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“Do the Atlantis story and abandon Eriol-Saga”

VERLYN FLIEGER

“Once upon a time,” wrote Tolkien to a publisher in 1951, “I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend . . . which I could dedicate . . . to England; to my country” (*Letters* 144). Much as he described (though perhaps not quite as he intended) his legendarium of Middle-earth, now published in entirety many years after his death, is indeed “a body of more or less connected legend.” It is also a body of overlapping, competing, endlessly revised, and often incomplete texts, the outcome of more than half a lifetime’s worth of invention. In such an assembly of material it is perhaps over-optimistic to expect total consistency, and with a few exceptions such as *Ainulindalë*, the stories of Beren and Lúthien, and those of Túrin Turambar, such consistency is not there. What is there, underlying all the intertangled, often unfinished texts, is a fixed purpose—Tolkien’s intent to create a mythology for England.

It might be asked, “Why for England especially?” England had managed without a mythology for centuries and suffered no apparent damage. Tolkien, however, was not the only Englishman who felt the lack. E. M. Forster, although no mythologist, had asked rhetorically in *Howards End*, “Why has not England a great mythology?” lamenting that, “Our folklore has never advanced beyond daintiness, and the greater melodies about our country-side have all issued through the pipes of Greece. . . . England still waits for . . . the great poet who shall voice her, or, better still, for the thousand little poets whose voices shall pass into our common talk” (Forster 279). Tolkien’s letter expressed much the same sentiment: “I was from early days grieved by the poverty of my own beloved country; it had no stories of its own There was Greek,” he wrote, “and Celtic, and Romance, Germanic, Scandinavian, and Finnish (which greatly affected me) but nothing English, save impoverished chap-book stuff” (*Letters* 144).¹ It is not unreasonable to suppose that Tolkien might have seen himself as Forster’s “great poet,” perhaps even, through the multiple voices of his mythology, as “the thousand little poets” as well.

Both Tolkien and Forster were responding to a perceived connection between mythology and nationalism that engendered what Tom Shippey has called a mythological “arms race” (Shippey, “Grimm, Grundtvig, Tolkien” 8). Beginning with the Grimms in the early nineteenth century, folklorists had ransacked the attics of the past for ancient texts whose stories and myth-embedded language would support cultural identity and encourage nationhood. Tolkien’s comment about Finnish is especially

apposite. Elias Lönnrot's *Kalevala*, a compilation of mythic songs from rural Finland, gave the Finns a sense of national identity, and Lönnrot's example clearly spurred Tolkien to attempt something similar. While still a student at Oxford, he had written of *Kalevala*, "I would that we had more of it left—something of the same sort that belonged to the English" (Carpenter 89). To want "something of the same sort" for England would hardly be surprising in an imaginative young Englishman whose country was at war, and Tolkien's ambition was apparently already forming in the years 1914–1916.²

Clear in itself, his ambition raises two related questions. What exactly did he mean by a mythology that "belonged to the English"?³ And how would he ensure that his invented one "belonged?" In answer to the first question, he meant it would embody what he saw as the English (not British) heritage, and would incorporate into a fictive legendarium elements from myth and history that fostered a sense of specifically English identity, as *Kalevala* had done for the Finns. The larger question is "How would his invented mythology belong?" His answer to that is more complex and convoluted, for there is evidence to suggest that it underwent a structural re-conception at a particular point in its development. The evidence is minimal, but provocative in its implications. It is a single cryptic note Tolkien jotted to himself on a scrap of paper at some time in the winter of 1945–46. Telegraphically brief, and neither explained nor elaborated, the note requires decoding, and even then is open to more than one interpretation. It reads simply, "Do the Atlantis story and abandon Eriol-Saga, with Loudham,⁴ Jeremy, Guildford, and Ramer taking part" (*Sauron* 281).

Reading this over half a century after it was written, we cannot be certain what the note meant to Tolkien at the time, although item by item its component parts are identifiable. The first item, the "Atlantis story" relates to *The Notion Club Papers*, the narrative he was working on at the time, in which "Loudham, Jeremy, Guildford and Ramer" are principal characters. Its unfinished text is included in Volume 9 of *The History of Middle-earth*, Christopher Tolkien's compendious edition of his father's mythology. The second item, the far older and longer "Eriol-Saga" begun in 1917, was in fact the "body of more or less connected legend," the frame and content of the mythology as a whole. It comprises Volumes 1 through 5 of *The History*. The two verbs in the note—*do* and *abandon*—seem plain and straightforward. It is only when all the terms are arranged in the sentence that the trouble begins, for the meaning of the whole is obviously greater than the sum of its parts.

Fortunately, there are clues pointing toward meaning, all of them having to do with narrative structure. To gather them, we have to range over a wide span of years from 1917 to 1945–46. For clue number one

we must go back to 1936, the year of Tolkien's bargain with C. S. Lewis that he would write a time-travel story and Lewis a space-travel one.⁵ Tolkien's response to the bargain was *The Lost Road*, the original Atlantis story and precursor of *The Notion Club Papers*. As Tolkien sketched it out, a contemporary English father and son on the coast of Cornwall, Albion and Audoin Errol,⁶ were the frame for a journey into English history and myth. Clue number two takes us back to 1917 and the story of Eriol, the voyager who sailed westward to the Lonely Isle of Tol Eressëa,⁷ and there heard and recorded “The Lost Tales of Elfinesse” (*Lost Tales I* 22), stories told by the “fairies” (also called “Gnomes,” later Noldor) of the creation of the world and the history of Middle-earth. This was the Eriol-Saga. Clue number three brings us again to the mid-forties, the time of *The Notion Club Papers* and its accompanying note, which heralded an apparent change in the narrative intent of that story.

The relevance to the note of clue number one, *The Lost Road*, lies as much in what Tolkien planned as in what he actually wrote, for the story was never finished. His outline, however, took the Errol father and son through successively earlier episodes in real history to their final destination in the imaginary pre-historic Second Age of Middle-earth. Here they would both witness and experience the destruction of his island of Númenor. Like the real-world myth of Atlantis when its people angered the gods, Númenor and its inhabitants were (with a few exceptions) to be overwhelmed by a great wave and drowned in the sea. In each episode, the recurring pair were to be known by some form (Langobard, Anglo-Saxon, Elvish) of their modern English names⁸ (all of them translatable as “Bliss-friend” and “Elf-friend”). The noteworthy aspect of the story was that the vehicle for their travel would be no Wellsian time-machine, but instead their ancestrally transmitted memories of a past they could not have experienced in their own personae.

However, like so many of Tolkien's efforts, this first time-travel venture was a casualty of his frequent writing habit of leaving one thing unfinished to begin another. The story had progressed no further than two or three chapters, with sketches and outlines for the historical and mythic episodes, when work slowed to a halt and the time-travel idea was shelved. A probable reason was the immediate success of *The Hobbit* in September 1937, followed by Tolkien's equally immediate start on the requested sequel in December of that same year. His writing time thereafter was almost entirely occupied with “the new Hobbit” which became *The Lord of the Rings*.

