Medievalism and the Shocks of Modernity:
Rewriting Northern Legend from Darwin to World War II

by

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Abstract

Literary medievalism has always been critically controversial; at various times it has been dismissed as reactionary or escapist. This survey of major medievalist writers from America, England, Ireland and Iceland aims to demonstrate instead that medievalism is one of the characteristic literatures of modernity. Whereas realist fiction focuses on typical, plausible or common experiences of modernity, medievalist literature is anything but reactionary, for it focuses on the intellectual circumstances of modernity. Events such as the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, many political revolutions, the world wars, and the scientific discoveries of Isaac Newton (1643-1727) and above all those of Charles Darwin (1809-1882), each sent out cultural shockwaves that changed western beliefs about the nature of humanity and the world.

Although evolutionary ideas remain controversial in the humanities, their importance has not been lost on medievalist writers. Thus, intellectual anachronisms pervade medievalist literature, from its Romantic roots to its postwar explosion in popularity, as some of the greatest writers of modern times offer new perspectives on old legends. The first chapter of this study focuses on the impact of Darwin's ideas on Victorian epic poems, particularly accounts of natural evolution and supernatural creation. The second chapter describes how late Victorian medievalists, abandoning primitivism and claims to historicity, pushed beyond the form of the retelling by simulating medieval literary genres. Experiments in narrative framing and time travel plot devices eventually led to the divorce of medievalism from historicity altogether. The third chapter crosses into the twentieth century and examines the relationship between the skepticism of a new generation of medievalist writers and their exploration of radical new possibilities in artificial mythology. Yet as the literature's purported connection to reality loosened, the use of appendices, genealogies, maps and other scholarly apparatus only increased.

The fourth chapter examines the gender dynamics of medievalist works, discussing how medievalist writers reinterpreted stock character types, for example by writing from the perspective of a previously maligned character as in William Morris's "The Defence of Guenevere" (1858). Through metafiction, female characters satirized conventions that "ought" to apply to them while the male characters often had their flaws made increasingly obvious. This corresponded to changing views on heroism, from the Victorian vision of "chivalrous empire-builders," as John Morris put it in *The Age of Arthur* (2001), to the significantly more skeptical views of wartime and postwar writers increasingly suspicious of ideology, empire, and the use of force. The final chapter's focus is on war, propaganda, and human nature. Postwar medievalist writers launched a satirical armada which took a new approach to the themes of evolution, mythology, and metafiction. In England, Iceland, and America, iconoclastic novels appeared. All three were radical rewritings of major medieval legends, provoked by the cataclysmic experience of the Second World War. These works question notions of civilization and progress, and condemn those who compose and tell heroic stories for encouraging organized violence. Tying together the major threads of medievalism from the previous chapters, this final chapter chases the greatest shockwave of the twentieth century through inverted medieval landscapes where the author may be the greatest villain of all. Rejecting the critical Balkanization of medievalism, this study instead offers a unified view of nineteenth- and twentieth-century responses to northern legend, one which shows medievalism closely tracking the shocks of modernity.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank:

Dedication

Dedicated to the Memory of Eric and Elsie Etchen,

of The William Morris Society.

Contents

A Note on Sources

Because the cultural status of the literary works discussed in this dissertation varies, the sources for the works vary as well. Tolkien's works have never been difficult to obtain in authorized HarperCollins versions and indeed more works such as *The Fall of Arthur* (2013) are still forthcoming under the guidance of Christopher Tolkien. However, the situation is certainly not the same for all medievalist authors. In some cases I have been able to obtain copies of works which have spent some time out of print, such as a 1967-1969 Ballantine Books printing of E. R. Eddison's Zimiamvia Trilogy, but in other cases print-on-demand copies (Eddison's *The Worm Ouroboros*) or online versions have been necessary. For a long time, to even remain in print medievalist works relied on non-academic scholars like the late Lin Carter, who kept works by Morris, Haggard, Dunsany and others in print with the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series. Lord Dunsany has finally made it into Penguin Classics in S. T. Joshi's excellent *In The Land of Time And Other Fantasy Tales* (2004), but some Dunsany works are still out of print. Whether one accepts the analogy between the printing press and the internet or not, *Project Gutenberg* is a useful resource in terms of accessibility.

The giant of Victorian medievalism, William Morris, has had his work kept alive by a suitably vigorous scholarly tradition, from his daughter May Morris's Collected Works (1910-1915) to the online *William Morris Archive*, a labour of love created in collaboration with The William Morris Society. I have used their versions for Morris's prose romances while relying on print versions for Morris's poetic works such as *The Earthly Paradise* (1868) and *Sigurd the Volsung* (1876). Thus, in references to the prose romances, only book number is given. Completing our journey back in time, this project takes the specific angle of Arthurian medievalism toward the works of Lord Tennyson, although other works such as "The Palace of

Art" (1832, revised 1842) and *In Memoriam A. H. H.* (1849) are discussed. Thus I have used The University of Rochester's *The Camelot Project: A Robbins Library Digital Project* for works related to Tennyson's Arthuriana. Poem titles are abbreviated after first mention but line numbers are not provided by the project, which is digitally searchable. It is the best digital resource for comparative work in the English Arthurian tradition of which I am aware.

Finally, this note must address works from Iceland. Halldór Laxness's works have appeared in English translation through Vintage International, but the world is still waiting for a new translation of *Gerpla* (1952), last translated into English from a Swedish version in 1958 as *The Happy Warriors*. The names of Icelandic sagas and saga characters follow English-language conventions established in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* (1997), but the names of Icelandic writers such as Halldór Laxness, Guðbergur Bergsson, and Birna Bjarnadóttir are given with Icelandic spelling. Names from Norse mythology are given in English (i.e. Asgard), but where writers have coined their own names (as in Dunsany's Pegāna, Eddison's Carcë, Tolkien's Lothlórien, or the realm of Tlön described by Borges) their spelling is used.

As will be discussed in the introduction, the present dissertation lies somewhere between several distinct fields of literary criticism. Although I will argue that the works herein discussed form a coherent tradition in modern western literature which has merely been distorted under the influence of various critical, cultural and literary trends, I recognize that readers are likely to approach this dissertation unfamiliar with at least some of the authors. Thus, I have included a brief appendix before the bibliography, which provides basic context on the most important authors herein discussed. Dates and full names are provided for authors and works on first mention.

Introduction

I. "How Bloody Romantic!" Medievalism and its Discontents

It is now the fashion to place the golden age of England in times when noblemen were destitute of comforts, the want of which would be intolerable to a modern footman, when farmers and shopkeepers dieted on loaves the very sight of which would raise a riot in a modern workhouse, when men died faster in the purest country air than they now die on the coast of Guiana. We too shall be outstripped and in our turn be envied.

-Thomas Babington Macaulay, *The History of England* (1848)

In the conclusion of his medievalist novel *A Fish Dinner in Memison* (1941), E. R. Eddison (1882-1954) takes modernism to task in a scene where modern artists discuss the achievements of Edward Lessingham, Eddison's hero. Lessingham is a great man in the Carlylean or Nietzschean mode: a mountaineer, explorer, conqueror, poet and painter. He traces his descent "through many generations of English forefathers to King Eric Bloodaxe in York" (1935 14). Thus, Lessingham's Norse ethnic background is foremost among his broader European background. Lessingham's aristocracatic status is impeccable, and he believes in aristocracy. To say that he is out of place among his peers is an understatement. Although he discusses the Romantic wish to live in past eras with those closest to him, he rejects nostalgia in favour of ideals that are timeless (199). The modern artists' ideals, in contrast, are fleeting and frivolous, dictated only by fashion. They discuss even their own work with contempt. One comments that a particular painting "Wants a psychoanalyst to understand it." Another wonders if the piece represents "A kind of sublimation," but he is quickly rebuked for accepting psychoanalysis as legitimate in the first place: "A kind of excrement" (294). They understand their own works as a sort of confidence game or even hoax. Shortly after Eddison's novel appeared, a satire actually took just that form: the famous *Angry Penguins* literary hoax of 1943.

Lessingham pursues art for art's sake; his masterpiece painting is only ever seen by himself, his wife (the model) and his best friend; he asks that it be burned upon his death. Edward's tribute to Mary Lessingham's beauty displays an obsession on the more disturbing end of Victorian visions of love, as in poems by Christina Rossetti (1830-1894) or Robert Browning (1812-1889).[1] However, it is resolvedly *not* commercial, whereas Lessingham's contemporaries are concerned only with commerce. They admit that there is no need to "hire a gallery to inflict" their own paintings on the public except that "the public will every time and all the time admire what they're told they ought to admire. So that there's money in it" (294). Eddison thus reverses the modernist critique that medievalist literature is merely commercial while modernist literature harbours higher ambitions.

This approach is typical to medievalism, from William Morris (1834-1896) to J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973). Lord Dunsany (1878-1957) similarly disavowed twentieth-century commercialism; one of his prophets tells a medieval king not to wish for immortality, for then he would live to see modernity – an experience he would despise because of modernity's disconnection from history, its collapse of values, and its open worship of money: "Jests all new to royal ears shall smite thee on the head like hailstones, when thou hast lost thy crown…. [T]hose to whose grandsires [were] as children to kiss the feet of the King shall mock at thee because thou hast not learnt to barter with gold" (1906 111). Dunsany, Eddison, and Tolkien all declared independence from the *avant-garde* literary trends of high modernism; they disagreed with the rejection of traditional aesthetics and disliked the elitist and obscurantist aspects of these trends. Yet all equally claimed independence from commercialism. None of the aforementioned three writers expected public interest with their peculiar mythologies, yet all found it.

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[1] For example, Rossetti's "In An Artist's Studio" (1856) and Browning's "My Last Duchess" (1842) both discuss the objectification of female models by male painters; see also Edgar Allan Poe's "The Oval Portrait" (1842).

Like Dunsany, Eddison could also laugh at himself. Eddison's satire proves a double-edged sword when the modern artists refer to Lessingham as "An aristocratical plutocratical self-obtruding diletante" (296), a well-deserved comeuppance in an age when the British empire was falling apart and when worship of "The Heroic in History," as Thomas Carlyle (1775-1881) had put it, was looking more monstrous by the minute. Yet at least Lessingham is, as Carlyle would have said, *sincere*; his peers are pretentious. The truest believer among them defends modernism with exactly the patronizing attitude that has created widespread resentment toward *avant-garde* culture: "I don't want to be offensive, but you don't begin to understand it, and your views don't interest me" (294). In *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (2001), T. A. Shippey notes the "snobbish and elitist claim of so much modernist writing, that it was produced for and could only be appreciated by the thoroughly cultivated individual" (316). Whether one finds Eddison's depiction fair, his satirical approach to modernism was common for Romantic writers of his generation. H. P. Lovecraft (1890-1937) satirized Eliot's "The Waste Land" with "Waste Paper: A Poem of Profound Insignificance" (1923), while Dunsany mocked modernism in "A Fable of the Moderns" (1951) and "Darwin Superseded" (1952). In *Lord Dunsany: Master of the Anglo-Irish Imagination* (1995), S. T. Joshi summarizes Dunsany's critique in "The Awakening" (1953) thus: "a man, listening to a pianist, senses that he is finally beginning to understand modern music and spins a grandiose philosophical interpretation of the pieces – but the 'pianist' is only the piano tuner" (78).[2]

Eddison, Lovecraft and Dunsany were all critically condemned and then summarily ignored after their deaths in the mid-twentieth century. Yet just as modernists may have hoped that "dying dragon," to use Shippey's metaphor, of literary medievalism was finally dead,

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[2] Like Eddison, Dunsany implies that much of modernism is more or less a Rorschach test; the *Angry Penguins* "Ern Malley" hoax on modern poetry, the Sokal Hoax on postmodernist theory, and other real hoaxes have tested this.

Tolkien's work came along. Unlike the aforementioned three writers, Tolkien did not directly attack his contemporaries. However, Shippey argues that he provoked greater "critical rage and fear" because he could not be ignored: "He threatened the authority of the arbiters of taste, the critics, the educationalists, the *literati*. He was as educated as they were, but in a different school… His work was from the start appreciated by a mass market, unlike *Ulysses*, first printed in a limited number of copies designed to be sold to the wealthy and cultivated alone" (316).

In the twentieth century, those who continued to work in Romantic cultural traditions such as literary medievalism were well aware that their traditions were no longer considered respectable, due in large part to the prestige of modernism. One of Eddison's modern artists, observing Lessingham, says that he looks "Like a God exiled from wide Heaven," and receives the immediate rebuke: "How bloody romantic!" (299). As will be discussed in chapter three, the notion of the overthrow, death or departure of gods held a particular importance for writers of Eddison's generation; it went back to Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) of course, but even at the time of Nietzsche's striking treatment of the theme it already had a long-established foundation in Romantic thought.[3] The critical attacks on medievalism as Romantic, melancholic, morbid, reactionary, escapist, adolescent, etc. were well-established by the time of Eddison's novel. Yet these attacks apply not just to twentieth-century Romantic or neo-Romantic writers, but to their predecessors as well, even those now considered prestigious indeed.

We may now forget that Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) was once condemned for his medievalism; that critics attacked the *concept* of *Idylls of the King* (1885). John D. Rosenberg describes the critical blockade Tennyson's poetry faced in the early twentieth century: "The prejudice [was]… that simply because the *Idylls* is set in the past it must be dishonestly

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[3] Prior to Nietzsche, thinkers as diverse as John Keats (1795-1821), Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) and Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909) lamented the passing of gods; although they often referred to Greek or Norse deities, they were really lamenting their own age's loss of belief in the supernatural.

evasive…. [C]ritics argued that the modern poet's business was to portray modern life. On the most vulgar level, Tennyson was urged not to write about knights in armor but to compose an epic on Work or Sanitation" (11). William Morris suffered a similar critical neglect from his death in 1896 until E. P. Thompson's *William Morris: Romantic To Revolutionary* (1955). Rosenberg argues Tennyson was, in fact, rejected due to the Anxiety of Influence: "So great was the need of the first half of the twentieth century to free itself from the all-dominating voice of the greatest poet of the nineteenth century that the act of omission was achieved virtually without protest" (1). Even as Tennyson and Morris were being critically rehabilitated, W. H. Auden (1907-1973) was defending Tolkien from further versions of the same attacks.

Yet the criteria of the modernist critical blockade disqualifies not only *medievalist* authors from being taken seriously in a literary context, it disqualifies *medieval* authors as well, since many were not writing about contemporary life like Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400), but instead about legends of past times – like Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241), Thomas Malory (1405-1471), and the anonymous authors of *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and the Icelandic sagas. Some, like Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), even gazed into wholly different worlds. Medievalist authors were well aware of this. Indeed, Darrell Schweitzer notes that when Dunsany was attacked for writing about subjects other than contemporary Irish life, "Dunsany's reply then was that if someone were to found a society for medieval Italian poets, they obviously couldn't include Dante, who didn't write about Italy, but another place entirely" (87).

Writers and scholars of medievalism have been defending the legitimacy of their chosen literary mode since before Tennyson's time. Yet although the hostility between modernists and neo-Romantics for much of the twentieth century was certainly mutual, the former's narrative of literary history has dominated the canon until recently. Where Whigs and utilitarians failed,

modernists succeeded – in ejecting medievalism from respectability. How far back does one have to go in order for non-ironic literary versions of legends of past times to even approach canonical acceptability? The answer, it would appear, is "On or around December 1910," as Virginia Woolf had it, when "human nature changed" (4). Henceforth modernism was supposedly the only style of literature which could engage with modernity. Note the canonical status of similar works on either side of the great divide; the medievalist poems and romances of the English antiquarian Morris are now accepted as canonical, but the medievalist poems and romances of the English antiquarian Tolkien are critical anathema. Presumably, this is for no better reason than that the former wrote before December 1910, and the latter wrote afterwards.[4]

Although modernists and neo-Romantics may have considered each other's movements to be cultural embarrassments, canonicity took the former's side. Rosenberg calls the modernist narrative of literary history "a mythic literary country in which all of Victorian poetry figures as a Waste Land and the reader is rushed directly from Keats to Yeats to Eliot" (1). Following Rosenberg's argument that modernist constructions of canonicity are more imaginative and ideological than the works of the Romantics they exclude, one might also note that the *avant-garde* of modernist and postmodernist intellectuals have no standing to charge anyone with being irresponsible for eschewing realism, since ideas as anti-realist, anti-scientific, and intellectually irresponsible as anything in Romanticism have dominated these movements. As Steven Pinker rather abruptly put it in *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (2002), "The dominant theories of elite art and criticism in the 20th century grew out of a militant denial of human nature. One legacy is ugly, baffling, and insulting art. The other is pretentious and unintelligible scholarship," yet Pinker also notes that "A revolt has begun" (416).

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[4] One could make the same point with regard to both horror literature (Edgar Allan Poe, 1809-1849 and H. P. Lovecraft, 1890-1937) and science fiction (H. G. Wells, 1866-1946, and Arthur C. Clarke, 1917-2008).

Actually, the revolt has been ongoing for decades; an entire critical tradition has been largely ignored in the academic humanities. The anti-scientific nature of modernist (and postmodernist) intellectualism has been documented in works like *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia 1880-1939* by John Carey (1993), *The Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels With Science* (1994) by Paul Gross and Norman Levitt, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science* (1997) by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism* (2004) by Richard Wolin, and *Theory's Empire: An Anthology of Dissent* (2005), edited by Daphne Patai and William H. Corral. Of course, many of these books, along with Pinker's *Blank Slate*, have been given openly hostile and even ad-hominen reviews[5] by exactly the class they criticize who, as Shippey notes, have long been "well-entrenched as editors and reviewers in the literary columns" (316). Yet, relying on this critical tradition, there is a case to be made that the "mainstream" of modern canonical criticism represents strict adherence to *realism* in aesthetics, and full-blown *fantasy* in the realm of epistemology. One could be forgiven for imagining that the reverse configuration – realism in epistemology and fantasy in aesthetics – might be more reasonable. In *The Road to Middle-earth* (1983, 2nd ed. 1993, 3rd ed. 2003) Shippey makes a similar observation about the irony of modernist attacks on literary medievalism: "When people start appealing to 'truth', 'experience' and 'reality'… they imply very strongly that they know what these things *are*, an insight not likely to be shaken by argument" (154).

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[5] See Blake Morrison's 1992 review of Carey's *The Intellectuals and the Masses* for *The Independent*, "Nobs versus Mobs," John Dupré's 2002 review of Pinker's *The Blank Slate* for *American Scientist*, "Making Hay With Straw Men," or the exchanges between Joshi and Baxter (2014) or Shippey and Griffin (2006) in *The New York Times*. Dupré achieves impressive levels of hypocrisy as he accuses Pinker and others in the aforementioned critical tradition of "intellectual conservatism" – an accusation which is a non sequitur, not true, and, of course, a straw man. *Theory's Empire*, a landmark anthology on the crisis in the modern academic humanities, was mostly ignored.

Exactly the objections made to Tolkien were once made to Tennyson, and were even used to distance the canonized William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) from his own early work. This provokes the question: was the early Yeats, who wrote of spirits and elves in *The Celtic Twilight* (1902), less "realistic" than the later Yeats who wrote the astrological/occult treatise *A Vision* (1925, 2nd ed. 1937)? Surely the difference is not intellectual responsibility, but merely post-1910 critical rejection of Romanticism. Rosenberg explains, "The attempt to sever Yeats from his nineteenth-century heritage has proven more difficult… His early indebtedness to Keats, Tennyson, Morris, Rossetti, and the Aesthetes is beyond dispute" (2). And yet Yeats himself encouraged this narrative, writing in "Coole Park and Ballylee" (1931), "We were the last romantics – chose for theme / Traditional sanctity and loveliness" (41-42). This remark lead to books such as Graham Hugh's *The Last Romantics* (2007). Sunil Kumar Sarker writes, "William Morris and Algernon Swinburne, the last Victorians, died in 1896 and 1909, respectively; and Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, the two harbingers of modernism, were born in 1885 and 1888, respectively. Yeats stands between the two groups of poets: he is both Victorian and modern" (30). Had Yeats not transitioned away from his initial Romanticism, he may have found himself ignored by the critical establishment, rather than being awarded the Nobel Prize.

In the long run, however, modernist elitism was counterproductive. At this point, Tennyson's reputation has been resurrected; he is now considered one of the pre-eminent poets of his time, and he is here to stay. If Tennyson can recover from modernist attacks, others can as well: Dunsany's work, for example, is now enjoying renewed interest. The objections of the modernists to their medievalist predecessors are no longer themselves canon, and the modernist objections to their medievalist contemporaries must also be re-evaluated. The arbitrary inconsistency of the 1910 divide is unsustainable; it even entails ignoring connections between

canonical and "genre" authors, such as Auden taking an interest in Anglo-Saxon poetry after seeing Tolkien lecture on the subject at Oxford (Overbey n.pag.), or Yeats's friendship with Dunsany, whose work he praised and presented in *Selections from the Writings of Lord Dunsany* (1912). This dichotomy is an ideological construct that cannot account for the network of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers interested in northern legend. The critical Balkanization of medievalism has prevented a proper understanding of the subject.

T. A. Shippey's first major book, *The Road to Middle-earth,* focused on the foundation of Tolkien's works in nineteenth-century philology. Shippey's later book, *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (2001), reflects on Tolkien's reception. When *The Lord of the Rings* was rated highly in a 1996 survey of the British reading public, "The result was greeted with horror among professional critics and journalists" (xx-xxi). In a bold scholarly disagreement over the nature of the canon, Shippey defended the British public's choice of *The Lord of the Rings* as one of the best books of the twentieth century, while politely disagreeing with the claim that Joyce's *Ulysses* is. Defining Tolkien as a modern author, Shippey writes: "The dominant literary mode of the twentieth century has been the fantastic. This may appear a surprising claim, which should not have seemed even remotely conceivable at the start of the century and which is bound to encounter fierce resistance even now" (vii). Some of that resistance was on display in an exchange between S. T. Joshi and Charles Baxter in *The New York Review of Books,* in which Joshi similarly argued to Baxter that for at least a century,

> Many of the most dynamic aesthetic developments in Anglophone literature have come
> from what used to be derided as 'genre fiction' – especially the vital interrelation between
> literature and media… [Realist fiction] now occupies a lesser place, with a dwindling
> readership and decreased relevance in today's culture. (2014 n.pag.)

This exchange re-enacted a similar one between Shippey and Jasper Griffin in *The New York Times* in 2006.[6] Like the contributors to *Theory's Empire*, Shippey argues that the diminished place of the academic humanities in broader culture is largely a self-inflicted wound: "[despite] the academic triumph of modernism, postmodernism, etc., one can see that for all its academic success this has been marked by corresponding popular failure" (*Roots and Branches* 134). At the same time, the culture surrounding neo-Romantic literature has thrived.

Literary medievalism is enjoying a renewed academic interest, much of it under the aegis of cultural studies. However, the cultural studies approach to the subject, as Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl take in *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present* (2011), does nothing to repair literary medievalism's shattered visage, since it accepts the canonical (realist) and "genre" dichotomy and treats the latter anthropologically: Pugh and Weisl's chapter on "Literary Medievalisms" desperately seeks medieval references in canonical realist literature, while in the next chapter Tolkien is treated with children's literature, and figures like Morris and Dunsany hardly appear. As Joshi notes above, the literary fantastic has exponentially outpaced elitist literature in its influence on wider western culture, especially by inspiring works in other media. However, cultural studies is not the correct approach to literary medievalism. The cultural studies approach is founded on the aesthetically anarchistic notion that *all* culture is worthy of study by scholars, but the best argument for literary medievalism is, in fact, conservative: while the tastes of ages vary, aesthetics and historical relevance tend to triumph over time.

This study takes a traditionalist approach to the literary criticism of medievalist works, rather than a cultural studies approach, on the premise that the works discussed deserve attention for their aesthetic merit and historical importance. It is based on the premise that Shippey and Joshi and others like them are more correct in their intellectual and aesthetic notions than their

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[6] Shippey discusses the exchange in *Roots and Branches: Selected Papers on Tolkien* (2007), p. 280, footnote 5.

opponents are. It attempts to follow in the tradition of works of literary criticism and intellectual history such as Alice Chandler's foundational study *A Dream of Order: The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth-Century English Literature* (1970),[7] Joshi's groundbreaking study of speculative fiction, *The Weird Tale* (1990), Stephanie Barczewski's *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood* (2000), Andrew Wawn's *The Vikings and the Victorians: Inventing the Old North in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (2002), the second part of Heather O'Donoghue's *From Asgard to Valhalla: The Remarkable History of the Norse Myths* (2008) and of numerous books focusing on single medievalist authors, such as Shippey's books on Tolkien and many others on Morris. The approach of comparing multiple authors' responses to the same medieval material with a focus on anachronisms is stressed here to a greater degree than in philologically-based works like those of Wawn and Shippey. This is because the dissertation's goal is to demonstrate that Romanticism never died and that, far from being escapist or irresponsible, medievalism is in fact one of the characteristic and most important literatures of modernity.[8] This study is an attempt to reveal a coherent literary tradition whose eclipse by the *avant-garde* was temporary and superficial.

Modernity and modernism are not equivalent. Modernism focused on the *experience* of modernity, with tales of confusion, introspection and futility ("The Waste Land," *Ulysses*, etc.). Modern medievalism, on the other hand, focuses on the *intellectual circumstances* of modernity (which, as Pinker notes, many intellectuals in the humanities *deny*). Myths and legends address

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[7] Alice Chandler's 1970 critical survey of nineteenth-century English medievalism in literature and history explores the Romantic roots of medievalism. It introduces very useful concepts and is acknowledged as an important influence by later scholars such as Kim Moreland (*The Medievalist Impulse in American Literature: Twain, Adams, Fitzgerald and Hemingway*, 1996), Jennifer Palmgren and Lorretta Holloway (editors of *Beyond Arthurian Romance: The Reach of Victorian Medievalism*, 2005), Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl (*Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present*, 2012), and of course the author of this dissertation.

[8] Discussing the ideas of Simon Critchley, Bjarnadóttir concurs with his view that even now "The Jena-romantic inheritance has not entirely disappeared from modern literature" (36). This dissertation makes a similar claim regarding the evolution of Romanticism in the North Atlantic.

cross-cultural, indeed universal human issues such as humanity's place in the universe, human nature, life and death, free will and fate. Thus, they are an especially effective forum for discussing the meaning of modern knowledge, particularly scientific knowledge, which surely has light to cast on such issues. As scientific knowledge has advanced it has discovered new, and in many cases epistemologically superior, answers to old questions.[9]

Many of the foremost medievalist writers thought that science did threaten the intellectual status of traditional beliefs, by explaining natural phenomena in an increasingly powerful way that ultimately revolutionized thought. The reception of the works of Darwin is the ultimate example of this. This attitude is mirrored in the philosophies of Carlyle, Ruskin, and Nietzsche. In medievalism as in the works of these philosophers, one finds modern thinkers on mythology who take scientific knowledge very seriously, exactly because they have apprehensions about where it might lead. Eddison, for example, aims to address the questions myths have traditionally addressed: "Who am I? Who are you? Where did we come from? Where are we going? How did we get here? What is 'here'? … What is Death? What is Time, and why? Did it have a beginning, and will it have an end?" (1941 xvii). Compare those questions to the central questions of Jena Romanticism, which Birna Bjarnadóttir characterizes as: "What is a meaningful life? What can give life value after religious foundations have been rejected? How to address the crisis of modernity?" (38). What occurs in Eddison's work, as in medievalism generally, is a dialogue between timeless myths which speak to the first set of questions, and a modern seeker who turns to myths to interpret life in light of the second set of questions.

Thus, medievalist literary works must deal with a related series of further questions. What is the relationship between past and present? How does the new knowledge of a given

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[9] Such an assertion within the academic humanities is bound to be controversial even now, but it would not even need to be stated in the sciences. Thus the fact that this assertion is controversial merely reflects lingering anti-intellectualism in the humanities; the afterglow of the "Science Wars" of the 1990s. See *Theory's Empire* (2005).

generation or decade affect contemporary understanding of literary tradition? To what extent can the values and ideals of these stories be imported into the present time? To what extent do these stories reflect an age or culture that really existed? The fidelity of folklore and the reliability of the chain of transmission from manuscripts to modern editions become important, as does philology. Where is the line between discovery and dreaming? What does our connection to these stories mean? Can it be accounted for in purely naturalistic terms, or does it have a greater significance? Each generation of medievalist writers gave unique answers to these questions.

There is always an implicit contrast between a medievalist writer's own time and the time in which the literary works to which he or she responds were written; medievalist literature thus more or less forces writers to confront notions of evolution, civilization, and progress. As Walter Houghton explains, for the Victorians "the past which they had outgrown was not the Romantic period and not even the eighteenth century. It was the Middle Ages" (2). The consistent perception of distance between medievalist authors and the medieval cultures they were engaging with *assumes* that modernity is unalterably different from previous circumstances of human life. Writers can misinterpret, skew, or even reject the knowledge of modernity, but the view that there *is* such knowledge is intellectually progressive by nature, contra *avant-garde* indulgences in arguably regressive epistemological notions.[10] It is not the aim of this dissertation to merely tally the achievements of medievalist writers, while discussing the purported missteps of *avant-garde* ones. Rather, the aim is to offer insight into the tradition of literary medievalism by taking a similar approach to the subject that these writers took. They saw themselves as writers, educated in the western tradition, attempting to interpret modernity intellectually through an aesthetics that is grounded in tradition, but does encourage experimentation and progression. Thus, their disagreements with their contemporaries are important in exploring their ideas.

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[10] See *Theory's Empire: An Anthology of Dissent* (2005) and *The Seduction of Unreason* (2004).

For the purposes of this study, it is necessary to locate medievalism critically. Both *avant-garde* elitism on the one hand and writing for the consumer market on the other are reactions to the rise of the reading public since the Romantic era. Medievalism belongs in the centre between these two newer extremes. For the past decades, however, many academic scholars have only dealt with medievalism through one of these extremes: *avant-garde* dismissal on the one hand, or as pure cultural studies on the other. Yet literary medievalism is best understood on its own terms. This is the reason for this dissertation's use of writers and cultural commentators as theorists.[11] My own critical methodology is traditional in eschewing systematizing ideology and instead treating writers as though they have agency to write their observations on their own times. Building historical context and providing close readings are the main methods I use, along with placing medievalist writers in dialogue with each other and with contemporary cultural commentators, scientists, and philosophers.

The scientific discoveries and political events which have defined modernity each sent out cultural shockwaves that changed western beliefs about the nature of humanity and the world. If one takes the position that writers like Tennyson or Dunsany represent "escapism," it will seem totally paradoxical that literary medievalism has only increased in popularity as major, modernity-defining events in western history have occurred. The paradox is easily solved if one realizes that such writers, while responding to medieval materials, are fully representative of the intellectual circumstances of their times; a unified view of nineteenth- and twentieth-century responses to northern legend shows medievalism closely tracking the shocks of modernity. In confronting the intellectual issues of their own times, one can often count on those "Bloody Romantic" medievalists to a *greater* extent than their "realist" contemporaries.

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[11] Here as well, there may be an affinity with the approach that Bjarnadóttir takes to interpreting the influence of Romanticism on modern European literature; she deems "the Jena romantics' central project*: the production of literature as its own theory*" (30).

II. Borders and Boundaries: The Scope of This Study

There are no safe paths in this part of the world. Remember you are over the Edge of the
Wild now, and in for all sorts of fun wherever you go.
-J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (1937)

Show not what has been done, but what can be. How beautiful the world would be if
there were a procedure for moving through labyrinths.
-Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose* (1980)

If any semblance of coherence is to be achieved in a study of literary medievalism, a strong focus in both thematic and methodological terms is necessary. As this study is concerned with the question of how the cultural shockwaves of modernity have affected medievalism, its subject matter is specifically confined to literary responses to northern legend from the mid-nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth century. By "literary responses," I mean creative works of fiction. This excludes essays and translations, which may be used for contextualization. It includes retellings in poetry and prose, all forms of poetry, novels inspired by medieval materials, including satires, and mythopoeic works in poetry and prose which draw on medieval materials. Children's literature (i.e. George MacDonald, C. S. Lewis) is excluded, except where works like Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937) and White's *The Sword in the Stone* (1938) are directly relevant because they lead into much grander works of adult literature. "Literary" means that the emphasis is on silent reading, as opposed to performance. Thus, although plays are prominent in the oeuvres of writers like Dunsany and Yeats, they are excluded here; discussing the Romantic drama of the early twentieth century would require a different approach and would entail its own separate project. The borders and boundary lines on any possible map must be imperfect and subject to criticism, but this section aims to at least make some landmarks clear.

Although I have emphasized the importance of writers deemed "fantasy" like Dunsany, Eddison and Tolkien, I have excluded most fantasy, particularly the American pulp tradition (i.e. Robert E. Howard, Clark Ashton Smith), because unlike the works of the aforementioned three writers, it cannot reasonably be categorized as a form of medievalism. It displays some overlapping features with medievalism, but what differentiates the two is that, however skeptical they might be, Dunsany, Eddison and Tolkien wrote in response to medieval traditions.[12]

Finally, due to the aesthetic and historical criteria of traditional literary criticism (as opposed to the broader criteria a cultural studies approach would allow for), I have generally avoided minor works. I have attempted to be representative, rather than comprehensive, in my selection and emphasis of medievalist works. Studies like Barczewski's *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood* (2000) and Wawn's *The Vikings and the Victorians: Inventing the Old North in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (2000) discuss major and minor nineteenth-century medievalists in the English and Norse traditions respectively. They provide a deeper depiction of the reception of these traditions during the nineteenth century. However, this study aims to provide a more panoramic view of major works in order to explore the development of medievalism as a modern literary tradition.

I use the term "legend" both in the narrow sense, which describes traditional stories of heroic characters, and in a broader umbrella sense which also includes related definitions such as myth, epic, saga, and folklore. The "northern" part of the term "northern legend" reflects the study's geographical subject matter: the European North Atlantic, mainly England and Iceland. The relevant bodies of medieval legend are, in English, Anglo-Saxon epic (primarily *Beowulf*) and Arthurian romance (particularly Malory), and in Icelandic, Norse mythology and the

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[12] In chapter 3, I argue that these authors ought to be given the category "Medievalist Mythopoeia" rather than "Fantasy," for their works have more in common with Romantic mythopoeia.

Icelandic sagas. Although my focus is on English and Norse legends, some reference to Celtic, classical, and biblical materials is inevitable due to the influence of these materials on the original legends, and also their influence on most of the authors of the responses under consideration. Celtic myth is the most important of these, because of its influence on Arthuriana and on some of the most important medievalist authors. Although studies of single authors such as Charlotte Oberg's *A Pagan Prophet: William Morris* (1988) and Marjorie Burns's *Perilous Realms: Celtic and Norse in Tolkien's Middle-earth* (2005) discuss their respective medievalist writers' response to multiple mythical traditions, this study takes the comparative approach of looking at major medievalist writers' responses to multiple mythical traditions.

Each strain of the literature comes with its own strain of criticism; there are separate critical traditions for Romanticism, Victorian Medievalism, Fantasy Literature, and now a small but growing body of works focused on the modern reception of medieval literary works, under which category this study may perhaps ultimately fall. My goal has been to present a coherent literary history of northern medievalism over the course of this period. I have certainly not been comprehensive in my use of the criticism of any one author.[13] Still, I aim to build on what has already been done, so I hope to have achieved a representative selection of criticism in each case. Moreover, these critical traditions are often separated by geography, as for example the aforementioned studies by Barczewski and Wawn, versus *The Medievalist Impulse in American Literature: Twain, Adams, Fitzgerald and Hemingway* (1996) by Kim Moreland. American writers like Mark Twain (1835-1910), John Steinbeck (1902-1968) and John Gardner (1933-1982) provide a unique and important perspective on medievalism, but I am unaware of any study incorporating American, English, Irish and Icelandic authors.

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[13] Some of these authors, like Morris for example, have book-length bibliographies on their works; my goal has merely been to look at the main tradition of literary criticism for the medievalist works of each author. The Appendix lists foundational criticism for each author and some scholarly resources as well.

In the English canon, the decades with which this study is concerned are classified under the Romantic, Victorian, and Modernist periods. In literary terms, we might say that this study focuses on the period from Tennyson's initial work on *The Idylls of the King* in the 1830s (completed in 1885) and ends after Tolkien's publication of *The Return of the King* (1955), with the publication of Gardner's *Grendel* (1971) and Tolkien's posthumous *Silmarillion* (1977). I also take modern literary criticism of medievalism as beginning with Chandler's *A Dream of Order* (1970), just as the literature itself this study focuses on was coming to an end with *Grendel*. Given the focus of the chapters on the influence of contemporary historical events on medievalist works, this study's period is best described as "From Darwin to World War II." Having mapped out the edges of this study, I now turn to define the ideas at its centre.

III. "The Modern Problem": Modernity and Other Controversial Concepts

> Yeats, like us, was faced with the modern problem, i.e., of living in a society in which men are no longer supported by tradition without being aware of it, and in which, therefore, every individual who wishes to bring order and coherence into the stream of sensations, emotions, and ideas entering his consciousness, from without and within, is forced to do deliberately for himself what in previous ages had been done for him by family, custom, church, and state, namely the choice of the principles and presuppositions in terms of which he can make sense of his experience.
> -W. H. Auden, "Yeats As An Example" (1961)

In the chapters which follow, several key concepts will be referred to repeatedly, so that it is worth defining these terms here. The most controversial of these definitions is likely to be modernity, so the most time will be spent discussing this: what are the intellectual circumstances which constitute modernity? The unfortunate lack of gender-inclusive language aside, Auden's

discussion of "The Modern Problem" is useful. According to Auden's definition, "The Modern Problem" is the dissolution of tradition, a disconnection from pre-modern ages and cultures. One comment on medieval culture versus modernity came in the form of a translation by the modernist poet Ezra Pound (1885-1972). In 1912 Pound translated the Anglo-Saxon poem "The Seafarer." The poem describes the struggle to survive and the inevitability of loss among the grim natural landscapes familiar in northern tradition, yet concludes with hope that beyond all the doom and death, God will save humanity. Michael Matto calls Pound's version "boldly unfaithful" because Pound omits the final twenty-five lines, thus "opting to excise all overtly Christian sentiments in the original" (14-15).

Is this modernity – simply the loss of faith in the post-Christian West? Bjarnadóttir notes that there is a relationship between this phenomenon and the rise of scientific knowledge: "the modern era, this time in history, which in its essence, is characterized by godlessness – [is also] an era of glittering progress in science and technology" (4). Indeed, many of the distinguishing characteristics of modernity are the results or consequences of scientific knowledge. There remains a significant subset of intellectuals in the humanities and social sciences who are willing to deny that humanity has made any intellectual progress at all, but such people still use technology which operates because the science behind it is at least a useful description of reality.[14] Modernity results from the consequences of scientific knowledge, including the technological and cultural changes brought on by industrialism, urbanization, mass production, and consumerism, as well as the horrors of mechanized warfare, mass killing, and genocide, all the way up to apocalyptic scenarios involving manmade disasters and nuclear weapons.

The term "shockwaves" of modernity means that each of the events or discoveries listed above shook the foundations of western thought. It is possible to stand among the rubble of a

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[14] See the essays on science in "Part VII: Restoring Reason" from *Theory's Empire: An Anthology of Dissent* (2005).

landscape that has been torn apart by an earthquake and refuse to see that things are any different; that would be reactionary in the sense of denying the validity of some definitive discovery, but that is not what medievalist writers generally did. To be "reactionary" in aesthetics is to be traditional; that is, to find beauty in artistic forms and features developed prior to the industrial revolution. This rationale lies behind the English canon. To be reactionary in epistemology is to live in an age overwhelmingly defined by the results of scientific knowledge, yet refuse to accept empirically established science as our best description of reality. Thus it is entirely possible to be forward-thinking in one way and backward-thinking in another. How does this apply to the Romantic tradition? Walter Kaufmann writes, "Romanticism is flight from the present, whether into the past, the future, or another world, dreams, or, most often, a vague fog. It is self-deception. Romanticism yearns for deliverance from the cross of the Here and Now: it is willing to face anything but the facts" (13).

Although in terms of settings the works discussed here do indeed stray from the present to the past, the future, other worlds, or dreams, Kaufmann's statement attributes to Romanticism a level of philosophical naïveté that does not accurately describe the approach of medievalist writers. Critchley describes an alternate version, which he calls "Unworked Romanticism," which transcends the limitations Kaufmann outlines through "acute awareness of consciousness and the limitedness of thought" (qtd. in Bjarnadóttir 38). This self-consciousness is key to the intellectual and aesthetic progression of literary medievalism; it leads to the concept of metafiction. As a result of the wealth of scholarship on medieval literature from the Romantic era onward, writers inspired by medieval works found a comparative perspective on myths and legends which allowed conventions to emerge more clearly – and be modified, revised or rejected in new works. Geza Reilly writes, "Metafictional texts comment upon the literary

tradition to which they belong, laying bare the conventions that support said tradition in order to dislocate from those conventions and question the nature of the relationship between fiction and reality" (256). Most literary medievalism is in some way metafictional because of this authorial historical perspective, but metafiction also applies to some medieval literature as well.[15]

Drawing on definitions by M. H. Abrams, Andrew McGillivray provides a definition of myth which highlights the notion of belief: "A myth is a story that is thought to have originally been religious in nature. The story, moreover, is or was told by a cultural group for the purpose of explaining a natural or cosmic phenomenon. Individual myths are often part of interconnected collections of similar stories, and these stories together are known as a culture's mythology" (12). Abrams states that "a mythology is a religion in which we no longer believe" (qtd. in. McGillivray 12).[16] Similarly, the literary retelling of myths in which we no longer believe has been termed mythography. For example, the Icelandic author Snorri Sturluson, who wrote two centuries after Iceland had converted to Christianity, has been considered a mythographic author because he is retelling pagan stories in which he presumably does not believe. The question of belief is also important for the final permutation of these terms, mythopoeia, which is the invention of artificial mythologies.[17] As mythopoeia requires as its foundation the rejection of any one mythology as a description of reality, it is a form of mythology that has proven especially prevalent throughout modernity. Standing as outsiders relative to the mythical traditions of the past, mythopoeic writers answer the call for the search for a modern mythology which was first made in Romanticism. A discussion of Romanticism itself will provide necessary context on medievalist writers' views on the past.

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[15] For example, in *Chaucer and the Norse and Celtic Worlds* (2005), Rory McTurk discusses parallel uses of metafictional framing by Geoffrey Chaucer and Snorri Sturluson.

[16] The full quotation is provided there in footnote 2; definitions by other scholars are also discussed.

[17] The first clear example of mythopoeia in Romanticism is the artificial mythology of William Blake.

IV. "Faery Lands Forlorn": Medievalism's Romantic Roots

[Medievalism] had links to the renaissance of interest in nature, primitivism, and the supernatural …the organic, the joyous, and the creative. Just as medievalism was very much a part of the desire to give man a sense of social and political belonging, so it was also an attempt, in the decline of any transcendental order, to naturalize man in the universe and make him feel related to it. It was opposed to the Newtonian and Lockean view of the universe as a vast machine in which man was a subordinate mechanism moved by pleasure and pain.