Nearly ten years later, taking a break from his labor on this unexpectedly long work, Tolkien turned again to time-travel and Atlantis with *The Notion Club Papers*. This he described to Stanley Unwin as, “taking up in an entirely different frame and setting what little had any value in

the inchoate *Lost Road*" (*Letters* 118). What "had value" was apparently the concept of inherited memory leading to the destruction of Atlantis/Númenor, while the "entirely different frame" completely changed the setting, the characters, and the format. The scene was re-located from Cornwall to his contemporary Oxford, the father and son protagonists re-imagined as the members of an Oxford club, and the narrative re-cast as the recently discovered minutes of club meetings.

Although *The Notion Club Papers* is the lineal descendent of *The Lost Road*, it is a considerably more complex and sophisticated piece of work. The rather stilted dialogue of the Errol father and son is replaced by the energetic debates of the Notion Club, a fictionalized portrait of Tolkien's actual Inklings (*notion*, i.e., *inkling*). The result is verisimilitude; the exchanges among the members have the crackle and bite of real conversation. That in its inception *The Notion Club Papers* had intentional autobiographical elements is beyond doubt. Indeed, the earliest drafts assign specific characters (Loudham, Jeremy, Ramer, and Guildford among them) the identities of Tolkien and his fellow-Inklings Lewis, Havard, and Dyson, with other minor characters more or less recognizable as well. These resemblances are not accidental, nor are they capricious. Although in subsequent revisions, this specificity is swallowed up in the fiction, it remains to affect the current of the narrative, like rocks just below the surface of a river.

Like Tolkien, many members of the Club are scholars attached to Oxford colleges. More like Tolkien, several are philologists by training. Even more like Tolkien, they have specific interests that mirror his own—curiosity about the history of languages, a love for fairy-tales, a knowledge of North-West European mythology, and (most important to the *Papers*) a highly developed taste for science fiction. In fact several, rather like the author of *The Notion Club Papers*, are themselves writers of such fiction. This new format and cast of characters allowed room for more discussion, and gave Tolkien the chance to hand off to various speakers theories about narrative techniques—for science fiction in particular and fantasy worlds in general. These are the conceptual background for his apparent decision to: "Do the Atlantis story and abandon Eriol-Saga, with Loudham, Jeremy, Guildford, and Ramer taking part" (*Sauron* 281).

This brings us to clue number two and the Eriol-Saga. Like *The Lost Road* and *The Notion Club Papers* this was a frame-story, this one with a double function. First, the frame was to set up a context in which mythic stories could believably be told and transmitted, a situation within which the entire mythology would be unfolded. Second, and within this context, it was to establish the "Englishness" of the legendarium. As Christopher Tolkien writes:

“Do the Atlantis Story and abandon Eriol-Saga”

The story of Eriol the mariner was central to my father’s original concept of the mythology. . . . In those days . . . the primary intention of his work was to satisfy his desire for a specifically and recognizably English literature of “faerie.” . . . In his earliest writings the mythology was anchored in the ancient legendary history of England; and more than that, it was peculiarly associated with certain places in England (*Lost Tales I* 22).

Since the mythology was to be “of faerie,” that is to say, Elvish, there had to be a way to make it the property of Men and thereby “English.”

Eriol the voyager was the link. He was at first imagined as belonging to a vague historical period before the Anglo-Saxon invasions of the island of Britain, and, according to Christopher Tolkien, was to be “close kin of famous figures in the legends of North-western Europe” (*Lost Tales I* 22). He was called *Angol* “after the regions of his home,” and was thus a kind of proto-Angle, a pre-English inhabitant of Europe. Later, his name now changed to Ælfwine, he became “an Englishman of the ‘Anglo-Saxon period’ of English history, who sailed west over sea to Tol Eressëa,” which would, at the end of the story “*become* [my emphasis] England, the land of the English” (*Lost Tales I* 24).⁹ In the earliest versions of the myth, then, England, though not originally named as such, was to be present as both a historical and a geographical reality.¹⁰

The figure of Eriol, however, went through further changes. Christopher Tolkien states plainly that his role

was at first to be more important in the structure of the work than (what it afterwards became) simply that of a man of later days who came to “the land of the fairies” and there acquired lost or hidden knowledge, which he afterward reported in his own tongue: at first, Eriol was to be an important element in the fairy history itself—the witness of the ruin of Elvish Tol Eressëa.¹¹ The element of ancient English history or “historical legend” was at first not merely a framework, isolated from the great tales that afterwards constituted “The Silmarillion,” but an integral part of their ending. (*Lost Tales I* 23)

It was later, in what Christopher Tolkien calls the “second [“unrealized”] ‘Scheme’ for the Tales,” that the concept of Tol Eressëa as England was dropped in favor of an actual Britain (here named Luthany), that Eriol was changed to Ælfwine, and the role of “the witness of the ruin” was diminished. “His part,” writes Christopher, was now “only to learn and record” (*Lost Tales II* 301).

The English “anchor” continued to drop away as the mythology developed through its many overlapping and competing prose and poetic versions, and Eriol/Ælfwine continued to recede in importance, while the tales of Fëanor and the Silmarils, of the children of Húrin and their tragic fate, and the great romance of Beren and Lúthien, came more and more to appear on their own. But as we have seen, like *The Lost Road*, the entire mythology was put aside late in 1937, when Tolkien began the sequel to *The Hobbit*, which became the *Lord of the Rings*.

Fortunately for the reading public, that work (after long genesis) was brought to completion and published. Less fortunately, both the Eriol-Saga and his two tries at the time-travel Atlantis story were left unfinished at Tolkien’s death. This was a pity, because each venture had, in a different way and at a different time in its author’s creative life, explored uncharted narrative ground—the former by marrying actual history and real-world myth to a fictive mythology, and the latter by using memory as a vehicle for time-travel. At first glance, however, there is little in either venture that suggests, as does Tolkien’s note, that one might either give way to, or lead to the other.

The third and final clue is the narrative line of the third frame-story, *The Notion Club Papers*. According to Christopher Tolkien, the story divides into two distinct though chronologically sequential parts. Part One, existing in manuscript versions A, B, C, and final D, Tolkien called “The Ramblings of Ramer,” and with reason, for it is almost entirely theoretical and highly discursive. Criticism of a science fiction story by Michael Ramer leads to vigorous debate about space-travel, the plausibility of current literary devices for getting off the planet, and finally to Ramer’s account of his actual psychic experiments and “rambles” along that line. It seems clear that Tolkien’s initial impulse was a reply to C. S. Lewis’s space-travel stories. Not only was his early working title, “Out of the Talkative Planet,” an obvious reference to Lewis’s *Out of the Silent Planet*, but Lewis and his space novels are (among others) specifically singled out for criticism.

All this becomes a long preamble to a tale when space-travel gives way to time-travel in Part Two, the whole of manuscript E, called “The Strange Case of Arundel Lowdham.” Now the emphasis shifts from the “ramblings” of Ramer to the un-summoned Númenorean memories of Lowdham, the frame of the rest of the narrative. Theory becomes an introduction to actuality, past events erupt into the present, and happenings of an increasingly psychic nature engulf the meetings. The latter half of manuscript E, the part most explicitly like *The Lost Road*, was (at the point where the story breaks off) developing as a journey via successive identities back through real time into mythic time and ultimately to Tolkien’s entirely imaginary Second Age and the destruction of Númenor. With such marked change, it seems reasonable

to conjecture that the narrative intent of the story might also have shifted ground from Part One to Part Two.