-Alice Chandler, *A Dream of Order* (1970)

The upheavals of nineteenth-century England – democratization in politics and culture, urbanization, industrialism, revolutions in transportation, communications, weaponry, and advertising or propaganda – created a great deal of apprehension. In *A Dream of Order*, Chandler identifies two sorts of alienation that Romantics reacted against: social and intellectual. The former entails a lack of belonging in society, which Romantics in England tended to criticize as commercial, corrupt, and cruel. Many believed that feudal society had been more moral and cohesive than industrial England, and that chivalric ideals had been displaced by cold economic calculation as the basis for social behavior (Chandler 92-94). Intellectual alienation, on the other hand, means a lack of belonging in the universe; the Romantic critique here is that the world is stripped of mystery, wonder and meaning by scientific advancements and the rise of an empirical worldview. This is clear in poems like William Wordsworth's "The Tables Turned" (1798) and "The World Is Too Much With Us" (1807); Edgar Allan Poe's "Sonnet – To Science" (1829); and John Keats's "Lamia" (1820). As Romantics use the past to criticize the present, considering the accuracy and fidelity of their vision of the past is important when interpreting them.

Related to this twofold concept of alienation was a twofold concept of materialism: both in the philosophical sense which denies the existence of anything immaterial (such as souls, spirits, and gods) and the social sense of accumulating wealth, status, and objects indicative of both. For many Romantics, the former materialism caused the latter, and the solution to both was to be found in the cultural legacies of the past. This leads to primitivism, the view that non-modern living is superior to modern living. Influential Romantics like Blake and Wordsworth locate a better world in the past by contrasting pastoral innocence with cruel industrialism. Works such as *Songs of Innocence and of Experience Showing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul* (1794) and *Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems* (1798) attack both sorts of alienation and both sorts of materialism. Both collections express nostalgia for a lost life in which human intuitions reflected reality, a life located in the rural past and permeated with folk beliefs. Chandler writes, "The Romantic poets had almost to a man bewailed the loss of spontaneity and joy that came with personal maturity. Wordsworth… like almost all the other medievalists, seems to be making a parallel statement about national youth and maturity, finding… that modern England was dominated by 'discontent, and poverty, and crime'" (104). Romantics praised the past as a time when social values were respected, and when all that had been thrown into question by the first "Shocks of Modernity" still rested on a firm foundation.

Primitivism, however, is an ill-founded ideology. First, it is often not concerned with any dry analysis of standard-of-living, but is instead inspired by the artistic and literary products of a culture, such as myths and legends. As stories which address universal human concerns, which are the products of many generations of oral storytellers, and which have been sculpted by audience reception, myths and legends almost *necessarily* possess great psychological resonance and aesthetic power. Moreover, as the medieval literature that is all that remains of such oral

traditions is fragmentary by nature, significant creativity is necessarily involved in its interpretation. Therefore, in myths and legends, we are all likely to see what we want to see, and this helps to explain why Romantic interpreters have been so susceptible to believing that the sort of human existence they most desire is actually represented by the products of a past culture; that their idealized "elsewhere" was once real. Yet while many in the Romantic tradition clearly thought that a life without alienation actually existed elsewhere in time or space, or in the religious sense of an afterlife, others thought that this belief was itself suspect.

Keats, with his metafictional and skeptical perspective, might be termed a Romantic who was critical of Romanticism. Keats realized that, due to their imaginative nature, Romantic visions of the past contained a high degree of psychological wish-fulfillment and aesthetic seduction. His perspective seems to be quite opposed to that of Blake or Wordsworth: for him the subjective experience of poetry and myth does not signify a human link to the divine, but instead an eerie encounter with one's own imagination, as in "Ode to a Nightingale" (1819):

Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam

Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell

To toll me back from thee to my sole self!

Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well

As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf. (69-74)

The key word in this passage is *cheat*: the experience of "faery lands" that can be found in medieval myth is "forlorn" because it is an imaginative illusion borne of melancholy longing. Keats realized that by imagining the rest of the puzzle based on a few tattered though tantalizing pieces, Romantic interpreters reveal more about themselves than about the myths they are drawn

to. For Keats, there never was a golden age, and the fact that other Romantics wanted to believe so strongly that there was said more about them than about history or the world. From this skeptical perspective, the feeling of nostalgia that underlies Romantic primitivism reflects nothing real, but instead the wish to retreat into an illusionary world that matches human intuitions and desires through the "deceiving" otherworlds of myth, poetry, and dream. Keats's poetry includes a metafictional critique; even as he writes about myth he criticizes his own desire to escape into a mythical elsewhere. For Keats, literary beauty may entail dangerous escapism.

This is clear in "La Belle Dame sans Merci: A Ballad" (1819), in which readers meet Keats's "deceiving elf" directly in the titular character. She is a beautiful fairy woman who seems to offer a perfect medieval fantasy: she needs a knight to rescue her and court her in a dreamlike pastoral world where nature provides everything to a suspiciously exaggerated degree. The knight telling the story, however, has quite another experience when he dreams of ghastly figures crying "La Belle Dame sans Merci / Hath thee in thrall!" (39-40). He awakens back in the "real" world, ill and depressed, unsure what to make of his visionary experience. Thus Keats uses the figure of the supernatural temptress as a metaphor for the alluring world of his own imagination. By creating it in the image of our own desires, we have mistaken the nature of the medieval, Keats observes; our haunted longing for the siren song of faerie is in its own way as dangerous as the alienation that prompts it. Thus, Keats simultaneously acknowledges the beauty of medieval myth and warns about letting it overpower our better sense. Chandler notes that in spite of such sympathetic skepticism, for most of the nineteenth century "the tide of medievalism was rising" (115) not only as a source of literary inspiration, but also as a historical narrative. The belief in a lost golden age that comes of taking the "grass-is-greener" psychology of an "elsewhere"-focused Romantic primitivism was uncritically put on a pedestal and taken literally.

Many medievalists hoped to place their own culture (or favoured cultural groups) on the firm foundation of a historical heritage. For William Morris, England's medieval heritage represented freedom and beauty. Morris was influenced by Teutonic Democracy, which claimed that England and Iceland shared a cultural heritage of democracy due to similarities between Old English and Old Norse. Chandler writes, "Morris praises the Anglo-Saxons for their hardihood and liberty and claims that the Norman invasion was a tragedy because it replaced the great northern heritage of English literature with the inferior Romance tradition and, what was worse, substituted the hierarchy of feudalism for the early fellowship of free men" (221-222). Scholars began to theorize that extant Old English literature is representative of a lost pagan Anglo-Saxon tradition, one similar to the much larger literature in Old Norse, since both had ancient Germanic roots. Claims made under the mantle of Teutonic Democracy included the notion that the Anglo-Saxons possessed a totally democratic parliament even before King Alfred's time (Chandler 25). Interpretations of history became so skewed that the philologist George Stephens, for example, argued that European history would have been vastly different if the Viking king of England, Knut, had lived longer, the Mongol invasions would never have touched Europe and England would have remained Scandinavian in culture (Wawn 236). Stephens saw in medieval myths the solution to his own age's spiritual emptiness. Wawn writes,

> Stephens also targets scientific materialism, nihilism, Darwinism, and even 'the almighty Dollar,' before thundering on to his conclusion. Scholarly investigation of the pagan gods underlines the importance of a spiritual dimension within any community. This is the lesson to be learnt from 'Our Northern fore-elders.' Stephens pleads: 'At such a moment THUNOR, our great ancestral Symbol-god, should never leave us… God help that Hearth, that Home, that Land, that Age where NO THUNOR IS.' (qtd. in Wawn 232)

This is indicative of the overblown nature of much of Victorian engagement with northern legend. It also shows that nineteenth-century medievalism was, at its root, a response to specific, psychologically uncomfortable aspects of modernity. The same hopes were invested in contemporary interpretations of Arthurian tradition; even William Makepeace Thackeray raved:

> Neither the awful truth from science… nor the vivisoulections of Contemporaries and Fortnightly Reviews need put away the clear clanging of King Arthur's sword... and those Excaliburs, I thank God our fathers have always held. (170-171)

In *Middlemarch* (1874), George Eliot captures her contemporaries' obsession with mythology through the character of the eccentric clergyman, Mr. Casaubon. Casaubon is so obsessed that he wakes up in the middle of the night and asks his wife Dorothea to help him edit the manuscript for his scholarly tome (518). Dorothea, however, does not share his enthusiasm:

> The poor child had become altogether unbelieving as to the trustworthiness of that Key which had made the ambition and the labour of her husband's life. It was not wonderful that, in spite of her small instruction, her judgment in this matter was truer than his: for she looked with unbiased comparison and healthy sense at probabilities on which he had risked all his egoism. And now she pictured to herself the days, and months, and years which she must spend in sorting what might be called shattered mummies, and fragments of a tradition which was itself a mosaic wrought from crushed ruins – sorting them as food for a theory which was already withered in the birth like an elfin child. (519)

Eliot's inspiration for Casaubon's *The Key To All Mythologies* may well have been William Morris's colossal anthology of poetic retellings of myths, *The Earthly Paradise* (1868). Eliot offers a sensible critique of her contemporaries' lofty ambitions regarding mythology; Casaubon himself admits, "I have lived too much with the dead" (519). Perhaps for Eliot, as for Keats, an

obsession with the otherworldly experience offered by medieval myths is to be "half in love with easeful Death" ("Ode to a Nightingale" 52). Eliot's fictional Victorian philologist Casaubon might say, with his real contemporary Stephens, that *Scholarly investigation of the pagan gods underlines the importance of a spiritual dimension within any community*, but he is a melancholy man, with a distant and ill-adjusted personality. His death, leaving the doomed *Key* unfinished and abandoned, does nothing but cast a shadow over those who knew him. Casaubon's status as a clergyman indicates the degree to which Romantic primitivist views of medieval history were replacing the Christian Eden which was fading with public faith. Chandler explains, "[Medievalists] saw materialism and mechanization as inimical to the human. The return to the Middle Ages was conceived of as a homecoming" (8). Teutonic Democracy supplied an English Eden, and it was only one Romantic ideology on the subject of history. Many medievalist writers turned to pagan myths and legends as response to their culture's loss of Christian faith.

For John Ruskin (1819-1900), the medieval period symbolized both a society and a cosmos orderly, benevolent, and meaningful (Chandler 10). Carlyle, too, saw what he wanted to see in the medieval period, a replacement for the waning religious faith of his age. Chandler writes that Carlyle "spent most of his life searching among the new nineteenth-century philosophies for his lost faith. His writings are all an attempt to find and express the unseen order of the universe" (123). Both Ruskin and Carlyle were raised as evangelical Christians, but both lost their faith. Being psychologically conditioned from a young age to feel as if the universe has been created with humanity in mind has a strong effect that can long outlive even the beliefs which support such a feeling. For cultural critics like Ruskin and Carlyle, the loss of faith had a powerful lingering effect in both private feeling and popular consciousness.

Ruskin and Carlyle each seek a replacement for their lost mythical view of reality. Thus both evaluate worldviews in terms of the meaning and motivation these worldviews offer subscribers rather than their truth value, since both view the evidence-based worldview of scientific materialism as meaningless and immoral. For example, Ruskin vigorously condemns the idea "that knowledge is thought the one and only good… whether men are vivified by it or paralyzed" (qtd. in Chandler 204). For Carlyle, even Norse paganism, mistaken as it may have been, is still a better understanding of humanity's place in the world than the scientific one. This is because in his view the essence of all mythology is "recognition of the divineness of Nature" (30). By personifying the workings of Nature, Carlyle suggests, the Norse pagans "wondered at, and fell down in awe before, as Religion" everything which "we now lecture of as Science" (17).

Myths describe human life in terms of purpose and meaning; for Carlyle and Ruskin, affirming the psychological or even spiritual value of myths in the face of modern materialism was a way of asserting these things. Ruskin saw his own time as a disenchanted industrial age and hoped for a sort of "re-enchantment" of the world. Chandler explains, "In all Ruskin's writing… medievalism verges on metaphysics" (209). This immediately leads to the question of what the value of metaphysics is, and there has never been a critic of metaphysics like Nietzsche. At the core of Nietzsche's critique is disdain for any ideology which denigrates lived reality in favour of metaphysics; he argues that such priorities reflect hatred of life and love of death. Nietzsche famously criticized Christianity from this perspective, but he applied such a critique to Romanticism as well, assessing it as a sort of replacement religion for an age of alienation. That is, Nietzsche interpreted Romanticism as another escapist psychological crutch.

In a phrase reminiscent of Keats's "Belle Dame," Nietzsche termed Romanticism, "The malignant fairy" (208), meaning that the Romantic obsession with otherworldly beauty is

ultimately morbid; for Nietzsche Romantics do not wish to go "back," but rather "they wish to get – *away*" (207). Chandler applies this view to literary medievalism: "The metaphysical attempt to find in medievalism the guide to an understandable and approachable universe failed completely… Neither modern science nor contemporary social developments gave man any grounds for believing that he was at home in the universe. Medievalism was one of the last great outflarings of the religious spirit" (10). In the conclusion to *A Dream of Order*, Chandler deems literary medievalism a misguided enterprise doomed by unrealistic philosophical ambitions. Isaiah Berlin makes a similar comment at the end of his study, *The Roots of Romanticism* (2001):

> Their attempt to convert life into art presupposes that human beings are simply a kind of material, even as paints or sounds are kinds of material…. To the degree to which this is not true… to the extent to which not everything which science says is nonsense… to this extent romanticism… seems to me to be fallacious. (146)

Berlin thus anticipates some of the arguments that Pinker makes in *The Blank Slate*. Nietzsche, subject of Alexander Nehemas's *Nietzsche: Life As Literature* (1985), could hardly fault anyone for "an attempt to impose an aesthetic model on reality," and Berlin recognizes the appeal: "For artists, indeed, perhaps some of the claims of romanticism may appear to have a great deal of validity" (145). Chandler, Berlin, and Nietzsche all assess Romantic medievalism as impeccable in aesthetics, but ridiculous in epistemology. Yet from Keats onward, many medievalist writers had themselves made the epistemology an issue. Romanticism's naïveté has been emphasized *ad naseum*, as if modernism has been unassailable in its philosophical views; yet Romanticism has always displayed a dichotomy between believers and skeptics. The latter might be identified with Critchley's "Unworked Romanticism," and the issue of contention is what Bjarnadóttir terms "The Flickering Boundary Between Religion and Aesthetics" (131).

V. "The Embroidered Robes of Myth": An Interpretive Framework

    Rain, rain, and sun! a rainbow in the sky!

A young man will be wiser by and by;

An old man's wit may wander ere he die.

    Rain, rain, and sun! a rainbow on the lea!

And truth is this to me, and that to thee;

And truth or clothed or naked let it be.

    Rain, sun, and rain! and the free blossom blows:

Sun, rain, and sun! and where is he who knows?

From the great deep to the great deep he goes.

-Merlin, from Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1885)

I see you are but some phantastical sophister who with speaking paradoxically will gain

the reputation of wisdom and reach. I'll listen to no more.

-Queen Stateira, from E. R. Eddison's *The Mezentian Gate* (1958)

In *Sartor Resartus* (1836), Carlyle popularized the "Philosophy of Clothes" for readers of

English literature. Carlyle introduces his reflections through the mouthpiece character, Professor

Teufelsdrockh, perhaps the original source for the many invented sages in Romantic tradition:

Nietzsche's Zarathustra, Dunsany's Prophets, Eddison's Doctor Vandermast, Tolkien's Gandalf

and numerous versions of the enchanter Merlin, including Tennyson's enigmatic, playful and yet

somber riddle-maker quoted above.[18] Merlin's riddles on the subject of truth are challenging:

they relate truth to issues of cognitive capacity, subjectivity, accident and ultimately, futility.

They also introduce a metaphor similar to Carlyle's: truth can be clothed or naked, a dichotomy

that divides subjective from objective, art from science, myth from reality.

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[18] The function of these sages is often to dispense the religious outlook(s) or mythical traditions of the worlds they inhabit, but they also act as mouthpieces for their authors as by commenting on contemporary philosophical issues. For the use of enchantress figures as metafictional author/artist figures see discussion on page 238.

Such a Romantic distinction goes back to Blake, who wrote: "Art is the Tree of Life…
Science is the Tree of Death" (30-32). Keats describes the Romantic view of poetic inspiration in
"Epistle to My Brother George" (1816) by saying that poets have a sort of divine vision:

A sudden glow comes on them, nought they see

In water, earth, or air, but poesy…

What we, ignorantly, sheet-lightning call,

Is the swift opening of their wide portal. (21-22, 25-26)

This describes an enchanted world. Here, the poet's intuition, inspiration or imagination is a kind
of second sight; whether terrifying or beautiful, it speaks in the symbolic language of mythology.
In contrast, Keats asserts in "Epistle to John Hamilton Reynolds" (1818), the truths about nature
that science uncovers are hard and heartless:

I was at home

And should have been most happy – but I saw

Too far into the sea, where every maw

The greater on the less feeds evermore: –

But I saw too distinct into the core

Of an eternal fierce destruction,

And so from happiness I far was gone. (91-97)

Keats makes this reflection looking from an "Enchanted Castle… where it doth seem / A mossy
place, a Merlin's Hall, a dream" (25, 32-33) into the sea, representing Nature (the influence on
Tennyson is clear). The notion that humanity is utterly subordinate to the indifferent laws of
nature inspires revulsion in Romantic writers, from Blake to Keats to Yeats and Nietzsche.
Indeed, the specific charge of "disenchantment" found in poems like Keats's "Lamia" and Poe's

"Sonnet – To Science" can be effectively summarized by saying that it laments the replacement of myth by science. Keats excelled at inventing metaphors for this, from unweaving a rainbow and clipping an angel's wings, to conquering mysteries by rule and line, and revealing Beauty itself (Lamia or the Belle Dame) as a misleading and potentially manipulative illusion. Poe makes the complaint even more obvious, asking a personified Science,

> Hast thou not dragged Diana from her car,
>
> And driven the Hamadryad from the wood
>
> To seek a shelter in some happier star?
>
> Hast thou not torn the Naiad from her flood,
>
> The Elfin from the green grass, and from me
>
> The summer dream beneath the tamarind tree? (9-14)

This characteristically symbolic account of various dryads, elves, goddesses and dreams being driven away leaves only a reductionist, rather than vitalist or animist, account of life and nature. The relevance of this Romantic distinction throughout the history of medievalism can be illustrated by observing that Tolkien eventually went so far as to invent ents, tree-like giants which possess supernatural souls just as much as humans do – and had these creatures rise in defense of forests defiled by the industrial projects of orcs, who treat nature as inferior to themselves, yet may themselves be soulless. The concept of the soul can include notions of aesthetics, ethics, free will, intuitions, imagination, personal beliefs, religious convictions, and even, ultimately, existential justifications. Moreover, the concept of the soul often entails the metaphysical assertion of the sort that souls are more "real" than apparent reality, in that they may reincarnate or manifest in other dimensions (such as heaven or hell) or lives (as in reincarnation or concepts of ghosts, afterlives, shades, etc). Thus, belief in methodological

naturalism, itself very close to philosophical empiricism, necessarily interferes with belief in souls, because the latter epistemologically privileges private intuitions, inspirations, and even imagination, over empiricism. Romantically-inclined writers find this conflict so important that it often affects their judgment on epistemology. For example, Poe's speaker addresses Science as one "Who alterest all things with thy peering eyes" (2) and asks, "Why preyest thou thus upon the poet's heart, / Vulture, whose wings are dull realities?" (3-4).

Medievalists, being influenced by the Romantic tradition, address exactly the issues Poe raises here, and in just as self-aware a manner. How are Keats's "dull catalogue of common things" and Poe's "dull realities" best understood? Each asserts that dream or imagination is aesthetically preferable to disenchanted reality, but there is some disagreement as to where on the scale of epistemology one ought to end up, between the influences of these opposing forces. In *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841), Carlyle blends his aesthetics into epistemology. For Carlyle, the visionary, vitalist or mythic view of reality conceives of the universe as alive, while the reductionist account describes only an indifferent machine. He illustrates the difference by contrasting Norse cosmology, in which the worlds are all branches of the great tree, Yggdrasil, with Newtonian physics: "I find no similitude so true as this of a Tree. Beautiful; altogether beautiful and great. The '*Machine* of the Universe,' – alas, do but think of that in contrast!" (21). Tolkien used two great Trees as the axis and light of his mythic world, similar to Yggdrasil. To an extent, Tolkien's "sub-creation" favoured pre-scientific worldviews as explanations for phenomenon, thus affirming Keats's "poesy" at the expense of science. Indeed, in Tolkien's mythopoeia, only beings who are evil or corrupt create industrial works or engage in scientific experiments. As many Romantic writers emphasize the notion of a sharp contrast between prescientific and scientific worldviews, such a notion is foundational here.

With the "Philosophy of Clothes," one of Carlyle's aims was to reclaim territory for Romantic, mythic, symbolic or subjective explanations for things, at the expense of scientific ones. Carlyle found the intrusion of science into questions formerly the province of mythology, philosophy and religion alarming. Carlyle's Professor Teufelsdrockh confronts the "Naked" truth – a fatalistic interpretation of scientific descriptions of humanity's position in the universe:

> To me the Universe was all void of Life, of Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility: it was one huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine, rolling on, in its dead indifference, to grind me limb from limb. Oh, the vast, gloomy, solitary Golgotha, and Mill of Death! Why was the Living banished thither companionless, conscious? (n.pag.)

Carlyle associated a scientific view of the universe with philosophical ideas such as materialism, reductionism, determinism, and nihilism, and he found these ideas totally unacceptable. Charlotte Brontë had a similar response to scientific materialism. In a review of Henry George Atkinson's and Harriet Martineau's strongly materialist book *Letters on the Laws of Man's Nature and Development* (1850), she wrote: "Sincerely, for my own part… do I wish to find and know the Truth; but if this be Truth, well may she guard herself with mysteries, and cover herself with a veil" (qtd. in Houghton 424). This veil is a layer of subjective interpretation between ourselves and the truths of objective reality, which partially obscures things both ways: for a veil affects how we see as well as how we are seen. Brontë's phrasing also implies a sort of immodesty, that "Naked truth" might be scandalous and unacceptable.

In other words, according to this outlook, we envision ourselves as beings with meaning, morality and purpose in some larger scheme or mythology, and then shape ourselves according to this vision using aesthetic modifications, of which clothes are only one type. If the vision that informs this scheme or mythology and our place within it turns out to be nothing more than an

illusion of the "veil," that is still preferable to gazing at "Naked truth." Here we might employ terms like *ritual, ceremony, costume, carnival*, and *masquerade*, each with slightly different implications in terms of the belief level and style of the participants. The "Philosophy of Clothes" applies to a wide spectrum of epistemological views. For Nietzsche, with his rejection of metaphysics, the Romantic medievalist does not and can not believe in any metaphysics which connects him or her to the worshipped traditions, and thus looks like a mere curiosity, an eccentric re-enactor of an imagined past. In *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), Nietzsche argues that the self-awareness of modernity has exchanged myth for masquerade:

> [The modern man] requires history as a storage room for costumes. To be sure, he soon notices that not one fits him very well; so he keeps changing. Let anyone look at the nineteenth century with an eye for these quick preferences and changes of the style of masquerade; also for the moments of despair over the fact that "nothing is becoming." It is no use to parade as romantic or classical, Christian or Florentine, baroque or "national".… [A]gain a new piece of prehistory or a foreign country is tried on, put on, taken off, packed away, and above all *studied*: we are the first age that has truly studied "costumes" – I mean those of moralities, articles of faith, tastes in the arts, and religions – prepared like no previous age for a carnival in the grand style.… Perhaps this is where we shall still discover the realm of our *invention*, that realm in which we, too, can still be original, say, as parodists of world history and God's buffoons. (340)

Modern people, Nietzsche suggests, live in terror of alienation and meaninglessness – and thus they misguidedly "try on" the "Clothes" of the past. Modern writers can study the past endlessly, Nietzsche suggests, but all the Romanticism in the world will not ultimately succeed in rooting our identity, values or experience in any true historical or metaphysical sense.

Nietzsche seems to have hoped for a more radical solution, something along the lines of the creation of a new mythology, yet even this might remain only a masquerade, unless motivated by a true sense of conviction. The issue comes down to what people are capable of believing in, in what sense (literal or symbolic), and why. The scientific view of knowledge, founded on empiricism, skepticism, and methodological naturalism, more or less forbids the "Philosophy of Clothes" except in the most abstract and symbolic of senses. In the context of arguing against religious faith, Sam Harris writes: "Beliefs are not like clothing. Comfort and utility and attractiveness cannot be our conscious criteria for adopting them" (2007 n.pag.).

Yet even in this abstract and symbolic sense, one which rejects metaphysics and places scientific knowledge as epistemologically superior, the metaphor is still meaningful. Atheists can appreciate myths as stories which have great symbolic meaning and help people interpret life. For example, Mark Twain was an atheist, yet in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), his narrator justifies religious tolerance (if not epistemological relativism) by noting that:

> Spiritual wants and instincts are as various in the human family as are physical appetites, complexions, and features, and a man is only at his best, morally, when he is equipped with the religious garment whose color and shape and size most nicely accommodate themselves to the spiritual complexion, angularities, and stature of the individual. (118)

Twain's "wants and instincts" imply that even from an atheist's point of view, the aesthetic and psychological appeal of mythology is a part of human nature. Another even more openly atheistic American writer, H. P. Lovecraft, similarly sent modern protagonists into the past (or a dream of the past, as *A Connecticut Yankee* may ultimately be), and found meaning there. Few writers have pursued empirical philosophical views to the extent that Lovecraft did, yet even he expressed something like the "Philosophy of Clothes" in "Celephaïs" (1922):

Kuranes was not modern, and did not think like others who wrote. Whilst they strove to strip from life its embroidered robes of myth and to show in naked ugliness the foul thing that is reality, Kuranes sought for beauty alone. When truth and experience failed to reveal it, he sought it in fancy and illusion… amid the nebulous memories of childhood tales and dreams. (1995 39)[19]

Lovecraft's "Clothes" are "the embroidered robes of myth," with the implication of being intricately woven, perhaps as the result of a long cultural tradition. It is a detail William Morris would have appreciated. Now "Naked truth" is "in naked ugliness the foul thing that is reality," so that Lovecraft displays both an aesthetic rejection of realism in fiction and an aesthetic pursuit of tradition, even in the context of full acceptance of contemporary science's most disillusioning implications and the total rejection of all metaphysics. Lovecraft expresses a self-aware and skeptical aesthetics inspired by Nietzsche, contra what both saw as religious worship of beauty.

For Nietzsche, it is exactly the problem that religious believers are willing, on an aesthetic basis, to ascribe epistemological value to *their* myths and no others, that leads them to condemn art. Their objection is that it is competition. In Nietzsche's view, mistaking one's own aesthetics for a true gateway to a higher world is hostile to life; since all life rests on "semblance, art, deception, prismatic effects, the necessity of perspectivism and error" (qtd. in Bjarnadóttir 178).[20] Nietzsche began his literary career identifying opposing symbolic forces in Greek mythical and literary traditions: the measured rationalism and harmony of Apollo and the frenzied passion of Dionysus. Bjarnadóttir notes the contrast between the two creative forces which Nietzsche first identified in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872): "The Apollonian artist is taken

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[19] A possible influence here is Yeats's poem "The Coat" (1914), which begins thus: "I made my song a coat / Covered with embroideries / Out of old mythologies" (1-3).

[20] One might even attribute similar views to John Ruskin. In *Modern Painters 3* (1856), Ruskin criticized humanity's "fear of disagreeable facts and… instinctive terror at all truth, and love of glosses, veils, and decorative lies of every sort" (qtd. in Houghton 413).

in by beautiful illusions, while the Dionysian artist pawns his or her intellect in order to become a rank plaything of the wild forces of nature" (174).

This study identifies a similar tension in Romantic literary traditions, between skeptics on the one hand, and believers on the other. The two sides tend to agree on every aspect of the "Philosophy of Clothes" identified above: that science is intellectually disillusioning; that modern industrial, metropolitan life is alienating; and that traditional conceptions of aesthetic, including the supernatural and other mythical features, are superior to newer traditions of realism. Aesthetically and psychologically similar, the disagreement between believers and skeptics occurs on the matter of epistemology.

The question is the epistemological value of subjective experiences – including the experience of reading myths and fairy tales, particularly in childhood, the experience of dreams and nightmares, hopes and intuitions, visions or hallucinations. To what degree does having such subjective experiences validate them as descriptions of objective reality – and where, exactly, can the line between the two be drawn? The believers, beginning with Blake, place mind over matter, and epistemologically value subjective experience very highly, often to the point of holding consoling supernatural beliefs. Consider the following description of Blake's death: "He died… in a most glorious manner. He said He was going to that Country he had all His life wished to see & expressed Himself Happy… His eyes Brighten'd and he burst out Singing of the things he saw in Heaven" (Grigson 38). Compare this to the relentless morbidity of much of Keats's poetry, the sense of decay and loss and death. Of course, not all medievalist writers take a view that strictly belongs to either the believer or skeptic side of this dichotomy, and indeed many wavered on the spectrum between these poles over the course of their careers. Yeats, for example, wrote the following on intuitition, beauty and belief in *The Celtic Twilight* (1902):

I believe when I am in the mood that all nature is full of people whom we cannot see… some wicked… but many beautiful beyond any one we have ever seen, and that these are not far away when we are walking in pleasant and quiet places…. [A]s a boy I could never walk in a wood without feeling that at any moment I might find before me somebody or something I had long looked for without knowing what…. [T]hey are surely there, the divine people, for only we who have neither simplicity nor wisdom have denied them…. [W]e shall be among them when we die if we but keep our natures simple and passionate. May it not even be that death shall unite us to all romance, and that some day we shall fight dragons among blue hills, or come that whereof all romance is but

> 'Foreshadowings mingled with the images

> Of man's misdeeds in greater days than these'? (64)

Closing with a quotation from Morris's *The Earthly Paradise*, Yeats envisions a greater truth behind mythology. Morris himself idealized tradition in a more secular way, as the title of *The Earthly Paradise* implied and as he pursued in experiments with utopian thinking. Yet it was a highly imaginative pursuit, and Morris too associated his own sense of aesthetics with idealized traditions. In "On Art and Socialism" (1884), Morris explained that he wanted to encourage:

A general love of beauty, partly for its own sake, and because it is natural and right for the dwellers on the beautiful earth to help and not to mar its beauty…. [B]eauty is a symbol of a decent and reasonable life, is above all the token of what chiefly makes life good and not evil, of joy in labour, in creation that is: and this joy in labour, this evidence of man helping in the work of creation, is I feel sure the thing which from the first all progress in civilization has been aiming at: feed this inspiration and you feed the flame of civilization throughout the world; extinguish it and civilization will die also. (106)

The more intensely one can envision a mythic world, the more difficult it can become to distinguish fact from fantasy. Thus, even though Morris was not interpreting his own sense of aesthetics in a supernatural manner, he still attributes to it a highly idealized significance.

Such an attribution is a characteristic obsession of medievalist writers. Skeptics use it in a purely aesthetic manner (Keats, Dunsany, Eddison), but for others it becomes a private religion (Blake, Yeats, Tolkien). Yeats certainly uses his aesthetic intuitions as the basis for metaphysical beliefs: "If beauty is not a gateway out of the net we were taken in at our birth, it will not long be beauty" (1998 64).[21] It must be a gateway to another world, or else it is a cruel lie, Yeats claims. This sounds like Keats's "Belle Dame." In insisting that his aesthetics have epistemological value, Yeats is at his most Romantic; Romanticism's attempt to recover a unified ideal behind medieval myths and contemporary folk belief was always aesthetic in its inspiration. Yeats writes of an old peasant, "I am not certain he distinguishes between the natural and supernatural very clearly" (61), but the same might be said about Yeats himself. Like Dunsany, Yeats uses "imagination," "fancy" and "romance" interchangeably, but whereas Dunsany held metaphysics and subjective intuitions as without epistemological value, Yeats was tempted to view them as a sixth sense. Indeed, the two of them repeat the believer-skeptic dichotomy of Blake and Keats.

In "Ideas on Beauty," Guðbergur Bergsson examines Romantic notions of aesthetics: "It is often asserted that art and the need for art come of the idea that an artist finds in himself a power that is greater than himself. Art is great; the artist is small by comparison with that which awakens within him or that which he creates with discipline and practice. But is that power he finds inside himself the spirit of god?" (231-232). Whether artistic inspiration is divine or not, it can be used to sway people and even inspire worship: "This hidden memory glides into the mind

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[21] Auden notes that Yeats was willing to adopt "a cosmology apparently on purely aesthetic grounds, i.e., not because it is true but because it is interesting" (1961 310).

on account of what we might call a restless murmur. Some might call it the need for faith. I do not know. Whatever this murmur might be, it is not directed at some specific god by the means of prayer, or to a certain political power, even though it is possible to manipulate this power and use it for purposes of propaganda" (232). In other words, the psychological power of aesthetics is so great that people are always tempted to ascribe to it a religious significance.

Bergsson writes, "Every artist must recognize how he chases after ideas. Either overtly or covertly, he tries to entrap them and redress them in recognizable garb, which is usually dependent on the spirit of the times and changes accordingly" (232). In *The Age of Arthur* (1973), John Morris uses the same metaphor to explain the history of the legend: "Each retelling of the tale clothed Arthur in the ideas of its own day" (119). The "Clothes" of a given moment are an attempt by the artists of that time to capture this inner voice and impose what Chandler would have called their "Dream of Order" on the world. Carlyle's Clothes, Brontë's Veil, Nietzsche's Costumes, even Campbell's famous "Masks of God" are all different ways of saying the same thing: art, myth, and dream place a layer of subjective interpretation over reality; how transparent or opaque this layer is, and correspondingly how ridiculous or noble the "Philosophy of Clothes" is, depends on one's epistemology – what position one occupies on the spectrum between skepticism and belief. Blake, and later Yeats, found their visions so alluring as to in some sense create and believe in their own private religions. Does aesthetics have metaphysical significance? Or are myths and dreams just the projections of fearful, limited primates? Is nature beautiful and orderly, or chaotic and cruel? In its concern with the meaning of contemporary science for the universal human questions, its fascination with mythology, its grappling with nihilism, and its metafictional concern with the value of words, literary medievalism has a strong affinity with existentialism, whose chronology it shares and in some ways parallels.

Chapter 1

I. Dragons of the Prime: Darwin, Doubt, and Degeneration in Victorian Medievalism

> While your men of science are… deciphering the filthy heraldries which record the relation of humanity to the ascidian and crocodile, you have ceased utterly to distinguish between the two species of man… the one, capable of loyalty and of love, can at least conceive spiritual natures which have no taint from their own… and the other, capable only of avarice, hatred, and shame, who in their lives are the companions of the swine, and leave in death nothing but food for the worm and the vulture.
>
> -John Ruskin, *Love's Meinie: Lectures on Greek and English Birds* (1881)

From the start, a sense of vast distance haunted Romantic writers working with traditional tales. In "Hyperion" (1818), Keats described the Titans in evolutionary terms: a "mammoth-brood" (I.165). In "The Epic" (1842), Tennyson similarly worried that writing Arthurian poems would be seen as the reactionary resurrection of a long-dead tradition: "For nature brings not back the mastodon" (36). As these metaphors from contemporary paleontology show, evolutionary concepts found their way into Romantic mythmaking well before Darwin. Yet as the public controversy over evolution increased, Victorian medievalism expressed a fearful and desperate tension between mythical and scientific conceptions of earth's past, the origins of species, and humanity's place in nature. Gillian Beer explains that despite Darwin's reluctance, with *On the Origin of Species* (1859), he incited an intellectual revolution: "Everyone found themselves living in a Darwinian world in which old assumptions had ceased to *be* assumptions, could be at best beliefs, or myths, or, at worst, detritus of the past" (3). Later work in biology has confirmed the paramount importance and far-reaching implications of Darwin's discoveries; as Richard Dawkins put it in *The Selfish Gene* (1976), "Intelligent life on a planet comes of age when it first works out the reason for its own existence" (1).

Most controversial of all were the implications for humans. Beer writes, "It is hard to overestimate the imaginative turmoil brought about by evolutionary theory, beginning in England already in the 1830s with Lyell" (11). Lyell himself insisted in response to Darwin that "the dignity of man is at stake" and Wilberforce, during his exchange with Huxley, felt his audience would take it for granted that it would be offensive to admit to being descended from an ape (Lucas n.pag.). Medievalism was invested in primitivism (a lost golden age), vitalism (humans having spirits), anthropomorphism (a human-like universe), teleology (a purpose for the universe), animism (animals possessing spirits), and special creation, all concepts Darwin's work brought into question. Steven Pinker uses evolution as an example of a scientific idea that people find difficult to accept, in contrast to supernaturalistic beliefs that appeal to intuition:

> The findings of science entail that the belief systems of all the world's traditional religions and cultures – their theories of the origins of life, humans, and societies – are factually mistaken…. [H]umans belong to a single species of African primate that developed agriculture, government, and writing late in its history… a tiny twig of a genealogical tree that embraces all living things and that emerged from prebiotic chemicals almost four billion years ago…. We know that the laws governing the physical world (including accidents, disease, and other misfortunes) have no goals that pertain to human well-being. There is no such thing as fate, providence, karma, spells, curses, augury, divine retribution, or answered prayers – though the discrepancy between the laws of probability and the workings of cognition may explain why people believe there are. And we know that we did not always know these things, that the beloved convictions of every time and culture may be decisively falsified, doubtless including some we hold today. (2013 n.pag.)

Scientific results have famously been counterintuitive, from the discovery that the earth is neither flat nor stationary to quantum mechanics, but few provoked as much controversy as Darwin's discoveries. Darwin proposed a theory that went against human intuition and was difficult to envision because of the deep time involved. He had on his side a great deal of close observation of the facts of reality and a small mountain of evidence. On the other hand, myths lie at the deepest level of human culture, are probably as old as language itself, and reflect humanity's deepest intuitions by presenting an anthropomorphic, symbolic and dreamlike vision of the universe. As poetic answers to universal human questions which have been sculpted by generations through oral traditions, myths possess great psychological depth and aesthetic power. Medievalists, being Romantically-inclined writers, *felt* the contradiction between the intuition-affirming imaginative visions of mythology, and the counterintuitive results of science.

In Darwin's works, despite the magnificence of the products of human culture, the human mind is an adaptive mechanism which has evolved to achieve the goals of survival and reproduction, neither supernatural nor different in kind from any adaptation of any species. As one life form among many, humans should not expect that their own subjective notions such as purpose, meaning, design, morality, or beauty should be shared by the universe itself. Thus, after Darwin, in the second half of the nineteenth century anthropomorphism became discredited among scientists (Beer 45). Darwin adjusted his prose style to remove anthropomorphic expressions; he revised "since the first creature… was created" to read "since the first organic beings appeared" (qtd. in Beer 48). This shows how important it was for Darwin that people understand that, as products of evolution, humans are adapted to the universe: in no sense is *it* adapted to *us*. In *The Descent of Man* (1871) Darwin proposed evolutionary mechanisms to explain aspects of human nature, including intelligence, the emotions, and the sense of beauty. Beer

writes that Darwin's ideas contradict "any formulation which interprets the natural world as commensurate with man's understanding of it" (90), thus discrediting the Romantic (specifically Wordsworthian) notion that there is a pre-existing harmony between the mind and the external world (Beer 69). By discrediting the view that human intuitions actually reflect the truth about the universe, Darwin necessarily undermines the foundations of a related concept: primitivism.

Primitivism, the view that pre-industrial living is superior to post-industrial living in any number of ways, has been a staple of Romantic thought since Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). Primitivism relies on the view that nature is benevolent toward humanity, if only we would return that benevolence and cease our unnatural industrial activities. It rejects the notion that life in a state of nature is "poor, nasty, brutish, and short," as Hobbes famously put it. Pinker explains the contemporary scientific view on these matters: "The evidence shows that Rousseau was wrong and Hobbes was right" (2012 n.pag.). The concept of a lost golden age has been important in western thought since the myth of the Garden of Eden, and it took on a particular power in the nineteenth century. Yet Darwin's discoveries, and scientific advancement more generally, discredited it. Beer explains, "Instead of the garden at the beginning, there was the sea... There was no way back to a previous paradise: the primordial was comfortless… Nostalgia was disallowed, since no unrecapturable perfection preceded man's history" (118-119). This wreaks havoc with Romantic notions of divine creation followed by slow disenchantment, finally arriving at just the sort of spiritually drained, commercialist modern society the Romantics despised and that Nietzsche assessed as nihilistic. Nietzsche's "death of God" means much more than a decline in the intellectual credibility of the claim that God exists. Yet that is a major part of the issue, and here Darwin made a significant contribution. By explaining life, speciation and behaviour in naturalistic terms, Darwin removed the need for any supernatural designer.

Serious re-evaluations of primitivism occur everywhere in Victorian literature. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) is perhaps the best example, and reads like one long, brooding meditation on Darwin's encounter with tribal peoples in *The Descent of Man* (1871). Primitivist views that a lost golden age once existed or that noble savages enjoy a paradisiac life in the state of nature, are incompatible with Darwin's discoveries. Thus, nature imagery in literature subsequently became strikingly anti-pastoral. Conrad's vision of nature is alien and hostile; it is a place where people who think themselves civilized discover their own true nature and recoil in horror. Yet while Darwin undermined primitivist historical claims, he also undermined progressive ones: whereas evolution had often been interpreted as teleological, Darwin flatly denied this. He specifically disavowed Victorian views of their own society as the intended goal of evolution. In Darwin's work, a vain and self-aggrandizing humanity, thinking itself specially created, is instead brought to recognize its relationship to every other living thing.

The notion of metamorphosis or transformation has always been a mainstay of mythology; thus retelling myths offered a unique opportunity for authors to reflect on new evolutionary ideas. This chapter examines the impact of contemporary evolutionary ideas on two great poetic retellings of northern legends: Morris's *Sigurd the Volsung* (1876) and Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1885). These retellings display the Darwin-induced fear that in recognizing kinship with nonhuman life-forms, human beings will undergo moral and even physical degeneration. Yet intellectually, this relies on the view of evolution popularized by the French naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744-1829), who argued that species change via the inheritance of acquired characteristics. In his theory agency is central since animals (including humans) in effect design their own bodies by acquiring characteristics through use (for example, the giraffe's neck). This preserves many of the intuitive beliefs encoded in myths. Beer writes,

Lamarck proposes a world of intelligent desire rationally satisfied. His work also follows the pattern of all stories of how things came to be the way they are: need brings about change or – in more admonitory versions – bad behavior results in loss and degradation. It is a pattern of story which has been predominant in many cultures. He draws on mythic concepts of metamorphosis and transformation and explains them causally. (19)

The example of the robin that flew too close to the sun explicitly relies on the heritability of acquired characteristics, showing how intuitive this notion is (19). Lamarck's view that every life form is in a certain sense responsible for designing itself may not be an entirely satisfactory substitute for divine creation, but it is nevertheless more reassuring than Darwin's Malthusian description of life. Rather than violating human intuitions and placing humanity subordinate to nature, Lamarck, unlike Darwin, preserved some such intuitions and a crucial role for agency.

Thus, Lamarck's ideas held a certain attraction for writers fascinated by mythology. Myths explain the workings of nature, including the traits and behavior of animals, by the actions of anthropomorphic agencies. It is hardly hyperbole to say that without the concept of agency there could be no mythology. Indeed, in myths supernatural agents like gods, giants, and wizards are often placed in such a powerful position relative to nature as to mold it at will in acts like making worlds, life forms, and geographical features. Moreover, many such beings can take on multiple manifestations, shift shapes, or change skins. Under Lamarck's ideas, every life-form is in some sense a shape-shifter, even if the process is incremental. Due to Lamarck's emphasis on agency, both Morris and Tennyson use his ideas when linking moral failure to becoming more beastlike in a process of degeneration. They use Darwin's version of evolution, on the other hand, to show the external struggle of humanity against a hostile or indifferent universe. Both writers link both themes to maintaining faith in the world order, and its gods.