It is at this crucial point that the two items cited in the note—the Atlantis story and the Eriol-Saga—apparently collided, for according to Christopher Tolkien, the note was “undoubtedly” written “before [Tolkien] began the writing of the manuscript E,” which explicitly takes up the Atlantis story. My suggestion is that the note had to do with the frame, and that it was Tolkien’s answer to the question of how his invented mythology would belong to the English. He was contemplating conceptual changes that would connect one frame (the Atlantis story) to the other (the Eriol-Saga), and would extend the “Englishness” of his mythology beyond history and pre-history into the realm of psycho-history and para-psychology.

Both changes concerned strategy of presentation, finding a way to portray the story convincingly *as a mythology*. Most real-world mythologies, such as *Kalevala*, are set before the public by collectors or compilers like Lönnrot, who function as the editorial “bridge” over the inevitable disconnect between the old (frequently oral) stories and the modern audience from a different time or culture reading a written text. Admiration for *Kalevala* notwithstanding, Tolkien had no ambition to be a folklore collector. His dismissal of English “chap-book stuff” makes it clear that he had rejected that route out of hand. He wanted instead to be the sole inventor of a cohesive fictive mythology, in his own words, “a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story . . . which I could dedicate . . . to England” (*Letters* 144).

The crucial element is the phrase “to England.” To invent a mythology is one thing; to persuade a particular (in this case specifically English) reading public of its validity not just as myth but as *their* myth—however fictive—is quite another. For this Tolkien needed some kind of sub-creative credibility,¹² a source that could convincingly transmit the ancient stories to future English audiences, and an equally plausible means by which they could arrive in the contemporary (presumably English) reader’s hand. He had models aplenty, but like Lönnrot, they all, to some degree, emphasized their distance from the material they retold. For example, Snorri Sturluson’s thirteenth-century *Prose Edda*, which Tolkien knew well, re-told Norse myths. The first section, *Gylfaginning* (“The Deluding of Gylfi”) used the traveler Gylfi, whose by-name, like Eriol’s, was Gangleri (“Wanderer”). Gylfi journeyed to the home of the gods to question them (also like Eriol) about the creation and nature of the world. Snorri’s own Prologue, however, made it clear that as an enlightened Christian and a thoroughly modern man, he did not believe the stories he set down.

The medieval clerics who copied at second or third hand the stories we call “Celtic” mythology were often at pains to de-mythicize them. The redactor of the *Táin Bó Cúalnge* (the epic Cattle Raid of Cooley) in the Book of Leinster stated firmly, “I who have written this story, or rather this fable, give no credence to the various incidents related in it. For some things in it are the deceptions of demons, others poetic figments; some are probable, others improbable, while still others are intended for the delectation of foolish men” (O’Rahilly 272). The nineteenth-century ballad collectors such as Bishop Percy and Francis Child, as well as more scientific folklore scholars such as the Grimms and Lönnrot, all looked on the stories they collected and published as fossils of ancient beliefs which they sought to preserve. Tolkien’s comment on this was that they were “using the stories not as they were meant to be used, but as a quarry from which to dig evidence, or information about matters in which they are interested” (“On Fairy-Stories” 119).

There were, alternatively, the great romantic frauds, the Chattertons and Macphersons who out of a love for myth or in a real effort to stimulate interest—or both—passed off their own inventions as the real thing. But they were frauds whose inevitable unmasking not only disqualified but cheapened what they wrote. The task Tolkien set himself was not just to create a mythology but to give it credibility. The great collections Tolkien knew were no longer tales told by the faithful, but specimens gathered between covers for analysis and classification. How was he to find a middle ground as neither scientist nor fraud? What would be his strategy of presentation?

He had avoided the problem in *The Hobbit* by writing it as a children’s book. It faced him squarely with the Silmarillion, which did not fit under the children’s book rubric.¹³ Who would be telling his stories, to whom, and why? His first answer had been Eriol/Ælfwine, but the note accompanying *The Notion Club Papers* seems to signal a change in approach. When Tolkien wrote it, he obviously had something in mind which we can only guess at now: how “doing” the Atlantis story related to “abandoning” the Eriol-Saga, and what would have been the consequences of such a move. One possibility has been proposed by Christopher Tolkien, who says, “The only explanation that I can see is that the ‘Eriol-Saga’ had been, up to this time, what my father had in mind for the further course of the meetings of the Notion Club, but was now rejecting in favour of ‘Atlantis.’ In the event he did not do so; he found himself drawn back into the ideas he had sketched for *The Lost Road*” (*Sauron* 281–82).

This is a reasonable scenario, but not the only conceivable one. It is also possible that Tolkien might have been contemplating a less sweeping, yet more structurally and psychologically profound change. Now the

words “do” and “abandon” come into play. While they can suggest that Tolkien might have been considering exchanging one frame for another, they might equally suggest that, in order to save all the work already done on the Eriol-Saga without carrying it further, he meant instead to find a mechanism by which the two frames could meet and join. Abandonment does not necessarily mean wholesale rejection. It could as easily mean simply leaving the Eriol-Saga where it was and bringing the Atlantis story back through time to connect to it. *The Notion Club Papers* would become the mythology’s entry-point and the Atlantis story the mechanism of transmission for the whole.

Such a connection, had it been carried out, would have brought about fundamental changes. As mentioned above, it would have stretched history into psycho-history. In addition, it would have solved a practical problem of increasing concern to Tolkien—how to bring a mythical, a-historical, flat-earth “faery” mythology into a realistic, historical, round world. In Part Two of the *Papers* Jeremy poses the question Tolkien was trying to answer: “If you went back would you find myth dissolving into history or history into myth?” He then goes on to make what is a half-rhetorical but in light of Tolkien’s note a most revealing query: “Perhaps the Atlantis catastrophe was the dividing line?” (*Sauron* 249). Atlantis was going to be precisely that in Tolkien’s mythology, the line which both divided and connected the Atlantis story and the Eriol-Saga.

In his essay “On the Construction of ‘The Silmarillion,’”¹⁴ Charles Noad states that *The Notion Club Papers* “reveals Tolkien’s thought concerning the relationship of his myth to history. Discussions . . . hint at a way in which the past as recalled by myth and legend might have a reality of its own, distinct from the ‘true’ past” (Noad 50). Noad asserts that the appearance of Númenor, first in *The Lost Road* and subsequently in *The Notion Club Papers*, had two effects on Tolkien’s overall concept. First, “it introduced the concept of a transition from a flat to a round world.” Second, “it implied that there was a good deal of unrecorded history between the era of the Elvish myths and our known history” (63).