II. "Back into the Beast": Tennyson and the Two Cultures

Speculations on the causal relationship of disbelief and disorder… [held] particular application to the lower classes. For 'everyone' agreed that any discarding of the Christian sanctions of duty, obedience, patience under suffering, and brotherly love was obviously 'fraught with grievous danger to property and the State.' Nothing could illustrate that assumption more tellingly than the reviews of *The Descent of Man* (1871) in the most important newspapers, where Darwin was severely censured for 'revealing his zoological conclusions to the general public at a moment when the sky of Paris was red with the incendiary flames of the Commune.'

-Walter Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870* (1957)

In *In Memoriam A. H. H.* (1849), Tennyson laments the contradiction between the hopes and intuitions encoded in cultural traditions such as Christianity on the one hand, and the view of nature implied by evolutionary science on the other, asking "Are God and Nature then at strife?" (55.5-8). Tennyson's speaker divides religion and naturalism in stark terms: "Life shall live forevermore, / Else earth is darkness at the core, / And dust and ashes all that is" (34.1-5). For Tennyson, understanding evolution could be bleak indeed; his speaker finds the idea of human life without an immortal soul so depressing that death itself becomes appealing:

Twere best at once to sink to peace,

Like birds the charming serpent draws,

To drop head-foremost in the jaws

Of vacant darkness and to cease. (34.13-16)

Tennyson's use of evolutionary imagery (a reptile deceptively luring its prey) to describe despair is consistent with his pessimistic interpretation of nature "Red in tooth and claw" (56.15). Indeed, a personified Nature warns,

Thou makest thine appeal to me:

I bring to life, I bring ro death;

The spirit does but mean the breath:

I know no more. (56.5-8)

While Tennyson's third line here probably refers to contemporary biblical criticism, the larger issue is that humans have no special place in the universe, and will one day go extinct like any other species: "A thousand types are gone; / I care for nothing, all shall go" (56.3-4). Examining the fossils "sealed within the iron hills," Tennyson's speaker asks in desperation if extinction is the inevitable fate of all life, and humans simply deluded apes chasing phantom ideals:

No more? A monster then, a dream,

A discord. Dragons of the prime,

That tare each other in their slime.

Are mellow music matched with him. [Man meaning the human species] (56.25-28)

By "Dragons of the prime," Tennyson likely means dinosaurs. The word dinosaur was coined from Greek roots in 1841 (Oxford English Dictionary n.pag.). Since then, dinosaurs have represented the pre-human world in popular consciousness. Even before Darwin, the discovery of dinosaur fossils made it clear that an earth vastly different from the human world once existed: Stephen Greenblatt calls Tennyson "the first major writer to express… awareness of the vast extent of geological time that has haunted human consciousness since Victorian scientists exposed the history of the earth's crust" (1112). As perhaps the best-known of all prehistoric animals, dinosaurs quickly became symbols of evolution itself. The word dragon, on the other hand, entered the English language six hundred years earlier from Old French, and in turn went back through Latin to Greek (Oxford English Dictionary n.pag.). By the Victorian period,

dragons had become symbols of mythology. Tennyson thus achieves a striking juxtaposition: he uses a mythical creature which ultimately derives from ancient oral folklore as a poetic term for a cutting-edge scientific understanding of the history of life. By uniting a symbol of mythology with a symbol of evolution, he emphasizes the "discord" between the culturally constructed past of mythology, and the scientifically reconstructed past of paleontology.

Tennyson agreed that the most controversial aspects of evolution were the implications for how human nature and behavior should be understood. This is why he compares or "matches" Man (humanity) with "Dragons of the prime": for as "cold-blooded" as such beasts may be, when human behavior is viewed through a naturalistic lens it seems similarly predatory, but dissimilarly in a state of hypocritical denial. Tennyson was concerned with the implications of accepting the account of human nature described by evolutionary theory, which he saw as doubt of the divine, disillusionment and despair, even nihilism. The social consequences of such attitudes, as Houghton notes above, were widely thought to be anarchistic or worse. This explains the attitude Tennyson takes toward what C. P. Snow would later identify as the "Two Cultures" of the arts and sciences in his *Idylls of the King* (and associated Arthurian poems).

In Tennyson's *Idylls* the arts, particularly those depicting myths, present an illusory escape from nature as described by science. Everything which is potentially mythical or supernatural in these stories is filtered through rumour, and the visions characters experience can be interpreted as hallucination. In the *Idylls,* readers are always at least one narrative level away from any apparent magic. This is not a world of gods and monsters like Morris's *Sigurd*, in which the dragon Fafnir prophesizes Sigurd's doom to his face. Rather, the *Idylls* takes place in a world of rumour and doubt, where characters *speak* of prophecies and marvels. Arthur's knights enchant one another with supernatural tales, but the power of the tales is mainly aesthetic:

Gareth telling some prodigious tale

Of knights, who sliced a red life-bubbling way

Through twenty folds of twisted dragon, held

All in a gap-mouthed circle his good mates

Lying or sitting round him, idle hands,

Charmed. ("Gareth and Lynette," henceforth GL)

This dragon is but a feature of old stories; it has the power of art, to "charm" listeners, but one is not about to meet one. Tennyson frames the supernatural as a second- or third-hand report. Arthur's knights have a truly religious faith in him, based on similarly unreliable rumours: "Strike for the King and live! his knights have heard / That God hath told the King a secret word" or "The King will follow Christ, and we the King / In whom high God hath breathed a secret thing" ("The Coming of Arthur," henceforth CA). This latter restates the former, but as a fact: such an epistemological jump is characteristic of faith itself. Tennyson frames the supernatural with caveats; the potential for misperception and misreporting increases with every level of frame narrative, as when Bedivere tells Leodogran that Merlin's master Bleys told *him* that when Uther died without an heir, Merlin and Bleys saw a strange vision in the sky:

The bounds of heaven and earth were lost –

Beheld, so high upon the dreary deeps

It seemed in heaven, a ship, the shape thereof

A dragon winged, and all from stern to stern

Bright with a shining people on the decks,

And gone as soon as seen. (CA)

From Bleys to Bedivere to Leodogran, through the narrator to the reader, there "seemed" a ship in heaven. This is very like Keats's description of the poet's trance, which places a mythical veil over reality, so that everything *seems* beautiful and meaningful:

> And down the wave and in the flame was borne
>
> A naked babe, and rode to Merlin's feet,
>
> Who stoopt and caught the babe, and cried 'The King!
>
> Here is an heir for Uther!' (CA)

This supposed origin for Arthur may make him a Carlylean hero "sent into the world" to achieve great things, but it may be a wistful commentary on the supernatural pyrotechnics which inevitably attaches itself to oral legendry. Arthur might be "Dropt down from heaven," or "washed up from out the deep" ("The Last Tourament," henceforth LT): an evolutionary lineage.

When Bedivere asks Merlin "if these things were truth," the sage replies in riddles indicating a "Philosophy of Clothes."[22] Merlin's reply is Carlylean in its notion that truth should be "clothed" (hidden) in appealing legendry. Merlin criticizes those who

> Judge all nature from her feet of clay,
>
> Without the will to lift their eyes, and see
>
> Her godlike head crowned with spiritual fire,
>
> And touching other worlds. ("Merlin and Vivien," henceforth MV)

Clay can be fired into artistic products, so Merlin may simply be referring to the human capacity for artifice (to *envision* other worlds) rather than anything supernatural (to *discover* other worlds). Note the similarity in phrasing and conception to John Ruskin's quotation at the start of this chapter. The analogy between magic and art as forces which *appear* to change reality is extended throughout the *Idylls*. Upon seeing Camelot, Gareth's knights say it is "a city of

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[22] Merlin's reply is quoted and discussed on page 39.

Enchanters, built / By fairy Kings" and "there is no such city anywhere, / But all a vision" (GL). Arthur is called a "changeling out of Fairyland," whose power comes from "Merlin's glamour" (GL). Glamour alters appearances; even Arthur recognizes that Merlin's magic may be illusion: "So to this hall full quickly rode the King, / In horror lest the work by Merlin wrought, / Dreamlike, should on the sudden vanish" ("The Holy Grail," henceforth HG). On his deathbed, Bleys is "Shrunk like a fairy changeling" (CA). Fairyland, the source of enchantment, beauty and meaning for Tennyson, wavers like a mirage; this view proved very influential on Dunsany. Similarly, the "Lady of Shalott" is caught on one side of an art-reality divide. She perceives Camelot only through a weaver's mirror, while the peasants perceive her only by hearing her faint singing on the wind at dawn and dusk. When she crosses this divide, she does not survive for long. It is as if the line between subjective perception and objective reality in Tennyson's mythology becomes blurred by the intensity of his need to believe.

Tennyson's final Arthurian poem provides a metafictional key to his mythmaking. In "Merlin and the Gleam" (1889), Merlin represents Tennyson, while the magic "Gleam" he seeks is the "otherworld" of myth, poetry, and dream. Tennyson recounts childhood experience (II), being disdained for his love of the past (III), reading the medieval legends (IV), believing in a Romantic version of the past (V), and treating the Arthurian cycle himself (VI). This wistful poem is full of nostalgia for a dreamlike world "before" modern alienation. Rosenberg explains,

> Throughout his life Tennyson could summon to consciousness that strangely animistic sense of nature we associate with our own individual childhood and with the childhood of the race…. One of his earliest memories was of outspreading his arms in a gale and crying out, 'I hear a voice that's speaking in the wind'…. [H]e writes of 'dim mystic sympathies with tree and hill reaching far back into childhood.' (68)

The problem is that the "great voice" that Arthur hears in the *Idylls* "shakes the world, / And wastes the narrow realm whereon we move" ("The Passing of Arthur," henceforth PA); the longing for a mythic worldview always runs into the problem of what nature is actually like.

Tennyson was very much aware of the immense suffering in nature: "An omnipotent Creator who could make such a painful world is to me sometimes as hard to believe in as blind matter behind everything. The lavish profusion too in the natural world appalls me, from the growths of the tropical forest to the capacity of man to multiply, the torrent of babies" (qtd. in Beer 115). Tennyson's discomfort with nature's Malthusian profusion results in nightmarish fertility imagery: lush nature overgrowing human control, "great tracts of wilderness, / Wherein the beast was ever more and more, / But man was less and less, till Arthur came" (CA).

Edward Engelberg's "The Beast Image in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*" describes "one of the main causes of man's fall" in the *Idylls* as "his surrender to the Passions" and argues that Tennyson "exposes… the inherent characteristics in man" which "quicken his fall from the high ideals of Arthur to the lowest levels of a brute existence" (287). The article surprisingly does not mention evolution; Engelberg instead refers to "the old medieval and Renaissance view of man divided against himself by divine strivings and a bestial predisposition" (287). However, an evolutionary framework offers more insight into why Tennyson's knights degenerate "Back into the beast" (PA), as Arthur laments on his death: failure to hold on to illusions in the face of an evolutionary view of nature. Chivalry is an apparently civilized and Christian code of conduct, but it is also founded on violence – a "savage" behaviour. Tennyson uses the knights' attempt to adhere to chivalry to depict the tension between scientific and religious accounts of human nature. When Prince Geraint kills three bandits whom Tennyson calls "wolves of woman born," ("Geraint and Enid," henceforth GE), Engelberg notes, "The deeper Geraint penetrates the

wasteland, the less do the persons he encounters resemble men" (137). Many of the questing knights seem to hear a sort of "voice of the wilderness" similar to that which transforms Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: "I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude – and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating" (95).

Rosenberg notes, "The three characters in the Idylls who suffer madness – Pelleas, Balin, and Lancelot – all flee the court and withdraw into wild woods or wastelands" (73). There they undergo a sort of degeneration which is prompted by their recognition of evolutionary ideas. This threat of degeneration applies primarily to three knights: Tristram, who advocates ethical naturalism, Balin, who sinks into brutal rage, and Pelleas, who attacks the court's hypocrisy. Each of these "savage knights" repudiates the idea of humanity's special place in the universe and instead affirms his connection to nature. Tristram argues for free love, but Dagonet the fool tells Tristram that only animals would follow him (Brashear 36). For Tennyson, preserving traditional gender roles was a way of resisting the view that humans are only animals.[23]

William R. Brashear notes, "The savage Balin is a character of Tennyson's own devising, the Balin and Balan episode in Malory being rather slight, and hardly suggesting the use Tennyson makes of it" (42). With Guinevere's example falls Balin's ability to maintain his civilized conduct. Engelberg explains, "When Balin overhears the famous garden conversation between Lancelot and the queen, he becomes disillusioned in the realm and dissolves… into wild nature" (289). Like a wild animal, Balin grinds his teeth and leaps about, his screams "Unearthlier than all the shriek of bird or beast" ("Balin and Balan," henceforth BB). Rosenberg notes that as Balin recedes into the woods, "he reverts further into bestiality" (81). But the most damning assessment of degeneration comes from Balin himself:

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[23] See discussion of evolution and gender roles in Tennyson's *Idylls* on page 205.

Savage among savage woods, here die –

Die – let the wolves' black maws ensepulchre

Their brother beast, whose anger was his lord! (BB)

Yet Pelleas, with his nose keen to the scent of hypocrisy, is the most devastating of the degenerate knights. He rages "O noble vows! / O great and sane and simple race of brutes / That own no lust because they have no law!" ("Pelleas and Etarre," henceforth PE). For Pelleas, attempts to separate humanity from nature are not noble, but instead arrogant and hypocritical. Randy J. Fertel argues that "This Thersites-like anger turns the pastoral and Wordsworthian ideal of instinctual health on its head" (348). Rejecting pastoral views of nature, Tennyson interprets an evolutionary view of life in pessimistic, even frantic terms as Pelleas uses nature imagery to describe his despair: "In dung and nettles! Hiss, snake… / Let the fox bark, let the wolf yell!" (PE). Engelberg identifies a "pattern of self-identification with the beast and the death-wish" in the *Idylls* (291), and this is certainly present in Pelleas's story.

Pelleas takes a harsh view of Camelot: "black nest of rats, ye build too high," he disdainfully scowls (PE). For Pelleas, chivalry is a futile attempt to pretend that humans are different from other animals; given the passion with which he expresses this view, he may be the Red Knight who claims, in perhaps the most damning assessment of Camelot that occurs anywhere in Tennyson's *Idylls*, that the only difference between Arthur's Camelot and his own decadent rival court is the former's hypocrisy (Brashear 43). As Engelberg argues, the Red Knight's end in "The Last Tournament" seems to fulfill his assessment of Camelot's knights as no better than himself, mereley in denial of their mutual brutality: "Tennyson describes the group behavior of Arthur's knights as nothing short of a pack of wolves" (291). Once Arthur's knights have killed the Red Knight, they "leapt down upon the fallen; / There tramped out his face from

being known, / And sank his head in mire, and slimed themselves" (LT). Rosenberg argues that the Red Knight's death fulfills his assessment of Camelot: "The attackers and the thing attacked have alike reverted to beasts sunk in the primordial slime" (72).

Tennyson's King Arthur thinks that only religion makes humans better than animals, which presumably have *brains* but no souls: "For what are men better than sheep or goats / That nourish a blind life within the brain, / If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer" (PA). William E Buckler notes that Arthur describes "prayer as good for the soul and as a mode of distinguishing between man and beast" (43). Arthur's religious experiences are also similar to Keats's "poet's trance," and are so intense that

> This earth he walks on seems not earth,
>
> This light that strikes his eyeball is not light,
>
> This air that smites his forehead is not air
>
> But vision. (LT)

Overtaken by the "Gleam" which Merlin and other autobiographical Tennyson characters seek, Arthur is comforted by faith. At such times, and perhaps only at such times, "he feels he cannot die, / And knows himself no vision to himself, / Nor the high God a vision" (LT).

The problem is that outside of such a state, "vision" has no epistemological value: God seems an elusive psychological phenomenon, even a wavering mirage like Merlin's magic. Lancelot wishes that God were an externally-existing interventionist who would make the world conform to Christian ideals; he swears that if he does not voluntarily stop his affair with Guinevere: "then may God, / I pray him, send a sudden Angel down / To seize me by the hair" ("Lancelot and Elaine," henceforth LE). No divine intervention occurs (just as when Vivien prays for heaven to incinerate her if she has lied): A bolt of lightning appears, but it doesn't

strike her, though she is guilty (MV). The empirical test fails every time it occurs in the *Idylls*. And yet the entire court of Camelot is founded on adherence to values which derive their validity from the claim that these visions and their attendant metaphysics are reliable and real.

The ultimate example is the Holy Grail, the quest for which is achieved only by Galahad, who then conveniently disappears. Like Arthur, Galahad has a charisma that encourages faith: "While thus he spake, his eye, dwelling on mine, / Drew me, with power upon me, till I grew / One with him, to believe as he believed" (HG). Galahad's disappearance into heaven is reminiscent of the arrival of the baby Arthur: he runs over bridges that burst into flame and disappear, while "Thrice above him all the heavens / Opened and blazed with thunder such as seemed / Shoutings of all the sons of God" (HG). This report describes only how things *seemed* to witnesses, and the partial success of three other knights is similarly framed as an uncertain, dubious report: "Blessed are Bors, Lancelot and Percivale, / For these have seen according to their sight"; and even this is "if indeed there came a sign from heaven" (HG). They are reporting what they experienced, not necessarily what actually happened. Brashear argues that the Grail is actually just an illusion: "The Holy Grail, conceived as an external thing, or a religious system, or the concept of an external God, even if arrived at, crumbles into dust on penetrating scrutiny" (45). The Grail is meant to guarantee the metaphysical validity of Camelot's ideals, but instead, Brashear suggests, hallucination and wishful thinking are more likely (46).

Tennyson's Camelot is a microcosm of the conflict between tradition, particularly mythology and religion, on the one hand, and science, particularly evolutionary biology and psychology, on the other. Houghton writes that throughout the Victorian period there was a constant "fear or suspicion, or simply the vague uneasy feeling, that one was not sure he believed what he believed" (21). The edifice of tradition stands upon metaphysical foundations which are

crumbling, and the moral framework that holds the edifice itself together must fall with the foundations. When "Man's word is God in man" (BB), the well-meaning characters cannot simultaneously live up to truth-telling and fight for illusions. Moreover, as the *Idylls* progresses, doubt infects the minds of even the strongest believers. And once this has happened, the "Clothes" of Camelot become costumes, the court and its values a ridiculous charade. Isolt requests to Tristram, "Lie to me, I should suck / Lies like sweet wines: lie to me: I believe" (LT). Rosenberg cites this as evidence of the wishful thinking of many of the "good" characters in the *Idylls*, noting that, "Tennyson uses the phrase twice 'lived in fantasy'" and notes that even Arthur "lives in his 'fancy' of the Round Table" (10). Self-consciousness destroys the entire project, and truth-telling is left to the villains – the savage knights, Vivien, and the silent Mordred, awaiting his chance to unmask the lie at the core of Camelot. Tennyson's Shakespearean fool Dagonet, a wise but anarchic truth-teller, does further damage by describing King Arthur's ideals of chivalry as a noble delusion based on religious evolution-denial:

> Ay, ay, my brother fool, the king of fools!
>
> Conceits himself as God that he can make
>
> Figs out of thistles, silk from bristles, milk
>
> From burning spurge, honey from hornet-combs,
>
> And men from beasts – Long live the king of fools! (LT)

Looking back on the old vows, a disillusioned knight of Camelot assesses them with the striking phrase: "the wholesome madness of an hour." He then notes that illusions have social utility: "They served their use… every knight / Believed himself a greater than himself" and this led to better behavior, so that ultimately "the realm was made" (PA). When the edifice has fallen and Arthur faces his final defeat and death, he laments:

> All whereon I leaned in wife and friend
>
> Is traitor to my peace, and all my realm
>
> Reels back into the beast, and is no more. (PA)

This assessment of degeneration appears at Arthur's moment of greatest doubt over divinity. Rosenberg explains, "Arthur has recognized the genuine possibility that it is nature, not man, who is timeless, that time may be the reality rather than the appearance, and that man may be in cosmic time no more significant than the minutest insect on the most mutable leaf" (37).

In "The Passing of Arthur," Arthur gives a form of Paley's pre-Darwinian "Argument From Design" for the existence of God: "I found Him in the shining of the stars, / I marked Him in the flowering of His fields," yet just as in *In Memoriam*, the "Problem of Evil" interferes: "But in His ways with men I find Him not" (PA). Arthur compares his failure to civilize his part of the world with his doubts about God's creation:

> Why is all around us here
>
> As if some lesser god had made the world,
>
> But had not force to shape it as he would,
>
> Till the High God behold it from beyond,
>
> And enter it, and make it beautiful? (PA)

He is willing to entertain the notion that he simply does not understand, since "these eyes of men are dense and dim" (PA). But the debate between faith and doubt remains until the very end, as Arthur is uncertain whether Avalon, Heaven, or Oblivion awaits him.

Tennyson even converts the final loss of Excalibur into a deliberation on faith versus doubt. Rosenberg writes, "Bedivere fears to discard Excalibur lest all relics of the King be lost and only 'empty breath / And rumours of a doubt' survive his passing" (142). Buckler agrees that

Bedivere is worried about what the evidence for Arthur's story will be in the future: "Bedivere himself has nagging doubts and empirical uncertainty, but presumably he now understands the rightness of Arthur's spiritual instruction" (43). If Buckler is right, Tennyson is arguing that it is more important for Bedivere to *tell* the story than to be able to *prove* it by appealing to evidence such as the sword. This Bedivere does, "In the white winter of his age, to those / With whom he dwelt, new faces, other minds," though recognizing that "the true old times are dead" (PA).