Taking these in order, we can see first, that the transition from a flat world to a round one came naturally out of the most Atlantean aspect of the story, the Drowning of Númenor, in which cataclysm a chasm opened in the sea and the flat world was “bent” and rounded on itself. The Lost Road of the title story is the straight way West, left hanging in the upper air when the lower world falls away beneath it. Second, the time-gap between the modern time-travelers and the events of the Eriol-Saga leaves ample space “between the era of the Elvish myths and our known history.” Although Noad does not cite it, a statement Tolkien made in a 1945 letter to Christopher supports this position: “I do not now feel either

ashamed or dubious on the Eden ‘myth,’” wrote Tolkien. “It has not, of course, historicity of the same kind as the N[ew] T[estament], which are virtually contemporaneous documents, while Genesis is separated by we do not know how many sad exiled generations from the Fall, but certainly there was an Eden on this very unhappy earth” (*Letters* 109-110). The timing of the letter (earlier in the same year he began *The Notion Club Papers*), the sentiment expressed, and the phrase “exiled generations,” all strongly suggest that Tolkien might have seen a connection between the posited Genesis–New Testament gap and the similar stretch of history between his own Genesis (*Ainulindalë* in the Eriol-Saga) and the Atlantis story. His frequent allusions to his Elves in Middle-earth as “exiles” would support this view.

The change would have dramatically altered the character and personality of the witness. Noad declares that Tolkien “considered jettisoning the entire Pengoloð-Ælfwine framing device, and instead having the myths retold by Númenoreans and their successors,”¹⁵ thus allowing for “a new form of transmission” (64). If, as seems likely, these Númenorean successors were to culminate in Loudham, Jeremy, Guildford, and Ramer, the form of transmission would necessarily be new because the witness or witnesses would be fundamentally different. Instead of inhabitants of a pre-historic, mythic, primarily Elvish world, they would be contemporary Englishmen of Tolkien’s own time and Tolkien’s own town of Oxford.

This strategy has implications for narrative style, which would replace generic fairy speech with contemporary, even colloquial English. Eriol, even when he became Ælfwine, was little more than a formal mouthpiece for questions, and as a listener had little discernible personality. The Notion Club members, especially Lowdham, are bursting with personality. They are not listeners; they are talkers, debaters, and interrupters. They are opinionated, abrasive, argumentative, intellectually curious. It is not an accident that the working sub-title of *The Notion Club Papers* was “Out of the Talkative Planet.”

The change in setting and *dramatis personae* is for the better; but just what about the Atlantis story could have been the catalyst that turned Tolkien back to re-consideration of the Eriol-Saga? The most obvious candidate is Lowdham, whose character becomes more strongly marked as the story progresses, and who as Alwyn (Ælfwine) Arundel (Eärendel, Elendil), is clearly scheduled to assume the role of witness. Christopher Tolkien writes:

Only when the manuscript B was completed (and the text of “Part One” of the *Papers* very largely achieved) did the thought enter: “Do the Atlantis story.” With Loudham’s standing beneath the Radcliffe Camera and staring up at the

sky the whole course of the *Papers* was changed. . . . But when my father wrote “Do the Atlantis story” he also said that the “Eriol-Saga should be abandoned,” although there is no mention of any such matter in Part One. (*Sauron* 281–82)

More than the course of the *Papers* would have changed. Blended with the *Papers*, the nature of the mythology itself would have altered, for it would have offered a particularly and peculiarly Tolkienian answer to the question “In what way would the story be English?”

Finally, to the earlier-conceived historical and geographical connection would be added a psychological and psychic one. Now it would be English not simply because it was *about* England or because it happened *in* England, but because it was *ingrained in the memory* of countless generations of Englishmen, memory revived, re-experienced, and re-possessed by Lowdham (and presumably also by Jeremy, Guildford, and Ramer), through the genetic re-collections of their ancestors. This is to say the least a mode predicated not on Wellsian time-machinery but on Jungian psychology and the theory of the collective unconscious, plus something as close to reincarnation as makes no matter.

Part One of the *Papers* finds the members of the Club arguing about the necessity for aesthetic harmony between an author’s way of “getting there” (whether “there” is through time or space) and the “there” that is got to. Defending his story’s way of getting there, Ramer argues that it should not affect the story thus arrived at, for it is a mere frame, a device and no more. Guildford responds that it must, instead, be a coherent part of the picture. “An author’s way of getting to Mars, say, is part of *his* story of *his* Mars. . . . It’s part of the picture . . . and it may seriously affect all that’s inside” (*Sauron* 163). He then offers his own method of getting there. It is, he tells the Club, “the only known or likely way in which anyone has ever landed on a world,” which is, “Incarnation. By being born” (*Sauron* 170). On this premise, Tolkien’s way of getting to “his Mars,” i.e., Númenor and its mythic past, by inherited memory would also “seriously affect all that’s inside.” It would make English history and myth, as well as his own pre-English mythology, the property of inborn, genetically transmitted remembrance, possessed by the English whether they know it or not.

In addition, these changes would have had a practical effect on the credibility mechanism, the way in which the story comes to the modern reader. In his later commentary on his own publication of the *Silmarillion* Christopher Tolkien wrote that it was “certainly debatable whether it was wise to publish . . . a version of the primary ‘legendarium’ standing on its own and claiming, as it were, to be self-explanatory.” “The published work,” he wrote, had “no ‘framework,’ no suggestion of what it is and how (within the imagined world) it came to be. This,” he declared, “I

now believe to have been a mistake” (*Lost Tales I* 5). Tolkien would have agreed. Lack of framework is precisely the problem, a problem with which he found himself unendingly concerned. It was not easy, for he had to drive three horses simultaneously, and they were not all trotting in the same direction.

The first horse carried the source of the stories and the situation within the fiction itself wherein they arose, the internal tale-teller and primary audience. For expediency, we may designate this first horse as the frame-story of the voyager Eriol/Ælfwine. The second horse was the vehicle by which the stories were preserved and/or passed down. Somehow there had to be some reliable means other than oral transmission for the bringing forward of the tales from age to age. This, too, was originally assigned to Eriol/Ælfwine, who recorded the tales in a fictive book. Both together we may take to be the Eriol-Saga. These two horses trot along comfortably together. The third horse, not entirely broken to harness, was to carry the ultimate means of transmission, the rationale for the book as finally published and held in the modern reader’s hand.

The first and second horses carry the story from oral to written form. Although Eriol/Ælfwine is *told* the tales, and although as originally conceived, he is the direct link between the stories and the reader, the actual vehicle of transmission is a written book. Tolkien’s earliest title of *The Book of Lost Tales* makes this explicit, and he had inserted behind the early versions of the Lost Tales evidence to suggest the presumptive existence of a written text, which text had a variety of origins. Among them was:

The Golden Book of Heorrenda
being the book of the
Tales of Tavrobel

(*Lost Tales II* 290)

As its title implies, this was to be the work of one Heorrenda¹⁶ “of Hægwudu,” the son of Eriol (nicknamed Wæfre), who was “using those writings that my father . . . did make in his sojourn in the holy isle [Tol Eressëa]” (*Lost Tales II* 291). Another version, following the switch from Eriol to Ælfwine, gave the book not only an origin but a precise location:

The Golden Book of Tavrobel
the same that Ælfwine wrote and laid in the House of a Hundred
Chimneys at Tavrobel, where it lieth still to read for such as may
(*Lost Tales II* 310).