Both Carlylean and Nietzschean interpretations of the *Idylls* have been proposed. Buckler outlines the former as follows: like Christ, Arthur is "an inscape" (17) of "true human potential" who happens to be "located in an illusion of time and space" (16). This relies on Carlyle's view that heroes are manifestations of a timeless divine will working in human history. Valerie Pitt describes Tennyson's Arthur as a "recognizably Carlylean hero," whose right to rule comes not from "right of birth, but by right of the power in him, the power laid upon him, which makes the knights acclaim and follow him" (qtd. in Buckler 244). By imposing his vision on the world the Carlylean hero *proves* meaning is real. Brashear explains the Nietzschean interpretation thus:

> The tragic subjective poet recognizes the impossibility of objective values and, hence, the necessity of heroic (Apollonian) illusions… *Idylls* embodies the struggle of the individual to sustain the illusion of self that can withstand the disturbing force of the Dionysian realm of consciousness. (29)

The crucial difference between these two perspectives is this: Carlyle accepts the validity of metaphysical assertions, whereas Nietzsche works from the basis that metaphysical assertions themselves are a poetic illusion. Thus Brashear argues that Tennyson emphasized the need for an ideal rather than the truth of an ideal (31). For Brashear, Tennyson himself admits that "Arthur's values are meaningless, his purposes futile" (37).

The Carlylean and Nietzschean interpretations hinge on the epistemological status of myth: clothes or mere costumes? To what extent can one sustain faith in traditional metaphysics in the modern world? For Tennyson the psychological and social consequences of this question were important. Perhaps the most extreme expression of Tennyson's obsessive theme is when Launcelot is told, "Doubt not, go forward; if thou doubt, the beasts will tear thee piecemeal" (HG). Evolution puts God and Nature "At Strife," and there are behavioral consequences to choosing a side – the "Gleam" of a potentially delusional dream like Camelot and civilization on the one hand, or the despair of doubt leading to degeneration and savagery on the other.

The *Idylls* are full of images of human endeavor reclaimed by an all-conquering Nature; the most common example is the ruins of buildings reclaimed by lush, over-fertile growth: "monstrous ivy-stems / Claspt the gray walls with hairy-fibred arms, / And sucked the joining of the stones" ("The Marriage of Geraint," henceforth MG). The ruined Camelot is a graveyard of "hornless unicorns, crack'd basilisks, splinter'd cockatrices, shatter'd talbots" (HG). Engelberg comments, "Each of these fabulous animals has lost its power, just as Arthur has now lost his" (290). These mythical creatures are linked to magic, whereas real animals are linked to "brute nature." Humans cloaked these creatures in myth, but a "hornless unicorn" is only a horse, not a symbol of medieval fantasies of innocence, just as a "dragon of the prime" is a supernatural animal with the magic stripped from it. The ruined Camelot strips "the embroidered robes of myth" from nature as Tennyson takes an anti-pastoral stance, exposing "the potential holloweness of the yearning for lost natural harmony, heroic innocence, and a perfect but static society" (Fertel 339). Thus, the *Idylls* ultimately dissects itself as a symptom of the Romantic longing for a world that never was. From Keats to Tennyson and beyond, the medievalist practice of building an illusion and tearing it down at the same time proved very influential.

III. "The Blood of the Worm was Mine": Ruskinian Transformation in Morris's Retellings

> To suppose that theories of a relation between man and the lower mammalia are only a product of advanced science, would be an extreme mistake… Even at low levels of culture, men addicted to speculative philosophy have been led to account for the resemblance between apes and themselves [through tales of] upward change from ape to man… [and] of apes as degenerate from a previous human state.
> -Edward Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (1871)

Ruskin was disturbed by evolution and, like Tennyson, he associated dragons with evolutionary imagery. In *Modern Painters 5* (1860), Ruskin praises J. M. W. Turner's portrayal of a dragon for depicting this dragon in an evolutionarily-informed manner, with "the head of the Ganges crocodile, the fish-eater, to show his sea descent" (332). Ruskin praises Turner's crocodile-like dragon for its power to horrify; as "the relation of humanity to the crocodile" consists of "filthy heraldries" Ruskin clearly had no wish to find crocodiles anywhere in *his* family tree. Yet while Ruskin accepts the Tennysonian use of the dragon as a symbol of evolution, he also adds to it his own symbolism: the dragon also represents the materialism of his age: "This dragon… embodies covetousness and the fraud, rage, gloom, melancholy, cunning, and destructiveness associated with it" (qtd. in Le Quesne 153). It is no surprise that such a view should come from the critic who two years later, in "The Roots of Honour," accused economists of "considering the human being merely as a covetous machine" (n.pag.). The notion of social emotions as a "disturbing affectionate element," a mammalian weakness in the logical pursuit of wealth, is Ruskin's way of portraying contemporary economics as inhuman and indeed cold-blooded. For Ruskin, the important thing is to behave with honour (the first of the "two species of man" above) and not degenerate into amorality and avarice (the second). In a powerful turn of phrase, Ruskin assesses his society's worship of greed as a new religion: "Here, in England, is our great spiritual fact for ever interpreted to us – the Assumption of the Dragon" (n.pag.).

Contemporary scientists like Edward Tylor and T. H. Huxley thought that prescientific myths might contain evolutionary speculations; William Morris likewise imported evolutionary ideas into his retellings of myths. In *The Life and Death of Jason* (1868), Morris expresses evolutionary ideas through physical descriptions of the story's monsters. Charlotte Oberg describes how Morris inserts "Darwinian events quite out of the usual run of Greek myth" (85) and depicts his heroes glimpsing the evolutionary past. The journey of the Argonauts depicts "a paradigmatic evolutionary history of the changing earth, beginning with a battle with 'worms,' or primeval reptiles, and progressing through encounters with stone-age men who practice human sacrifice, to a skirmish with slightly more civilized barbarians" (85). Morris then presents the harpies with characteristic Victorian revulsion at their hybrid nature:

Dim eyes ringed with red,

And bestial mouths set round with lips of lead,

But from their gnarled necks there began to spring

Half hair, half feathers, and a sweeping wing

Grew out instead of arm on either side,

And thick plumes underneath the breast did hide

The place where joined the fearful natures twain. (V.233-240)

This monstrous merger of human and animal anatomy reflects Victorian apprehension over human relatedness to the rest of life. As Beer notes, "Many Victorian rejections of evolutionary ideas register a physical shudder" (7). The harpies torment King Phineus and taunt him over his misguided attainment of forbidden knowledge:

O Phineus, thou art lucky now

The hidden things of heaven and hell to know…

> Truly, in dark night
>
> Thou seest, Phineus, as the leopard doth…
>
> Fool, who would fain have both,
>
> Delight and knowledge! (V.249-51, 255-60).

If delight and knowledge are "at strife," Phineus may not want to see what is in the dark; he is a Tennysonian figure. The harpies thus both embody and express evolutionary ideas.

As Morris turned from Greek to Germanic tradition over the course of his literary career, he found even more fertile ground to work. In *Sigurd the Volsung* (1876) he found the creative leeway to express the themes of hybridity and transformation that he had touched on in *Jason* with even greater force. This is not initially clear, since Morris's narrator invokes the Romantic concept of a lost golden age at the poem's opening: the Volsungs lived "ere the world was waxen old," and their bards sang of "the gleam of the first summers on the yet-untrodden grass" (I.i). Above all, "The Gods were unforgotten…. [T]hey walked with men" (I.i.9). By emphasizing the fading of magic over time, Morris expresses the Romantic conception of a "slow disenchantment" of the world. As Anthony Ugolnik notes, "what [Morris] drew from the Old Icelandic tradition bore an unmistakable Romantic stamp" (40).

Morris's Odin even says that the greatness of legendary times must dwindle when he describes Valhalla: "there the Early-comers [earliest legendary heroes] shall have abundant rest / While Earth grows scant of great ones, and fadeth from its best" (I.i.147-148). In Norse myth, Valhalla is not a place of "abundant rest." Instead, this is a projection of Christian, or in Morris's case post-Christian longings (as with Carlyle, Ruskin, and Arnold), onto pagan myths.[24] For Morris, even if historical distance makes it impossible to believe in gods the way one's ancestors did, loss of faith leads to unacceptable psychological and social consequences.

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[24] See *The After-Summer Seed: Reconsiderations of Morris's Sigurd the Volsung* (1977), ed. John Hollow, page 3.

Like Tennyson, Morris contrasts civilizing heroism with degeneration and immorality, and makes the linchpin between the two faith in the gods' order in the world. Early in *Sigurd*, Signy presents her brother Sigmund with a vision of an afterlife which will compensate for life's injustice; standing with the gods at the end of time:

Thy wit shall then be awakened, and thou shall know indeed

Why the brave man's spear is broken, and his war-shield fails at need;

Why the loving is unbeloved; why the just man falls from his state;

Why the liar gains in a day what the soothfast strives for late. (I.iii)

She tells him that his life, with all its suffering, is a necessary contribution to a greater artistic design: "great shall thy gladness be; / As a picture all of gold thy life-days shalt thou see" (I.iii). Thus Signy urges her brother to have faith in the gods: "Thou shalt drink of the cup of awakening… By the side of the sons of Odin shalt thou fashion a tale to be told / In the hall of the happy Baldur" (I.iii). The metafictional description of Sigmund fashioning his own tale gives him agency to control his own destiny and to create his own meaning (perhaps subject to divine approval). However, just as in Tennyson's *Idylls*, the element of doubt haunts Morris's epic from start to finish. We certainly never see Sigmund "drink the cup of awakening," recognize his life as "a picture all of gold," or stand among the gods. Throughout *Sigurd*, the gods are untrustworthy, absent, or occupied; faith in the gods' design is unwarranted, and every vision of a triumphant future proves only an ephemeral fantasy. Sigurd and Brynhild anticipate "days to come… the glories of their home… their crowned children" (III.viii). Yet they never have any children. Later, when Brynhild marries Gunnar, she makes a prediction to Gunnar of *their* children's future, similarly in vain (III.iv). No one in *Sigurd* is in control of his or her own story; there is no divine design and characters only discover their own bestial nature.

Thus, like Tennyson's use of maws, jaws and claws, Morris uses a predator's weapons as a symbol of nature's cruelty. As a wolf approaches, Sigmund's violent survival instincts well up:

I too grew wolfish then;

Yea I, who have borne the sword-hilt high mid the kings of men,

I, lord of the golden harness, the flame of the Glittering Heath,

Must snarl to the she-wolf's snarling, and snap with greedy teeth. (I.iii.669-672)

In Ruskinian fashion, he contrasts the products of human craftsmanship, which he takes for providing dignity, with the wolf's jaws – a weapon, indeed, but not crafted except by evolution. Sigmund survives by violence, but for him this is the start of disillusionment and degradation. He is driven into the woods after all his male relatives are killed, and feels himself degraded as "a swordless outcast, a hunted beast of the wood" (I.iii). Like Tennyson's Arthur, at his moment of greatest despair he questions the gods: "In the Day of their Doom a man's help shall they miss; / I will be as a wolf of the forest, if their kings must come to this" (I.iii).

John Hollow writes that for Sigmund, "the question is always… how far in the direction of the animal… he may go without becoming something other than himself" (8). Emily Meredith notes, "Sigmund, feeding his lust for revenge alone in the forest, resembles the medieval "wild-man [or *wodwos*]" (75). Like Tennyson's savage knights, Sigmund is in danger of degeneration. When he and his son find magic wolf-skins, he chooses to use them upon recalling his doubts about the gods (I.iv). Morris treats the story's mythic feature of shape-shifting (or skin-changing) in a Lamarckian fashion: the transformation of the men into wolves is both physical and mental: "though somewhat the hearts of kings / Abode in their bodies of beasts" (I.iv). Yet they also possess "ravening hearts, yearning for prey," and their violence becomes less selective until they nearly kill each other (I.iv). When Sigmund is a wolf, Morris attributes to him a "tangled wolfish

wit / As though some God in his dreaming had wasted the work of his hand, / And forgotten his craft of creation" (I.iv). As in Tennyson, degeneration reflects the abandonment of humanity by the divine – a classic Romantic metaphor for humanity's loss of belief in deities due to nineteenth-century intellectual pressures. Moreover, this confirms that Morris's view is that moral and aesthetic order does not precede the world, but must be imposed upon it. If the craftsman neglects his work, it will revert to an uglier, worse state. Indeed, upon returning to their human forms, the two men find that by donning the wolf-skins even once, they have sacrificed a part of their humanity forever:

> They stood on their feet upright
>
> Great men as aforetime, and they came forth into the light
>
> And looked in each other's faces, and belike a change was there
>
> Since they did on the bodies of wolves, and lay in the wood-wolves' lair. (I.iv)

Hollow notes that the interpretation that Signy restores her brother's faith in the gods is thwarted by Sinfiotli who is born for revenge and who, in Morris's retelling, actively commits suicide once that revenge is done (4). Moreover, Morris attributes suicidal thoughts to Sigmund himself: when he carries Sinfiotli's body to the seashore to be taken away in a boat by Odin in what Holloway calls "a strange half-echo of "The Passing of Arthur" (11), Sigmund tells Odin "I would cross this water, for my life hath lost its light" (I.vii). Like Tennyson's knights of Camelot, Morris's medieval warriors are infused with post-Romantic doubt over whether life is worthwhile based on disillusionment with the divine order.

At the very least, Morris radically changes the gods' role in the world: they do not create the world, but appear partway through its long history and mould it. As in Tennyson's *Idylls* and his own *Jason*, in *Sigurd* Morris expands the timeframe of his mythic world's history so that it is

no longer a matter of mere millennia but instead gestures toward the contemporary geological concept of "deep time." He gives the dwarf Regin a long account of the history of the world in the first person. Regin's people are so ancient that they remember the time before the gods, a "Dwarf-age" during which they dominated the earth. Indeed one being, Andvari, is "an Elf of the Dark" so ancient he remembers "the days before the Dwarf-age;" he knows of the making of this world and other "worlds that come and go / On the nether rim of heaven" (II.iii). He relates "how the sea hangs balanced betwixt the curving lands, / And how all drew together for the first Gods' fashioning hands" (II.iii). Rather than inventing a world *ex nihilo*, Morris's Norse gods find Nature and shape it to their artistic vision.

Regin refers to the gods in Ruskinian terms as "craftsmen," "shapers," "framers" and "makers" (xx) who "fain would look on the earth, and their latest handiwork, / And turn the fine gold over, lest a flaw therein should lurk" (II.iii). They are responsible for fixing things in their forms; before the gods, each spirit has "no fixed semblance," but takes on appropriate forms once the gods advance in shaping the world, a concept Tolkien would later use in his own creation myth in *The Silmarillion* (11). Regin explains that although his people's powers have faded, they retain the power of transformation, an ability from the age before the gods:

> But yet of our ancient might one thing had we left us still:
>
> We had craft to change our semblance, and could shift us at our will
>
> Into bodies of the beast-kind, or fowl, or fishes cold;
>
> For belike no fixed semblance we had in the days of old,
>
> Till the Gods were waxen busy, and all things their form must take
>
> That knew of good and evil, and longed to gather and make. (II.iii)

As a Ruskinian craftsman, Regin himself longs to "gather and make"; however, the rest of his family does not find meaning in working to create objects of value, but instead is driven by the covetous desire to hoard wealth. This newly sympathetic Regin condemns his father's covetous nature. Morris gives Regin a tragic arc: whereas in the original he is only a greedy schemer, Morris makes him fall from a creator of civilization to that petty state. Regin sympathizes with this search for meaning in work; indeed, Morris even gives Regin a new role: culture hero.

In the original story Regin teaches Sigurd various crafts, but in Morris's *Sigurd* he is an ancient figure who gifts basic arts of civilization such as agriculture and metalworking to humanity as a whole: "Unto this land I came, and that was long ago. / As men-folk count the years; and I taught them to reap and to sow" (II.iii). However, as the generations pass, humans credit the gods Frey, Thor, Bragi, Freyja. As Jane Ennis notes, Regin resents that his culture hero status has been usurped (xxi), and the dwarves resent the gods: "We grudged his [Odin's] mastery" (II.iii). Morris's Regin thus begins as a Ruskinian craftsman who only wants his due, but the rest of his family is driven by greed. Regin calls his father Reidmar "a covetous man," who considers evil and wisdom identical, and his brother Fafnir is even worse (II.iii). While the gods seek to impose a moral-aesthetic order on nature, the dwarves would follow rather than resist the amoral natural order: "Ye shall die, and we shall be Gods, / And rule your men… make them beasts beneath us" (II.iii). The alternative to the gods imposing their artistic vision on the world, Reidmar offers, is to return power to the Earth, to leave Nature as it is under the rule of the dwarves: "It was better in times past over, when we prayed for nought at all, / When no love taught us beseeching, and we had no troth to recall" (II.iii). In his retort, Odin asserts that his moral-aesthetic vision is superior to the evolution of Reidmar's race: "I have seen your fathers' fathers and the dust wherefrom they grew" (II.iii).

Whereas Fafnir's transformation from dwarf to dragon is described in one sentence in the original saga, Morris depicts Fafnir's transformation through Regin's horrified eyes, as Fafnir announces: "I have slain my father Reidmar, that I alone might keep / The Gold of the darksome places, the Candle of the Deep" (II.iii). He has no desire to achieve reputation or to pass on tradition: his people's "ancient wisdom" would be wasted on short-lived humans (II.iii). Thus, Fafnir's transformation is a matter of *becoming* what he believes: his beliefs affect his behavior, which affects his biology. Such Lamarckism is unsurprising given the influence of Ruskin on *Sigurd*, and Ruskin's Lamarckism as described in "Lecture II: The Swallow":

> The infinitely more exalted powers of life must exercise more intimate influence over matter than the reckless forces of cohesion…. [T]he loves and hatreds of the now conscious creatures would modify their forms into parallel beauty and degradation…. This law of its spirit over the substance of the creature involves, necessarily, the indistinctness of its type, and the existence of inferior and of higher conditions, whole eras of heroism and affection – whole eras of misery and misconduct. (189)

Lamarckism, unlike Darwinism, places mind over matter; it is the only way which doubt over the divine could actually cause physical transformation. Fafnir expresses his monomaniacal greed thus: "Lo, I am a King for ever, and alone on the Gold shall I dwell" (II.iii).[25] The newly transformed Fafnir is in a position to seize everything, so he forces his brother into exile:

> More awful grew his visage as he spake the word of dread,
>
> And no more durst I behold him, but with heart a-cold I fled;
>
> I fled from the glorious house my hands had made so fair,
>
> As poor as the new-born baby with nought of raiment or gear. (II.iii)

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[25] Tolkien had similar ideas with his dragons such as Glaurung or Smaug, similarly isolated in splendor, who fanatically conceive of themselves as supreme monarchs.

Like Sigmund, Regin is cast from his Ruskinian workshop and into the state of nature. Now he considers himself unacceptably poor; the seeds of Regin's own corruption are planted upon witnessing his brother's transformation.

Even when given respect and gold by the "short-lived folk," as he calls humans, Regin finds this "scanty," since "oft mid all my wisdom did I long for my brother's part, / And Fafnir's mighty kingship weighed heavy on my heart" (II.iii). He broods over the legends inspired by his brother: "I thought of the golden place / My hands of old had builded; for I knew by many a sign / That the Fearful Face was my brother, that the blood of the Worm was mine" (II.iii). Here again we find Ruskin on the one side and Darwin on the other, as Regin's recognition of his kinship with his brother's dragon-form (which he once considered disgusting and terrifying) leads to his own moral degeneration. Betraying his civilizing role, Regin now admires Fafnir the dragon exactly because Fafnir has no human qualities left, only fanatical covetousness:

> I knew of Fafnir's heart
>
> That his wisdom was greater than mine, because he had held him apart,
>
> Nor spilt on the sons of men-folk our knowledge of ancient days,
>
> Nor bartered one whit for their love, nor craved for the people's praise (II.iii)

Regin now talks of love in terms of bartering and praise in terms of craving; he views life in terms of economic reductionism (as Ruskin attacked) and animalistic impulses (as Tennyson feared). He dreams of *becoming* Fafnir. All of this is Morris's invention; in the saga Regin's role is crucial but minimal, whereas Morris gives him a fall from grace like that of Tennyson's Merlin, and similarly frames it in terms of a shift from idealism to instinct – a loss of faith that follows from the rediscovery of ancient, disturbing truths. Only now has Morris's Regin become the scheming wizard we find in *The Saga of the Volsungs,* who plans to use Sigurd to kill Fafnir.

The countryside around Fafnir's lair is "More changeless than mid-ocean, as fruitless as its floor" (II.vi). As Sigurd enters this area, waves of darkness roll over his head, and like Regin before him, he seems in danger of becoming like Fafnir: "his hope of life grew chill, / And his heart by the Worm was enfolded, and the bonds of the Ancient Ill" (II.vi). As he is dying, in the few lines he has, Fafnir twice laments, "I die afar from the gold" and "I die far off from the Gold" (II.vii). To his dying breath, Fafnir is a monstrous manifestation of Ruskin's concept of "covetousness" – an amoral, fanatical form of greed. Once he is dead, Regin grovels and laps his blood like a dog, completing his descent (II.viii). In an important innovation, Sigurd offers Regin all of Fafnir's gold, but Regin refuses even this, demanding that Sigurd become his thrall (slave), the ultimate form of economic exploitation. Regin asks Sigurd to cook Fafnir's heart for him, but while cooking Sigurd tastes the dragon's blood and can thus understand the language of birds (who are nonchalantly discussing the fact that Regin means to kill him). Morris attributes a larger change of perspective to this event:

> He tasted the flesh of the Serpent and the blood of Fafnir's Heart:
>
> Then there came a change upon him, for the speech of fowl he knew,
>
> And wise in the ways of the beast-kind as the Dwarfs of old he grew;
>
> And he knitted his brows and hearkened, and wrath in his heart arose
>
> For he felt beset of evil in a world of many foes. (II.viii)

Just as Sigurd felt his heart "enfolded" by "the Worm" when approaching Fafnir, now upon tasting the "flesh of the Serpent and the blood of Fafnir's Heart" Sigurd undergoes a Ruskinian "Assumption of the Dragon," which changes his view of the world from a heroic one to one "wise in the ways of the beast-kind" just like Regin, Fafnir and their kin (the "Dwarfs of old"). He feels "beset of evil in a world of many foes," a vision of nature prompted by contemporary

Darwin-provoked fears. Morris's Sigurd does not just learn the one disturbing fact that Regin is planning to kill him: he gains the whole "dark flood of insight into suffering" that Beer ascribes to Darwinian thinking (4), and thus sees the pitiless wisdom of Fafnir and Regin before him.

Yet Morris's Sigurd refuses to behave according to this vision of nature. He kills Regin but does not become like him; by perceiving this ruthless natural world but refusing to become a part of it, he defies the threat of degeneration. When Sigurd has killed Fafnir and Regin, he takes credit for advancing the vision of the gods for the world: "Dead are the foes of God-home that would blend the good and the ill" (II.viii). And yet eventually the survival of this ancient knowledge proves Sigurd's own undoing, through the witch Grimhild's sorcery.

Like the dwarf's shape-shifting, Grimhild's sorcery is linked to the ancient earth: "Therein with the blood of the earth / Earth's hidden might was mingled, and deeds of the cold sea's birth, / And things that the high Gods turn from" (III.vi). Like Regin, Grimhild's power comes from "cold words of ancient wisdom that the very Gods would dim" (IV.i). The moment Sigurd drinks this potion: "the soul was changed in him" (III.vi). Grimhild also mixes a shape-shifting potion, and another that causes berserk rage (III.viii), drawing on the powers of earth and sea which precede the gods. With Ruskinian gods seeking to create meaning and order on the one side, and an amoral Darwinian vision of nature on the other, Morris links the tragedy of the Volsungs and the Niblungs, and even Regin's kin, to doubts over divine design.

Time after time, *Sigurd* questions the status of the gods. For example, when describing the hermit-like existence of the prophet Gripir, Morris writes: "he lived as a God shall live, / Whom the prayers of the world hath forgotten" (98). Sigurd fears becoming "a Godhead banished… in the world apart" (173). Brynhild, deciding against life, says "I may live no longer, for the Gods have forgotten the earth" (223). And when Gunnar dishonourably plans to kill

Sigurd by giving the deed to his brother Guttorm, who unlike the rest of Grimhild's sons never swore blood-brotherhood with Sigurd, he exclaims: "Hoodwinked are the Gods of heaven, their sleep-dazed eyes are blind" (227). And finally, when Gunnar himself faces death in his enemy Atli's hall, Atli tells him to give up the Otter's Ransom or die, and Gunnar's reply has a Nietzschean echo: "So crieth the fool… on the God that his folly hath slain" (290). Fafnir's death is part of the greater disenchantment of the world: "A dreadful voice went by / Like the wail of a God departing" (112). Morris even frames Sigmund's death in terms of divinity's overthrow: "For 'twas 'en as a great God's slaying, and they feared the wrath of the sky" (15).

At the end of *Sigurd the Volsung*, the treasure of the Otter's Ransom has destroyed three houses and benefitted no one. From the very start, all it does is cut people off from one another: Andvari, the ancient and unfortunate supplier of the ransom, obsessively gathered the gold alone for so long that when it was taken from him, he did not even know that humans existed (81). Hreidmar's family betray each other and Fafnir is defined by his aloneness; due to the treasure, Regin's heart is in exile even as he receives honours from humanity; Sigurd inherits the treasure only to be betrayed and set upon while his successors, the Niblungs, are in turn betrayed and let the secret of the treasure's location die with them. Greed, aloneness, monstrosity, and degeneration are all linked together in *Sigurd*, because they all derive from medievalist reactions to Darwinian and more broadly evolutionary ideas in Victorian culture. In *Sigurd*, as in the *Idylls,* the alternative to imposing an aesthetic order is a disenchanted vision of Nature. Both works use animal imagery, especially reptilian imagery, to represent fears of human kinship with the rest of nature. Morris depicts degeneration and hybridity as forbidden forces which cause one to lose one's humanity in a sort of Ruskinian nightmare. Like Tennyson, Morris connects Darwin to doubts about the ability of both human and divine agency to impose design on Nature.

IV. "An Accursed Inheritance": How Evolution Haunts Medievalism

We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil… The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us – who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign – and no memories.

-Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899)

Some of the imagery in Morris and Tennyson's evolutionarily-informed depictions of nature verge on horror literature, and there is in fact a contemporary and slightly later tradition of evolutionarily-informed depictions of nature in horror literature, from H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896), to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), and H. P. Lovecraft's "The Rats in the Walls" (1924).[26] As I hope to have demonstrated here, evolution has many implications that can be deduced. It has become the central idea in biology, so that "Nothing in Biology Makes Sense Except in the Light of Evolution," as biologist Theodosius Dobzhansky titled his 1973 essay. Yet the implications of the idea do not stop with the artificial boundaries of human research fields.[27] It might seem like a very silly question to consider, as Richard Dawkins does in *Unweaving the Rainbow* (1998), how elves could evolve:

Biologists would have a hard time fitting fairies into their existing classificatory scheme.

Where did they spring from in evolution? Neither the fossil record nor existing zoology

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[26] These are the dates these works were first published, not the dates of the editions listed in the bibliography. Lovecraft's story can be found in *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Tales* (1999), edited by S. T. Joshi.

[27] In *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (1995), Daniel Dennett famously described Darwinian evolution as a "universal acid" that eats through previously established assumptions in every field.

shows us any primates equipped with flapping wings, and it would be surprising indeed if they suddenly and uniquely evolved in a species sufficiently close to our own to have co-opted our clothing styles. (136)

Dawkins appears to be thinking of Victorian fairies, who had dwindled down to the size of butterflies and lived only in children's stories, as opposed to the colossal, mournful, even divine figures of medieval Celtic myth and legend. Never the less, Dawkins makes a good point – evolution does have implications for our view of all life, including what kind of life *could* exist. Evolution as a theme haunts medievalism in many ways. As evolutionary analysis is limited to no field, it is appropriate that these authors work out the implications of evolution for history and anthropology (discussed in chapter 2), life in other worlds (discussed in chapter 3), gender roles (discussed in chapter 4), and war and propaganda (discussed in chapter 5). A brief survey of the influence of Morris and Tennyson's interpretations of evolution, particularly for religious ideas, on later medievalist writers will conclude this chapter.

A dissenter from medievalism's lamenting of progress and modernity, Mark Twain similarly dissented from the notion that understanding evolution is demoralizing. In *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), Twain heretically inverts every major attitude in literary medievalism. Moving past the initial "shudder of disgust" and shock of despair characteristic of Victorianism, Twain looks to re-contextualize ethics within an evolutionary framework, rather than building it upon an aversion to or denial of it. Twain's protagonist Hank Morgan declares,

All that is original in us, and therefore fairly creditable or discreditable to us, can be covered up and hidden by the point of a cambric needle, all the rest being atoms contributed by, and inherited from, a procession of ancestors that stretches back a billion

years to the Adam-clam or grasshopper or monkey from whom our race has been so tediously and ostentatiously and unprofitably developed. And as for me, all that I think about in this plodding sad pilgrimage, this pathetic drift between the eternities, is to look out and humbly live a pure and high and blameless life, and save that one microscopic atom in me that is truly *me:* the rest may land in Sheol and welcome for all I care. (217)

Sheol, the underworld of the Torah, does not resemble the medieval Christian concept of hell, but is instead a dark void that Twain uses here to symbolize oblivion. This is a somber moment in an otherwise boisterous story; in an existentialist manner Twain advocates a moral life exactly *because* humanity is so small and insignificant. Nineteenth-century science revealed humanity's small scale in space and time; perhaps the most subversive part in Twain's medievalist work is dropping words like *microscopic*, *atoms*, and above all *billion* into the depiction of medieval Europe, and doing so in the language of its own religious doctrines (*Adam*, *pilgrimage*, *Sheol*).

E. R. Eddison similarly took on the theme of "deep time." Eddison draws on Tennyson's representations of evolution for imagery of his villains: King Gorice VII's face was "like the picture of some dark divinity graven ages ago by men long dead, [and] bore the imprint of those old qualities of unrelenting power, scorn, violence, and oppression, ancient as night herself yet untouched by age… elemental as the primaeval dark" (*Ouroboros* 393). Moreover, Eddison echoes Tennyson in describing Gorice's fortress: "Like some drowsy dragon of the elder slime, squat, sinister, and monstrous, the citadel of Carcë slept over all" (*Ouroboros* 390). The implication is clearly that armies, generals, fortresses, and war are the unfortunate but inevitable result of evolution. Both Dunsany and Eddison draw on Tennyson's framing and interpretation of evolution when considering mythology in opposition to the fear of an "Ultimate Nothing."[28]

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[28] The phrase is Eddison's; see discussion on page 173.

In Eddison's *The Worm Ouroboros* (1922), Lord Gro is a philosopher and a student of nature. Alone among the characters in the story he is unafraid of sorcery, since he knows "the hidden properties of this material world" (49). He understands cosmology and biology: "And I have held converse with birds and fishes in their degree, and that generation which creepeth on the earth is not held in scorn by me" (51-52). The term *degree* may imply evolution; but it is exactly knowledge of "natural philosophy" (science) which gives Gro immunity to the sorcery that terrifies other characters, even the high Lords of Demonland – because it consists mostly of illusions. T. H. White later placed conversations between animals and humans in his Arthurian works *The Sword in the Stone* (1939) and *The Book of Merlyn* (1977), using Merlyn as a scientist figure in the same role as Eddison's Lord Gro or Doctor Vandermast. In *The Mezentian Gate* (1958), Eddison's Lady Fiorinda, however, is in some interpretations the deity who creates our world. She specifies that evolution "in enormous wastefulness and painfulness" will lead to humans (195). In *A Fish Dinner in Memison* (1941), her interest in our world is only aesthetic:

> Aeons of unremembered ages, shall go to the making of the crumb I brush from my dress upon rising from board. Generations of mankind, unnumerable as the generations of the may-fly through a hundred years, shall live and die to no purpose but to merry my senses for five minutes, if I affect for pastime before my looking-glass to untwine my tressèd hair. The slow mutations of the immemorial rocks of the ancient earth shall be but for the making ready of a soft cushion of turf for me upon some hillside, in case the fancy should one day take me there to recline myself after my walking in the mountains. (263)

She is a fascinatingly Nietzschean figure, viewing the universe in pitiless terms and treating life itself as a sort of will to power. Eddison's creation myth is quite original, but his understanding of the intellectual implications of evolution owes much to Tennyson.

Tolkien also envisioned the deep geological past of "Middle-earth," though it is not clear what the relation of "Middle-earth" to our world is supposed to be, and Tolkien's ideas on the subject changed over the course of his life.[29] For the primary lands of Middle-earth, Tolkien employs what Marjorie Burns calls "geological revision," meaning that while Middle-earth "includes Northwestern Europe and Scandinavia," it does not appear to incorporate the known geological past of those regions (26). Most of Tolkien's Middle-earth is one continent, as if the British Isles, Northwest Europe, and Scandinavia were not separated from each other by seas, but instead had merged. Perhaps Middle-earth represents the deep past of the earth, whole forgotten geological ages? Tolkien does call his hobbits "relations of ours," a favour reciprocated by biologists who named a hominid species after his hobbits (qtd. in Isaacs and Zimbardo 149). Apparently the hobbits were closer relations to modern humans than elves or dwarves, but somehow our species have become estranged since Tolkien's presumably prehistoric "Third Age" and all that remains of them are names in the old folklore of North-western Europe. T. H. White explains them in a similar way in his Arthurian retelling, *The Sword in the Stone* (1939):

> Fairies are not the kind of creatures your nurse has told you about. Some people say they are the Oldest Ones of All…. [T]hey have the knowledge of the ancient Gaels. They know things down there in their burrows which the human race has forgotten about, and quite a lot of these things are not good to hear. (98)

Like Morris's Regin, they teach arts to early humans and thus combine an evolutionary narrative involving the development of technology with a mythical view of the intervention of more powerful beings such as culture heroes and gods in the lives of humans. White even opens his novel with a Tennysonian description of "The great jungle of Old England":

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[29] See further discussion of Tolkien's mythopoeia beginning on page 176.

It was not only that there were wild boars in it, whose sounders would at his season be furiously rooting about, nor that one of the surviving wolves might be slinking behind any tree, with pale eyes and slavering chops… When men themselves became wicked they took refuge there, outlaws cunning and bloody as the gore-crow. (13)

The weak-witted outcast Wat, who dresses in skins, draws on the medieval myth of the wodwos, a more primitive "man of the woods" (13); White mentions "even a few dragons, though these were small ones" (12). Similarly, prior to Arthur, Tennyson's England is:

Thick with wet woods, and many a beast therein,

And none or few to scare or chase the beast;

So that wild dog, and wolf and boar and bear

Came night and day, and rooted in the fields,

And wallow'd in the gardens. (CA)

A mention of children raised by wolves completes Tennyson's connection between humanity and animals. Fertel notes that although Tennyson uses gardens "as a symbol of man's control over nature through artifice," yet the garden is the scene of story's devastating adultery, which indicates nature's triumph over humanity's higher aspirations (345).[30]

Tolkien's treatment of our place in nature is different; one interpretation of Tolkien's mythopoeia is that it represents a possible past for our earth, but through the rebellion against the wise design of nature of numerous figures, from the angel Melkor all the way down to humans,[31] the world became chaotic and there arose alienation between nature and humanity. This image of humanity's place in nature is also reminiscent of Tennyson. In both Tolkien's and Tennyson's works, the "High God" is located in the distant past, and contemporary observers doubt the

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[30] Tennyson linked the viability of Christian faith to the relationship between Arthur and Guenevere, see page 210.

[31] Tolkien "leaves a space" for the Garden of Eden; see discussion of his treatment of the theme on page 180.

myths. Both use the theme of the "Deeps of Time" in reflections on a potentially absent god's role in the world, in *The Silmarillion* (1977) and *In Memoriam A. H. H.* (1849) respectively.

Whereas the "Problem of Evil" (in the naturalistic terms of Malthus and Darwin) caused such anguish for Tennyson, Tolkien accepts the Christian explanation that a malicious anthropomorphic power (Satan, or Tolkien's Melkor, later known as Morgoth) has sabotaged the High God's design, including causing the Fall of Man (1999, 64). Thus in Tolkien's mythopoeia,[32] nature displays two sides, both of which can be seen in Tolkien's shapeshifter Beorn in *The Hobbit.* He can become a bear and brutally attacks any enemies who wander into his territory – even displaying their heads near his house. However, he is a vegetarian and a gracious host whose animal companions serve friendly travelers. "Red in Tooth and Claw" he might be at times, but we can certainly see an Eden-like vision of nature here, as opposed to the darker evolutionary imagery Tolkien associates with the influence of Morgoth. Beorn thus balances precariously between the Darwin-induced fears of Morris and Tennyson on the one hand, and a pastoral view of nature reminiscent of a religious believer like Blake on the other.

One of the central stories of Tolkien's early mythology, *The Children of Húrin*, begins with Morgoth's capture of the titular human hero. He asserts his faith that after death, "Beyond the Circles of the World," his people will be free no matter what Morgoth does to him in this life, but Morgoth denies the existence of an afterlife and of Illúvatar, Tolkien's High God: "Beyond the Circles of the world there is Nothing" (65). Morgoth's follower Sauron later repeats the claim that the High God is a fiction, merely a projection made to legitimize authority. Here atheism, in the form of a Freudian or Marxist critique of monotheism, is a demonic lie – readers *know* that Morgoth is lying since he himself was once brightest among the angels who were with Illúvatar before the making of the world (1999 4).

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[32] For the definition of mythopoeia see page 29; for discussion of Tolkien's mythopoeia see page 176.

Yet this is of little help to Húrin since, enraged at his defiance, Morgoth curses his family and promises to torment them while he can only watch (65). First, Húrin's homeland is invaded by heathen barbarians (67). Húrin's wife Morwen is oppressed and his son Túrin grows up deprived of his birthright; like Morris's Sigmund conducting his guerrilla campaigns in the woods, he feels a deep loss of identity. Returning to a city, Túrin is called a "woodwose" – an insult that carries a particular sting in the context of fears of degeneration. Unfortunately, Túrin succumbs to rage and kills the individual who insulted him (88).

Like Morris's Sigmund, Túrin is exiled into the wilderness, where he becomes barbaric and loses his faith in divine order: "They [the gods and goddesses] have forsaken you, and they hold Men in scorn" (161). Túrin is the only one who notes that the gods may not be worth believing in or worshipping if they abandon the world to Morgoth (Satan) because of some purported disobedience in paradise. Moreover, his people have never even seen the gods, and think them a myth. A defiant heathen or atheist who refuses faith, Túrin represents despair for Tolkien.[33] An elf tells him "a darkness is on you if you… speak of the Valar as the foes of Elves and Men" (162). Although he does not shapeshift like Sigmund, a moral degeneration occurs as he leads a band of outlaws: "In winter they were most to be feared, like wolves; and Gaur-waith, wolf-men, they were called by those who still defended their homes… [T]hey were hated scarcely less than Orcs, for there were among them outcasts hard of heart, bearing a grudge against their own kind" (99). The outlaws are not entirely bereft of noble qualities, but from livestock theft they stoop to rape and torture; Túrin calls this "orc-work" and draws a line (114). The outlaws' danger of becoming orc-like demonstrates the Lamarckian nature of "corruption" in Tolkien's mythopoeia, since the orcs themselves are only elves corrupted by Morgoth.

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[33] His cousin Tuor has a parallel story with a reversed outcome, representing religious faith. Shippey writes, "The one relies on himself, the other on the Valar, the one brings hope… the other leaves nothing behind" (*Road*, 303).

Otherwise limited to corrupting Illúvatar's creatures, Morgoth's ultimate weapon is his only true creation: Glaurung, Father of Dragons. He is very like Morris's Fafnir, a monstrous figure with a monstrous worldview, who threatens the hero by noting the similarities between them: "Evil have been all your ways, son of Húrin… Thankless fosterling, outlaw, slayer of your friend, thief of love, usurper of Nargothrond, captain foolhardy, and deserter of your kin" (179). Glaurung mixes his lies with truth to make his words convincing: "[Túrin] saw himself as in a mirror misshapen by malice, and he loathed what he saw" (179). Glaurung later hypnotizes Túrin's sister Nienor and destroys her memory: "It seemed to her that the sun sickened and all became dim about her; and slowly a great darkness drew down on her and in that darkness there was emptiness" (209).[34] Like her brother, she too suffers madness and flees into the wilderness (213). The influence of Morris's *Sigurd* on Tolkien does not end there, but continues on with Glaurung's descendant Smaug of *The Hobbit*, who similarly exudes greed, cynicism – and suspicion of any activity a dwarf might be undertaking (201). Bilbo resists Smaug's avaricious, amoral worldview by asserting the possibility of non-selfish motives, and the dwarven prince Thorin Oakenshield's redemption comes from a dying repudiation of greed.

In addition to Morris's motif of Ruskinian transformation, Tolkien displays the influence of Tennyson's interpretation of nature's cruelty and indifference. The link is clear in Tolkien's poetic retelling, *The Fall of Arthur* (2014). An echo of Tennyson occurs when Arthur's Christian Britons sail to the land of the Saxons to counterattack the pagan invaders and find themselves uncertainly trying to assert their ideals in the midst of a sprawling wilderness:

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[34] Compare to John Gardner's description of the Dragon's glare from *Grendel*: "The eye was terrible, lowering towards me. I felt as if I was tumbling down into it – dropping endlessly down through a soundless void. He let me fall, down and down towards a black sun and spiders, though he knew I was beginning to die. Nothing could have been more disinterested: serpent to the core" (61).

Foes we fear not, nor fellow shadows

Of the dark mountains demon-haunted!

Hear now ye hills and hoar forest,

Ye awful thrones of olden gods

Huge and hopeless, hear and tremble!'

'…East rides Arthur.' (21)

This heathen landscape intimidates them; they receive no reply but their own ghostly words:

Echoes were wakened.

The wind was stilled. The walls of rock

'Arthur' answered. (21)

As in Tennyson's *Idylls*, the knights' assertion of high ideals falls flat in a sinister wilderness, whose lush growth threatens them. Moreover, just as in the *Idylls*, Arthur and his men may ultimately manifest an illusory ideal. Tolkien links Arthur and his knights to enchantment:

Fires were flickering, frail tongues of gold

Under hoary hills. In the huge twilight

Gleamed ghostly-pale, on the ground rising

Like elvish growths in autumn grass

In some hollow of the hills hid from mortals,

The tents of Arthur. (21)

Like Tennyson, Tolkien does everything with imagery. Nature dwarfs the tents of Arthur's people, and they are compared to imaginary creatures. They are trapped, seemingly, on the wrong side of some type of life-art or science-magic border. This, perhaps, is what they realize in hearing the name "Arthur" echo hollow off the cliffs.

Evolutionary theory changed the Face of Nature in literary medievalism. Abandoned by gods and afraid of their own nature, now disillusioned heroes were forced to recognize their kinship with the monsters they faced. Only in a Lamarckian framework in which beliefs drive behavior and behavior modifies biology could belief in Christianity on the one hand or evolution on the other mean the difference between virtuous civilizer and violent criminal. Amidst an apparently medieval landscape, the heroes of northern tradition battled nineteenth-century doubt.

Morris and Tennyson are foundational for medievalism, and the implications of evolution are foundational for this study. In *Imaginary Worlds*, Lin Carter writes: "A world that has magic in it… [magic that really works] ought not to have gunpowder" (216). Carter presumably bases this notion that magic and gunpowder are mutually exclusive on the perceived incompatibility of scientific and religious explanations for the way the world is. This was among Tennyson's great themes, and this particular conflict remained at the forefront of medievalism for generations. The titular character in John Gardner's *Grendel* (1971) is fond of screaming into the void in a self-satirizing manner nevertheless fraught with true rage and despair. As his howls of indignation reverberate off of the high cliffs of a natural world that cares nothing for human wishes, we can still hear the echo of Tennyson's voice in the wilderness, down a hundred years.