Tolkien’s fragmentary “The History of Eriol or Ælfwine” as set out by Christopher Tolkien, states that Eriol is bidden to “*write* [my emphasis] down all he has heard,” that his book “lies untouched . . . during many

ages of Men,” and is added to by the “compiler of the Golden Book” (*Lost Tales II* 282). Against this is written Tolkien’s note that “it may perhaps be much better to let Eriol himself see the last things and finish the book” (*Lost Tales II* 282). Another note specifies, “The last words of the Book of Tales. Written by Eriol at Tavrobel before he sealed the book,” while yet another proposes a “Prologue by the writer of Tavrobel [presumably the “compiler of the Golden Book” cited above] telling how he found Eriol’s writings and put them together” (*Lost Tales II* 287). It seems clear that Tolkien was of several minds as to just how to have the tales transmitted, and tried out a variety of redactors and/or compilers for the book.

This brings us to the third and most problematic horse, the final means of transmission, the rationale for the book in the reader’s hand. Whether Eriol “sealed the book,” or a later compiler found and continued the account, there still had to be a plausible way for it to be published. How did it get from Eriol or Heorrenda or an unnamed compiler, to the modern reader? Who brought it into print, and how, and why? The Eriol-Saga had no answer to this question. The Atlantis story as told in *The Notion Club Papers* did.

Tolkien’s answer, his transmission device, was the nesting of text within text within text, each deriving from a successively earlier time.¹⁷ The primary-level, or “outside,” text is presented as the publication of the recently-discovered minutes of the Notion Club found “on the top of one of a number of sacks of waste paper in the basement of the Examination Schools at Oxford” (*Sauron* 255), and edited by their discoverer, “Mr. Howard Green.” Mr. Howard Green, Tolkien’s imaginary Snorri-cum-Lönnrot, is a type familiar in nineteenth-century adventure fiction, the remote but realistic pseudo-editor who provides the occasion for the story and interjects explanatory notes and comments. H. Rider Haggard was fond of the device, employing it in *She* and *King Solomon’s Mines*, and Tolkien has followed in his footsteps.

Contained within the pages of Mr. Green’s “book” is the secondary-level single page from the much older manuscript book in the possession of Edwin (Eadwine, Audoin) Lowdham, father of Notion Club member Alwin Arundel (Ēarendil, Elendil, Alboin, Ælfwine, Elwin) Lowdham.¹⁸ This page is itself a transcription by yet a third party of a considerably more ancient Númenorean book written by Elendil which has somehow survived the cataclysm of the downfall of Númenor. Within the fiction the second text is introduced by Lowdham, who describes it as a manuscript leaf, “some sort of a diary or notes in a queer script. . . . I only found one loose leaf of it among the papers that came to me” (*Sauron* 235).

When he and Jeremy stumble away from a meeting on the night of the storm Lowdham inadvertently leaves behind “a leaf of paper.” It is picked up by Ramer, who identifies it as “the leaf of his father’s

manuscript that he told us about” (*Sauron* 255). Showing it to the Club at a later meeting, he comments that “this stuff looks to me like the work of a man copying out all he had time to see, or all he found still intact and legible in some book” (*Sauron* 259). Unable to recognize the script (it is in fact Fëanorian Tengwar; see the reproductions of this page in *Sauron Defeated* [319–21]), but making an educated guess that the language is Anglo-Saxon, Ramer decides to get the help of an Anglo-Saxon expert, and takes the page “round to old Professor Rashbold at Pembroke” for translation.¹⁹ Rashbold quickly pegs it as “Old English of a strongly Mercian (West-Midland) colour,” and comments that “the style has the air of a translation” (*Sauron* 257).

If it is a translation, who was the translator? Remembering that Lowdham found it among his father’s papers we might be tempted to assign the task to old Edwin Lowdham. Further embedding awaits us, however, for Edwin Lowdham was the possessor but not necessarily (in his own persona, at least) the translator. This is an even earlier avatar, as Tolkien’s sketches, outlines, and notes make clear. In two projected continuations of the “King Sheave” episode that closes the last recorded meeting of the Club, Tolkien has Ælfwine and Tréowine, the Anglo-Saxon avatars of Lowdham and Jeremy, set out to sea and sail West. Both continuations bring the voyagers to the Straight Road, but their ship is driven back by storm.

The sketches break off there, with an outline for their projected continuance following:

Tréowine [Jeremy] sees the straight Road and the world plunging down. Ælfwine’s [Lowdham’s] vessel seems to be taking the straight Road and falls [sic] in a swoon of fear and exhaustion.

Ælfwine gets view of the Book of Stories; and writes down what he can remember.

Later fleeting visions.

Beleriand tale.

Sojourn in Númenor before and during the fall ends with *Elendil* [Lowdham] and *Voronwë* [Jeremy] fleeing on a hill of water into the dark with Eagles and lightning pursuing them. Elendil has a book which he has written.”

His descendants get glimpses of it.

Ælfwine has one. (*Sauron* 279)

In the context of this outline, the “book” must be seen not just as

“Do the Atlantis Story and abandon Eriol-Saga”

an imaginative concept, but as the prototype credibility device for the whole mythological conceit. “The Book of Stories” of which Ælfwine gets a view is very probably a version of the Golden Book (whether of Tavrobel or Heorrenda). If Ælfwine “writes down what he can remember,” it would presumably be in his own language, Anglo-Saxon. Ælfwine’s earlier, Númenorean self, Elendil, who survives the downfall, has yet another book “which he has written.” According to the outline, Elendil’s descendants “get glimpses of it,” and Ælfwine (clearly one of those descendants) “has one.” This is quite probably the source of the page from Edwin Lowdham’s manuscript, that portentous clue to the past which is dropped by Lowdham, picked up by Ramer, and translated by old Rashbold of Pembroke.

Elendil’s “book” leads to Ælfwine’s translation which leads to Edwin Lowdham’s manuscript, of which the single leaf dropped by Lowdham and picked up by Ramer is embedded in the Notion Club “papers,” the minutes found by Mr. Howard Green who then becomes both editor and publisher of *The Notion Club Papers*.²⁰ Here is where and how the Atlantis story connects to the book which contains the Eriol-Saga. The journey into the past brings the protagonists closer with each successively older identity until they hold in their hands the book or books in which the earliest stories were brought forward.

In his commentary appended to the narrative portions of *The Lost Road*, Christopher Tolkien writes:

With the entry at this time of the cardinal ideas of the Downfall of Númenor, the World Made Round, and the Straight Road, into the conception of “Middle-earth,” and the thought of a “time-travel” story in which the very significant figure of the Anglo-Saxon Ælfwine would be both “extended” into the future, into the twentieth century, and “extended” also into a many-layered past, my father was envisaging a massive and explicit linking of his own legends with those of many other places and times: all concerned with the stories and dreams of peoples who dwelt by the coasts of the great Western Sea. All this was set aside during the period of the writing of *The Lord of the Rings*, but not abandoned, for in 1945, before indeed *The Lord of the Rings* was completed, he returned to these themes in the unfinished *Notion Club Papers*. (*Lost Road* 98)

Tolkien’s proposal to do the Atlantis story and abandon the Eriol-Saga would bring the Eriol-Ælfwine figure into the present not just by “extending” him into the future but by starting him off there. The reader would encounter the “faërie” myth by way of a more novelistically

conceived work, which would in turn affect the ethos and spirit of the legendarium contained within both. It would have made the “Englishness” a genetic—even psychic—as well as historic and geographic element in the story. This is a profound change.

The position of *The Notion Club Papers* in Tolkien’s development as a writer is important here. It is not unreasonable to assume that confidence in his own powers as a writer had been strengthened, first by the success of *The Hobbit*, and second by his more recent experience in sustaining a story of much greater length and complexity. By 1945 he had been at work on *The Lord of the Rings*—with intermittent starts and stops—for some eight years. He had had sufficient practice at writing fiction that he might now have felt ready to take some risks. Certainly, he was preparing to deal, in fiction and through barely disguised fictive voices, with experiences of the mind and psyche to which he had heretofore only briefly alluded.²¹

The mystical strain in Tolkien’s nature is at its clearest in the parapsychological spin he puts on the characters in *The Notion Club Papers*, which deals with reincarnation, out-of-body experiences in time and space, the psychic import of dreams, and most important of all, collective unconscious manifest in inherited memory. These were the kinds of things he had more cautiously (and safely) dealt with by way of fantasy in *The Lord of the Rings*²² but was now ready to risk addressing in more realistic fiction. By using regression through the serial identities and memories of Notion Club members as his path backward into the mythology, Tolkien would be providing a series of specifically and genetically English embedded frame-narrators, each contained in the one before him, and all leading the reader deeper and deeper into the fiction and the mystery.

Rather surprisingly, there is a hint of something like this in *The Lord of the Rings*, as I noted, in a slightly different context, in *A Question of Time*. Early in the story Merry Brandybuck, rescued from the Barrow by Tom Bombadil, experiences for a fleeting instant a memory from the ancient past of being speared through the heart by “the men of Carn Dûm” (*FR*, I, viii, 154). This is a flashback to an episode from the Second Age of the parent mythology, the *Silmarillion*, and is clearly an occurrence of which the present-day Merry has no first-hand knowledge nor any conscious recollection. It is a brief moment, no more; it has no apparent significance beyond itself, and nothing in the rest of the story depends on it. Still, it is there.

Such incidents are more numerous, more psychologically portentous, and more essential to the plot in *The Notion Club Papers*. Here the protagonists experience multiple flashbacks—recall Lowdham “standing beneath the Radcliffe Camera and staring up at the sky”—to anterior

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memory, referring to “the Eagles of the Lords of the West,” “Zigûr” (Sauron), and “Elven-Latin,” all of which were intended to pay off in the Númenorean climax to the story. Such episodes do not come out of nowhere, but are grounded in their author’s own consciousness. References both implicit and explicit to reincarnation, genetic memory, and the concept of inherited memory of a homeland and of its (literally) “native” language are scattered throughout Tolkien’s published *Letters*. Here are some examples:

Letter # 44 to Michael Tolkien. “Though a Tolkien by name, I am a Suffield by tastes, talents, and upbringing, and any corner of that country [Worcestershire] (however fair or squalid) is in an indefinable way “home” to me as no other part of the world is” (*Letters* 54).

Letter # 95 to Christopher Tolkien. “It is things of racial and linguistic significance that attract me and stick in my memory. Still, I hope one day you’ll be able (if you wish) to delve into this intriguing story of the origins of our peculiar people. And indeed, of us in particular. For barring the Tolkien (which must long ago have become a pretty thin strand) you are a Mercian or Hwiccian (of Wychwood) on both sides” (*Letters* 108).

Letter # 163 to W. H. Auden. “I am a west-midlander by blood (and took early to west-midland Middle English as soon as I set eyes on it)” and “I daresay such linguistic tastes . . . are as good or better a test of ancestry as blood-groups” (*Letters* 213).

Letter # 165 to Houghton Mifflin Co. “It is, I believe, as much due to descent as to opportunity that Anglo-Saxon and Western Middle English have been both a childhood attraction and my main professional sphere” (*Letters* 218).

And most conclusively, I think:

Letter # 153 to Peter Hastings. “‘Reincarnation’ may be bad *theology* (that surely, rather than metaphysics) as applied to Humanity. . . . But I do not see how even in the primary World any theologian or philosopher, unless very much better informed about the relation of spirit and body than I believe anyone to be, could deny the *possibility* of re-incarnation as a mode of existence, prescribed for certain kinds of rational incarnate creatures” (*Letters* 189).

The recurrent mention of Mercian or West-Midland ancestry points

pretty clearly not just to Tolkien's forebears, but to the page from Edwin Lowdham's diary identified by old Rashbold as Mercian and West-Midland. Add to these inherited "taste," tastes as a "test of ancestry," the combination of "racial and linguistic significance," childhood attraction "due to descent," and finally "the possibility of re-incarnation as a mode of existence for certain kinds of rational incarnate creatures." The sum of all these is evidence of the author's personal belief as well as a writerly preference for "descent," "ancestry," and "reincarnation" as a viable mode of time-travel.²³

The Notion Club Papers anatomizes the concept. Part One, "The Ramblings of Ramer," is directly relevant to the mechanical problem of transmission. Whatever was Tolkien's original intent for this, it becomes a set-up for Part Two, where, in "The Strange Case of Arundel Lowdham," the story gets down to business, to time-travel, and to incarnation. Or reincarnation. Here we see, in the memory-flashbacks first of Lowdham, and then of Jeremy, and later their combined memories as they travel up and down the west coasts of Britain and Ireland, how incarnation would work as a time-travel device. During the great storm that breaks up the meeting on night 61, the two begin to experience actual regression in time and identity directly back to Númenor and the corresponding—perhaps identical—storm that brings about its downfall. They move into Númenorean identities, call each other by Númenorean names—Abrazàn and Numruzîr—and apparently occupy Númenorean space. These regressions continue after they leave the meeting and Oxford itself and go in search of their memories.

What, finally might have been the effect on the mythology had Tolkien carried through his intent to abandon the Eriol-Saga and do the Atlantis story? The answer can be found in his own notes to *The Notion Club Papers* where the concept apparently developed. These, plus his references in the *Letters* to inherited memory and recognition of an unknown "home" and language, all support the likelihood that "the Atlantis story" would have changed the approach—and through that the ethos and spirit—of the whole legendarium. There would have been a radical re-vision of the over-arching concept of "belonging" to England.

The traditional method of starting a mythology at the beginning with Creation would have been replaced with the far less conventional narrative entry from what for Tolkien would have been the middle, (i.e., modern, reader-contemporary period). The imagined End (which he never got to) would still be far off in a future quite clearly still ahead of our own world. In addition, the shift would have augmented the rather tenuous and changeful thread of historical and territorial continuity—whether as Tol Eressëa or actual Britain—with the para-psychological thread of continuity through memory. More radical still, such memory

would have been presented as passing through a series of successively receding incarnations of the same two individuals.

Thus the mythology would have been “for England” in a psychical, as well as historical sense. The change would have made the mythology the common possession of a generic collective memory, as well as of a shared piece of ground and its shared history. Tolkien’s sketches and outlines for continuation of *The Notion Club Papers*, as well as for the earlier *The Lost Road*, indicate that this would have been played out in episodic recapitulations of existing incidents in English myth and history—such as his fully realized treatments of the mythical arrival of King Sheave, and the historical raid of the Danes at Porlock. These were to reappear through memories, with “Loudham, Jeremy, Guildford, and Ramer taking part,” and were to culminate in the book or perhaps books referred to in Tolkien’s notes—the Book of Stories, and Elendil’s book.

The entire concept could be re-stated in the words Tolkien used to describe the work of the *Beowulf* poet. It is “an historical poem about the pagan past, or an attempt at one—literal historical fidelity founded on modern research was, of course, not attempted. It is a poem by *a learned man writing of old times* [my emphasis], who looking back on the heroism and sorrow feels in them something permanent and something symbolical” (“Monsters” 26). Like Tolkien’s profound and scholarly, but also highly personal vision of *Beowulf*, his own mythology is meant to give “the illusion of surveying a past, pagan but noble and fraught with deep significance—a past that itself had depth²⁴ and reached backward into a dark antiquity of sorrow”²⁵ (“Monsters” 27).

It could be argued nonetheless that the whole question is not just moot but irrelevant, since Tolkien never followed through, either by completing *The Notion Club Papers* as a self-contained work, or by effecting the enormous shift in perspective and psychology that “doing” Atlantis as the frame and entry-point for the whole mythology might have brought about. The change was never carried out, and what we have is what we get. What we get is an unfinished symphony whose implications outrun its execution. Over against this, I would argue with Sir Philip Sidney that “the skill of the artificer standeth in the idea or foreconceit of the work and not in the work itself”; or at least, that the idea or foreconceit is as important as the execution. This is especially so in the case of Tolkien, where the skill of the artificer is contained in the foreconceit, though the work itself was never fully realized.

The whole notion of conceiving and carrying through a singly authored, wholly invented mythology needs further examination. Tolkien’s method of making it English through memory ancestrally transmitted and re-experienced in episodes from English myth and history should be reconsidered in light of Shippey’s concept of the

mythological “arms race,” the pervasive ambition of European cultures to stake a claim to nationhood through myth. Finally, the actual structure of the legendarium and its potential changes merit close interrogation. Fragmentary, confusing, and inconclusive though the evidence may be, the working out of Tolkien’s dream of a “mythology for England”—the soaring height of the ambition, the breadth and depth and range of the undertaking, and the resultant complicated collection of stories, sketches, notes begun, abandoned, and begun again, always moving in the direction of a complex but deeply-felt vision—invites inquiry beyond what it has so far received.

NOTES

- 1 This is probably a reference to a kind of popular folklore that was the stock reading matter of ordinary people during the eighteenth and much of the nineteenth centuries. Popular with the pre-industrial rural and urban poor, chapbooks continued as a staple of children’s literary fare in the twentieth century. They told the stories of figures such as Guy of Warwick, Bevis of Hampton, Hugh of Lincoln, and the Seven Champions of Christendom.
- 2 The relationship of war to mythology and nationhood merits attention. One example is Germany’s use of the Siegfried myth in World War II. A less ominous, but equally telling example of Tolkien’s felt connection is his poem “The Voyage of Earendel,” written in September 1914, a month after England entered World War I in August of 1914. Another early poem, “The Shores of Faery,” was written sometime in 1915. Tolkien was called up to military service in July 1915. I suggest that the imminence of war, with its implied destruction of existing culture, fueled, if it did not create, Tolkien’s desire to give his country a mythology. See Shippey, “Grimm, Grundtvig, and Tolkien.”
- 3 Some answers, of course, have already been offered. Jane Chance’s *Tolkien’s Art: A Mythology for England* discusses the general concept, but chiefly in the context of Tolkien’s medieval scholarship and its relation to *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Tom Shippey offers the concept of an “asterisk-mythology” in his article “Long Evolution: *The History of Middle-earth* and its Merits” in *Arda*, 1987. See also Carl Hostetter and Arden Smith’s “A Mythology for England” in *Proceedings of the J.R.R. Tolkien Centenary Conference* held in Oxford in 1992, which examines the Englishness of Tolkien’s mythology from a linguistic perspective. In that same volume Anders Stenström’s “A Mythology? For England?” diagrams and deconstructs the not-

quite accurate but nonetheless by now almost canonical phrase “a mythology for England.”

- 4 Tolkien varied between two spellings of this name, but finally settled on *Lowdham*. In my own discussions, I will use this form, but will quote it as it appears in Tolkien’s texts.
- 5 Tolkien wrote that “Lewis said to me one day: ‘Tollers, there is too little of what we really like in stories. I am afraid we shall have to try and write some ourselves. We agreed that he should try ‘space-travel’ and I should try ‘time-travel’” (*Letters* 378).
- 6 In his commentary on *The Lost Road*, Christopher Tolkien notes the similarity between Errol and *Eriol*, and allows the possibility that the resemblance might have been intentional.
- 7 The history of Tol Eressëa is complex. Originally conceived as an island in the West cut loose and dragged near to “the Great Lands” (later Middle-earth), it then occupied the geographical location of England. As will be seen, this concept was soon dropped.
- 8 Earlier versions of the names included Anglo-Saxon Eadwine and Ælfwine, modern Edwin and Elwin, the Númenorean Elendil and Herendil. *The Notion Club Papers* featured *Alwyn Lowdham*, son of *Edwin Lowdham*.
- 9 See *Lost Tales II* (219-92) for Christopher Tolkien’s discussion in “The History of Eriol or Ælfwine” of his father’s correlation of places in Tol Eressëa with actual places in England.
- 10 Both the pseudo-geography and the pseudo-history of this scheme underwent a complicated series of changes over the course of Tolkien’s long development of the story. I will deal here with only the last and most radical modification. For the others, the reader is referred to Christopher Tolkien’s painstaking unraveling of this extremely complicated matter in *Lost Tales I*, and “The History of Eriol or Ælfwine” in *Lost Tales II*.
- 11 The concept of Tol Eressëa went through many changes, and its “ruin” is difficult to pin down. Christopher Tolkien may be alluding to some obscure references in Tolkien’s notes to the Battle of the Heath of the Sky-roof, which Eriol witnessed. See his discussion in *Lost Tales II* (285–293).
- 12 “Sub-creation” was Tolkien’s term for the construction of an imaginary or “Secondary” world inviting “Secondary” belief. Successful sub-creation required the “inner consistency of reality”

(“On Fairy-Stories” 168).

- 13 Tolkien’s *New York Times* obituary quoted him as saying of *The Hobbit* that “it’s not even very good for children. . . . I wrote some of it in a style for children. . . . If I hadn’t done that, though, people would have thought I was loony” (*New York Times*, September 3, 1973).
- 14 In *Tolkien’s Legendarium: Essays on The History of Middle-earth*, ed. Flieger and Hostetter.
- 15 Pengoloð was a later narrator/scribe who contributed to the “book,” and thus added to the Eriol/Ælfwine frame.
- 16 The name *Heorrenda* had for Tolkien its own peculiar place in his connection of his invented mythos to English literature and history. In the chapter called “The History of Eriol, or Ælfwine and the End of the Tales” in *Lost Tales II*, Christopher Tolkien notes that his father’s Ælfwine character was at one point intended to be the son of one Déor the Minstrel, explaining that,

in the great Anglo-Saxon manuscript known as the Exeter Book there is a little poem of 42 lines to which the title of *Déor* is now given. It is an utterance of the minstrel Déor, who, as he tells, has lost his place and been supplanted in his lord’s favour by another bard, named Heorrenda. . . . From this poem came both Déor and Heorrenda. . . . I do not think that my father’s Déor the Minstrel of Kortirion and Heorrenda of Tavrobel can be linked more closely to the Anglo-Saxon poem than in the names alone—though he did not take the names at random. He was moved by the glimpsed tale [of *Déor*] (even if, in the words of one of the poem’s editors, “the autobiographical element is purely fictitious”); and when lecturing on Beowulf at Oxford he [Tolkien] sometimes gave the unknown poet a name, calling him *Heorrenda*. (323)

In his edition of *Beowulf and the Critics*, Tolkien’s hitherto-unpublished drafts of Tolkien’s *Beowulf* essay, Michael Drout points out in his introduction that “in other lecture notes (which, according to dates on some associated envelopes, seem to have been written or at least re-copied in 1962) Tolkien suggests that the Beowulf poet should be called “Heorrenda rather than X.” Drout also notes that in Bodleian Library, MS Tolkien A28 C, fol. 6v “rather than X” is written interlinearly in pencil and marked for insertion with a caret (Drout 18).

At some level, then, Tolkien intended an association of his own mythos not just with English history and literature, but with a specific

poet and poem.

- 17 Tolkien even got the jump on his own time-scale by setting the Papers themselves *forward* from his own time of composition (c. 1945-46) first to a fictive future of “approximately 1980 to 1990” (*Sauron* 155) when the Notion Club was presumed to have thrived, and then to the even later “discovery” and publication of the papers in the early years of the 21st century.
- 18 See Christopher Tolkien’s note 60 in *Sauron Defeated* that, “In [ms.] E, Jeremy addresses Lowdham as *Ēarendil*, subsequently changed to *Elendil*” (290).
- 19 This insertion of himself into the story—German *Tol-kühn* translates into English as *Rash-bold*, and Tolkien’s first appointment at Oxford was as Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Pembroke College—is Tolkien’s most explicit autobiographical reference, the ultimate in textual embedding, as well as a wholly personal inside joke.
- 20 Tolkien also used the device in *The Lord of the Rings*. The first edition Foreword states that it is “drawn for the most part from the memoirs of the renowned Hobbits, Bilbo and Frodo, as they are preserved in the Red Book of Westmarch,” which was “compiled, repeatedly copied, and enlarged and handed down.” The uncredited “editor” has “supplemented this account” with “information derived from the surviving records of Gondor (*FR*, 1st ed., Foreword 7). This strategy was present even in the earliest draft chapters of *The Lord of the Rings*. In *The Return of the Shadow*. Bilbo himself introduces the idea at the Council of Elrond, saying plaintively that he is just “getting on with my book,” and adding, “If you want to know, I am just writing an ending for it. I had thought of putting ‘and he lived happily ever afterwards to the end of his days . . . and anyway there will evidently have to be several more chapters, even if I don’t write them myself’” (405). The second edition Prologue notes that the “book,” which was “in origin Bilbo’s private diary,” was continued with Frodo’s “account of the War,” and added to by Sam (*FR*, Prol. 14). Bilbo and his successors function as both Gangleri and Snorri, with the “outside” voice of the Prologue introducing both the story and the history of the story, reinforcing the conceit that “this account of the Third Age is drawn mainly from the Red Book of Westmarch,” which is “that most important source for the history of the War of the Ring” (*FR*, Prol. 14). The divisions of the Prologue—a socio-historical account of hobbits, a discussion of pipe-weed, a note on the political structure of the Shire, and a final “Note on the Shire Records” (not in the first

edition)—serve to frame, historicize, and validate the account of the finding of the Ring, and to support the impression that the “book” is an actual artifact. *The Lord of the Rings* is thus presented as a living narrative—the story itself; as a means of transmission—the “book”; and as the mechanism to bring the book to the reader—the editorial Prologue. The device appears again in *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*, presented as a spin-off of *The Red Book*. Here another pseudo-editor ascribes the verses to “The Red Book,” and assigns authorship to “Bilbo and his friends, or their immediate descendants” (*Bombadil* 7).

- 21 Such allusions include his comment in “On Fairy-stories” that “in dreams strange powers of the mind may be unlocked,” and his repeated references in his letters to his recurring “Atlantis” dream of the great green wave that overwhelmed him and from which he always awoke “gasping.”
- 22 See my discussion of Frodo’s dreams in *A Question of Time*, chapter eight.
- 23 In this context, it is important to note that it was not just recurrence of identity, but *lineal descent* that provided the operative concept. A note appended to *The Notion Club Papers* specifies that “the theory is that the sight and memory goes [sic] on with *descendants* of [the Númenorean identities] Elendil and Voronwë (= Tréowine) but not reincarnation; they are different people even if they still resemble one another in some ways even after a lapse of many generations” (*Sauron* 278). Tolkien’s later note, given by Christopher Tolkien on page 281, reads simply “Loudham’s ancestry,” and suggests that Tolkien intended to amplify the concept by tracing Lowdham’s descent, though how far back he would have gone cannot be determined. Lowdham’s father is Old Edwin (Eadwine, Audoin, Elendil, Ēarendil).
- 24 See Tom Shippey’s discussion of “depth” in *The Road to Middle-earth* (272-81).
- 25 Michael Drout points out that Tolkien’s A-Text states that:

“Beowulf” is not an actual picture of historic Denmark and Sweden circa 500 A.D. But it is with certain defects, of course, at a general view, a self-consistent picture, an imaginative construction. The whole must have succeeded admirably in creating in the minds of the poet’s contemporaries the illusion of surveying a past, pagan but not ignoble and fraught still with deep significance—indeed a past that had itself depth and reached back into the mists. This last is an effect of and a

justification of the use of episodes and allusions to old tales—which are all notably darker more pagan and despairing than the foreground.

Tolkien's B-Text, which is closer to the published essay, expands this:

Beowulf is not an actual picture of historic Denmark or Gautland or Sweden circa A.D. 500. But it is (with of course certain defects here and there of minor detail) at a general view a self-consistent picture, an imaginative construction. The whole must have succeeded admirably in creating in the minds of the poet's contemporaries the illusion of surveying a past, pagan but not ignoble and fraught still with a deep significance, a past that itself had depth and reached back into the mists of countless human sorrows. This impression of depth is an effect and a justification of the use of episodes and allusions to old tales—which are all notably darker, more pagan, and despairing than the foreground (Drout 75, 139).

In writing about the *Beowulf* poet Tolkien was also writing about himself; his clear intent in his own work was not to give “an actual picture” of the pre-historic mythic past of England, but rather “a self-consistent picture, an imaginative construction.”

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