Chapter 2

I. Noble Savages or Savage Nobles? Late Victorian Experiments in Historicity and Genre

The main conclusion arrived at in this work, namely, that man is descended from some lowly organised form, will, I regret to think, be highly distasteful to many. But there can hardly be a doubt that we are descended from barbarians. The astonishment which I felt on first seeing a party of Fuegians on a wild and broken shore will never be forgotten by me, for the reflection at once rushed into my mind – such were our ancestors. These men were absolutely naked and bedaubed with paint, their long hair was tangled, their mouths frothed with excitement, and their expression was wild, startled, and distrustful. They possessed hardly any arts, and like wild animals lived on what they could catch; they had no government, and were merciless to every one not of their own small tribe…. [Such] a savage… delights to torture his enemies, offers up bloody sacrifices, practices infanticide without remorse, treats his wives like slaves, knows no decency, and is haunted by the grossest superstitions.

-Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (1871)

Men yearn for a golden age, not for an analysis of its metal.

-John Morris, *The Age of Arthur* (1973)

As noted last chapter, Victorian advances in anthropology and evolutionary theory affected belief in a lost golden age, which had been key to medievalism since Blake and Wordsworth. As Chandler argues, medievalism was driven by its proponents' desire to believe that they lived in a universe that was meant for them, and they often located such beliefs in pre-modern cultures (248). Chandler does not mention Darwin, but as Darwin's description of tribal peoples above indicates, Victorian evolutionary science stood in direct contradiction to the primitivist notions then found in medievalist scholarship and literature. As the sense of alienation increased during the later nineteenth century, the intellectual ambition of medievalism increased

correspondingly in order to compensate. The previous chapter discussed how medievalism's metaphysical claims came under pressure from contemporary science, and how key authors responded metafictionally. This chapter examines a similar response in the realm of history: the increasing ambition of medievalist historical claims fueled a "bubble" that had to burst eventually (Chandler 51). In the second half of the nineteenth century, Arthuriana, Anglo-Saxondom, and the Old North were all undergoing politicization and appropriation in service of nationalist agendas. This led to bitter disputes over exactly who and what qualified as Celtic, Norse, Saxon, or Norman. Darwin emphasized the common descent of humans and the very small scale of any hereditary differences between humans in the context of chimpanzees being our cousins; this undermined any essentialism which would support naïve arguments for cultural heritage. When it is known that all humans share common ancestry with fish, what meaning could it possibly have to say, *my* ancestors held to *these* rituals and beliefs, whereas *your* ancestors performed others? The "blood and soil" rhetoric of nationalism is incoherent in the biological context of evolution. But such was the strength of competing nationalisms that many still focused on the differences between cultures and language groups, laying claim to medieval legends, historical migrations, and political roots. Barczewski documents extravagant historical claims, which indulged in agenda-driven projection based on ethnic-linguistic essentialism:

> In the mid-nineteenth century some scholars argued that Robin Hood had been invented by the Saxons as a sylvan quasi-deity. In 1846 Thomas Wright, a prominent Victorian antiquary, declared that Robin Hood could be placed 'with tolerable certainty among the personages of the early mythology of the Teutonic people'. Seventeen years later Edwin Goadbvy asserted in *Sharpe's London Magazine* that Robin Hood had been a great hero of northern European mythology… an incarnation of 'the god Woden himself.' (133)

Moreover, in 1887 E. Stredder argued that Robin Hood was a Saxon outlaw whose lineage could be traced to before the Norman conquest (Barczewski 139). The speed with which figures of popular interest like Robin Hood could jump from English balladry to primeval Norse mythology shows the fanciful nature of significant swaths of contemporary medievalism. Barczewski calls such claims "emphatically not based upon historical fact" (106), but they nevertheless informed the version of medieval literature the reading public received.

Malory was canonized in an effort to assert English ownership of Arthurian legend (Barczewski 119). Yet with all of the censorship, euphemism, and editing which often applied even to "complete" versions of Malory, it is no surprise that the Victorian view of the Middle Ages seemed so similar to its own dreams of an ideal world. This still leaves aside the ideological elements involved in translation, which will be discussed in relation to Morris later in this chapter. In any case, all of the selective editing, distortion and metaphysics in the world could only stretch history so far, and thus some began to admit that they preferred legend to history, particularly if history could not be made to support one's agenda. Barczewski explains,

> [They ignored] Arthur's problematic historical identity as a Celtic warrior king…. [V]irtually divorcing him from history altogether, they were able to reinvent him…. This did not mean that they claimed that Arthur had never existed. Rather, they claimed that the Arthur of history and the Arthur of fiction were two entirely different characters, and that it was the latter who was the true exemplar of what a national hero should be. (153)

By consciously choosing the literary Arthur, later Victorian medievalists conceded that history did not provide, and in all likelihood *could* not provide, the basis for the vision they were seeking. Barczewski notes Tennyson's stripping of history from Arthur's story:

Tennyson deliberately presents the chronological aspects of the legend in as vague a

manner as possible…. [None] of the Idylls is set in a place and time which can be linked

to any real geographical location or historical era. By thus removing Arthur from the

realm of history, Tennyson is able to imply that he was a Saxon rather than a Celt. (156)

Thus, Tennyson's *Idylls* applies its core conflict between ideal vision versus disillusioned reality,

to history as well as anthropology. The history becomes demythologized, the myth unhistorical,

ethereal, ghostly. What happens when the twine of a twisted history starts to loosen and unravel?

Chandler's account of medievalism ends with what she calls "The Failure of the Vision" at the

end of the nineteenth century (248). This is the point, she argues, at which belief in the historicity

of medievalist utopias was finally abandoned as an illusion borne of wishful thinking, and the

titular "Dream of Order" – that is, of a life without alienation – faded.

Examining the framing of medievalist works relative to historicity reveals that the loss of

belief in primitivism corresponded to a genre shift toward *simulation*. There emerged a new form

of literary medievalism which abandoned any claim to historicity or to heritage status. As a result

of this skeptical attitude, the nationalist retellings which were so important throughout the

nineteenth century were replaced by new experiments in prose. These were not retellings, still

less "true versions" (which purport to be more accurate than the famous traditional versions of

legends), but synthetic romances, or simulated sagas. Artificial medieval literature came about as

the result of skepticism. It developed exactly because of writers freeing literature from historical

and metaphysical claims, and instead seeing the legends as works in a literary genre.[35] The key

figure in this shift is Morris, though contemporaries like Twain and Haggard are also important.

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[35] In "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics" (1936), Tolkien noted that many previous critics had seen *Beowulf* as of historical importance only, rather than as a literary work.

II. William Morris: Tradition, Translation and Teutonic Democracy

Of Heaven or Hell I have no power to sing,

I cannot ease the burden of your fears,

Or make quick-coming death a little thing,

Or bring again the pleasure of past years,

Nor for my words shall ye forget your tears,

Or hope again for aught that I can say,

The idle singer of an empty day.

-William Morris, "An Apology," *The Earthly Paradise* (1868)

From his saga translations to his poetic retellings and *Icelandic Journals*, Morris was one of the most enthusiastic of enthusiasts for the "Old North," warranting an entire chapter of his own in Wawn's *The Vikings and the Victorians* (2000). Examining Morris's Norse works makes it clear that his attitude toward medievalism changed significantly over the course of his career. These changes track his political convictions and disillusionments, and are reflected in the genre and framing of his medievalist works. Whereas the first chapter's section on Morris focused on close reading of *Sigurd*, this section is concerned with surveying Morris's Norse works, especially his prose romances, so as to demonstrate the evolution of his intellectual alignments.

Richard Frith distinguishes between the aesthetic strain in Morris's medievalism and the utopian or socialist strain (118). The title of E. P. Thompson's classic biography, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (1955), reflects scholarly consensus on Morris's medievalist literature. Scholars tend to consider Morris's initial works in a Pre-Raphaelite context, as primarily aesthetic, whereas after his journeys to Iceland and acceptance of the ideals of socialism, Morris's medievalism is considered to have become increasingly political.

The narrator of *The Earthly Paradise* (1868) makes clear Morris's initial aestheticism: he is a melancholic, Romantic "idle singer," unconcerned with any of the social or moral themes of Morris's later works. The closest he comes to justifying his work is that he keeps tradition alive:

[If] In some old garden thou and I have wrought,

And made fresh flowers spring up from hoarded seed,

And fragrance of old days and deeds have brought

Back to folk weary; all was not for nought. ("Epilogue")

As every piece in *The Earthly Paradise* was a retelling of an episode from a mythical tradition, the only thing that required justification was the collection itself. Morris uses the Chaucerian solution of a gathering of travelers telling stories to one another, framed by the "idle singer" who even acknowledges "My Master, GEOFFREY CHAUCER." He even mentions Chaucer's meditation on history, "The House of Fame" (c.1380), an extraordinarily skeptical work in which reputations are dispensed in an arbitrary and inconsistent manner, and truth is obscured by chaos and confusion. Morris's engagement with Chaucer in *The Earthly Paradise* is entirely appropriate here; the collection treats its central concept of an Earthly Paradise skeptically, so that the travelling tale-tellers, exchanging their stories, eventually come to realize that no utopia exists, not in the far west nor anywhere in the world. And yet after *The Earthly Paradise*, Morris's views sprinted toward idealistic conviction, specifically Teutonic Democracy.

Already with the translations Morris was referring to medieval literature as a potential direct link to real history and even to one's own ancestors. Morris and Magnússon introduce *The Story of Grettir the Strong* (1869) to English readers by writing, "We put forward this volume as the translation of an old story founded on facts, full of dramatic interest, and setting before people's eyes pictures of the life and manners of an interesting race of men near akin to

ourselves" (n.pag.). In his poetic retelling "The Lovers of Gudrun" in *The Earthly Paradise*, Morris took an unusual view of *The Saga of the People of Laxardale*'s historical accuracy:

> Know withal that we
>
> Have ever deemed this tale as true to be,
>
> As though those very Dwellers in Laxdale,
>
> Risen from the dead had told us their own tale. (21-24)

Such assurances of the saga's historical accuracy and its ethnic-linguistic connection to the peoples of all northern Europe now seems naïve, but Morris was not the only English writer to fall in love with Old Norse literature and allow this to influence the degree to which he hoped it could be his country's legacy too; Shippey describes similar views in "J. R. R. Tolkien and Iceland: The Philology of Envy" in *Roots and Branches* (2007). Morris and Tolkien both thought 1066 had been a disaster and blamed it for the lack a pagan Germanic legacy in English literature (aside from *Beowulf*), which presumably would have resembled Old Norse literature.

This outlook reached its culmination with Morris's involvement with the story of Sigurd the dragon-slayer in the 1870 saga translation *The Story of the Volsungs and Niblungs* and retelling of the story in the epic poem *Sigurd the Volsung* (1876). If *Sigurd* doubted the divine, it had little doubt as to the importance of the northern heritage. Morris and Magnússon introduce *The Story of the Volsungs and Niblungs* with a manifesto for Teutonic Democracy:

> We must again say how strange it seems to us, that this Volsung Tale… should never
>
> have been translated into English. For this is the Great Story of the North, which should
>
> be to all our race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks – to all our race first, and
>
> afterwards, when the change of the world has made our race nothing more than a name of
>
> what has been – a story too – then should it be to those that come after us no less than the
>
> Tale of Troy has been to us. (286)

This passage outlines several key assertions. First, it deliberately blurs the lines between *history* and *story* as in legend or literature. Second, it claims for England a part of the larger "Northern Heritage" of Germanic culture. As Barczewski and others have documented, nineteenth-century England was marked by the search for a national epic. If a national epic creates nationalistic consciousness, a Pan-Germanic cultural movement like Teutonic Democracy found its epic in the *The Saga of the Volsungs*. The translation of Norse literature into English, moreover, is natural and necessary from this point of view – yet in a sense, the *less* translation required, the *more* the ideals of Teutonic Democracy must be true.

In the saga translations, Morris displays an obsession with perceived authenticity which becomes a kind of ideological imposition through prose style. In *The Works of Morris and Yeats in Relation to Early Saga Literature* (1937), Dorothy M. Hoare states a representative opinion:

> In the ingenious search for the words which come nearest to the actual form of the Icelandic, the life and nearness, the directness has vanished…. [I]n his effort to come near the original, he deliberately uses in his translation words which are not modern, forgetting, or not realizing, that Icelandic prose is colloquial and rapid. The effective, quiet energy of what is not said, in Icelandic, loses its point… [in] translation. (52-53)

Morris prioritizes using Germanic vocabulary over Romance terms; it is more important to him to resurrect a Germanic legacy in English than to write efficiently readable modern English. He also uses alliteration often, a stylistic choice presumably meant to evoke a Germanic culture, as much of Old Norse poetry and Anglo-Saxon is alliterative rather than rhyming. Wawn compares translations by Morris and G. W. Dasent: "the impersonal Icelandic *theim syndisk* seems better served by Dasent's 'they thought they saw' than by Morris's transliterated 'them seemed'" (253). Morris often tries to use the same phrasing in English as in Icelandic as a way of stressing the

kinship of the two languages. In this case, he could have written "to them it seemed," but such a concession to modern English grammar is a bridge too far for him ideologically.

Morris uses transliteration wherever possible in order to demonstrate cognate terms, even if they must be resurrected, as it were, or philologically reconstructed. Wawn admits that Morris's translations often have more "philological firepower" (103), yet still notes that his "insistence on the closely cognate nature of the two languages leads to moments of fussy eccentricity" (253). For example, while Morris's consistent use of the archaic English second person pronoun "thou" (rather than the contemporary "you") for the Icelandic *þú* is effective as a transliteration meant to demonstrate the kinship of the two languages, in English, "thou" is associated with Shakespeare and the King James Bible, a quite contrary sort of archaism to the Beowulfian atmosphere that Morris intends. Indeed, Hoare notes Morris's "use of semi-biblical and dignified language, where such an effect is entirely incongruous" (53). She states that Morris's prioritization of literalistic "accuracy" over readability impedes the translations: "they are too exact in their effort to follow the words and syntax" (62). Contrasting translation styles, Wawn notes that "Dasent, the pragmatic proselytising Icelandist, seems always to have a readership in mind; for Morris translation was more a private communion with the past" (253). However, Morris's translations also reflect a public and scholarly *argument*. Their use of extant Germanic-rooted English terms, transliteration of Icelandic terms to obsolete or reconstructed Germanic-rooted English terms, alliteration, and replication of Icelandic grammar in English, shows that, quite unlike the *The Earthly Paradise*, Morris was now placing ideological beliefs about human history and perhaps even destiny above aestheticism. These translations ought to be called *transliterations*, as they meant to show that English and Icelandic *are* closely akin, and thus to support the ideals of Teutonic Democracy.

And yet the *Icelandic Journals* show that Morris's impressions on visiting Iceland were more thoughtful, even brooding, than idealistic: "What a mournful place this is… every place and name marks the death of its short-lived eagerness and glory… a piece of turf under your feet, and the sky overhead, that's all; whatever solace your life is to have here must come out of yourself or these old stories, not over hopeful themselves" (84-85). This less ideological, more personal view of Iceland and its literary legacy has aged better than the wishful excesses of Teutonic Democracy. Yet upon returning, Morris once again put on his idealistic public face and said that in Iceland he saw socialism in action. Despite the influence of the skeptic Keats, by the time he began writing *Sigurd* Morris had become among the most fervent believers in Teutonic Democracy, primitivism, and the notion that by drawing from medieval society, modern society could fix its most pressing problems. Iceland had become Morris's unlikely Earthly Paradise.

Morris makes Sigurd more altruistic and less vengeful, so that he represents a sort of socialist hero (Frith 125). Dennis Blach notes that Morris's Sigurd embodies Marxist ideals (101). Blach points out that Sigurd fights so that "the lowly man [will be] exalted and the mighty brought alow"; so that "the sheaf shall be for the plougher, and the loaf for him that sowed"; and for "the prison's rending… the golden thieves' abasement" (101). The socialist strain in Morris's medievalism, beginning in the late 1860s and lasting a full two decades, is a sort of Romantic utopianism akin to that of Blake or Wordsworth, rather than the Romantic skepticism of Keats. Morris consistently portrays undesirable aspects of his own society as later corruptions of an originally free, just, and equitable (Germanic) society. Not only does Sigurd stand as an ideal of good conduct for Victorian readers, but his story is a part of their cultural tradition. Having already explained his view of the story's heritage status in his translation, Morris's framing becomes as simple and direct as it ever was in *Sigurd*, with the narrator totally invisible.

III. "A strange thing that a severed head should speak": Magic in the Germanic Romances

> Now the old tale tells that Eric cried aloud: 'Little chance had this one,' and that then a wonderful thing came to pass. For the head on the rock opened its eyes and answered: 'Little chance indeed against thee, Eric Brighteyes. Still, I tell thee this: that where my body fell there thou shalt fall, and where it lies there thou shalt lie also.'
>
> Now Eric was afraid, for he thought it a strange thing that a severed head should speak to him. 'Here it seems I have to deal with trolls,' he said.
>
> -H. Rider Haggard, *The Saga of Eric Brighteyes* (1890)

With his prose sequels to *Sigurd* (1876), *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains* (both 1889), Morris portrays an idealized, free Germanic community attuned to the cycles of nature (Blach 114). The Wolfings, titular clan of the former romance, remember Sigurd and consider him a symbol of their living traditions of freedom and community. In *Wolfings*, Morris draws upon contemporary anthropology to depict the Germanic tribes whose culture was at the root of both Anglo-Saxon and Norse traditions. Graham Seaman explains, "his interest in these societies was anything but purely academic; the primitive communism dimly visible behind the Middle Ages was a direct validation of his political hopes for the future" (n.pag.). Yet while Morris's archaic language and formal dialogue create the impression of a fairytale world, he still has to admit the dark side of his barbarians: as Seaman notes, "the tribe are illiterate, have slaves, taken in war, and occasionally practice human sacrifice" (n.pag.). Morris tries to smooth the impact of these practices by noting that occasionally a thrall (slave) is adopted into the clan, and that when the Wolfings sacrifice prisoners of war, they sacrifice one of their own along with them, who goes willingly to lead them to the gods. But this, of course, only leads to the question of how a Marxist can endorse a superstitious human sacrifice.

In fact, the supernatural is the main problem for late Victorian authors writing simulated medieval literature. In translations it must be accepted; in retellings it may be reinterpreted, but removing it would be iconoclastic and its inclusion needs no justification since it already occurs in the source material. When writing one's own simulated medieval romances, however, as Morris began doing with *Wolfings*, supernatural elements require some explanation. However, prior to noting how Morris and his fellow saga-imitator Haggard approach this issue, it is necessary to note the extent to which Morris idealized medieval Germanic societies.

Despite their faults, Morris's Germanic tribes are a model of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Morris's heroes and heroines are committed to the Kindred and are named as such: Thiodolf or "Folk-Wolf" and "Hall-Sun" in The *House of the Woflings*, "Folk-Might" in *The Roots of the Mountains*, Hallblithe in *The Story of the Glittering Plain*. This is in stark contrast to the Roman invaders in *Wolfings*, whose society Morris describes thus: "Thralls and… unhappy freemen do all tilling and herding and all deeds of craftsmanship: and above these are men whom they call masters and lords who do nought" (n.pag.). With his Ruskinian focus on meaning in work, independence, and craftsmanship, Morris describes the Roman rulers as "The men that fashioned nothing but the trap to make men toil" (n.pag.). The Romans want status and money, but the peoples of the Mark remain free by the avoidance of permanent governing positions and by making decisions democratically at outdoor councils or "things." The characteristic institution of medieval Iceland was the Althing, upon which Morris models the democratic decision-making process of his society in *Wolfings*. The system is fair and reasonable, and it proves efficient enough to defeat a Roman invasion. Thiodolf, a hero like Morris's Sigurd, is elected war-leader for his society. He defends it with bravery and total commitment, ultimately sacrificing his life for his belief in his free community's ideals; Thiodolf is another Marxist martyr/messiah.

In *Wolfings*, Teutonic Democracy *works*. This is in contrast to the sagas, in which the attempt to settle disputes legally at the Althing often fails; introducing his translation, Robert Cook notes that in *Njal's Saga* not a single legal settlement holds (xxv). Anna Vaninskaya contrasts Morris's depiction of Teutonic Democracy through the institution of the Althing with that of H. Rider Haggard in *The Saga of Eric Brighteyes*, noting that the latter is bleaker: "Haggard's plot – like that of the models he alludes to in his introduction, but completely unlike Morris's – is driven by blood feuds, oaths and divided loyalties" (52). Haggard's is a story of interpersonal conflict, while Morris's romances deal with inter-social conflict. Whereas Morris depicts Norse society as unified and equal, Haggard sees division and hierarchy – arguably a more accurate, less ideological view. While Haggard's novel centres on its titular individual, Vaninskaya notes that Morris's "Germanic romances are at bottom not about heroes, heroines and villains, but about the society they inhabit" (54).

Morris uses the same language he developed in order to present his saga translations as part of England's Germanic heritage. Similarly, he permeates *Wolfings* with Norse references: he uses kennings such as "harvest of the sword" for battle, or "child of the hammer" for armour (n.pag.) and takes every opportunity to assert heritage status: the narrator notes that some of the Wolfings fight with the type of sword which "our forefathers long after called 'sax'" (n.pag.). He even asserts a direct link between Icelandic democracy and current English legal practice: "And in each of these steads was there a Doomring wherein Doom was given by the neighbours chosen, (whom now we call the Jury) in matters between man and man" (n.pag.). The institution of "The Doomring of our fathers" also appears in the sequel set centuries later, *The Roots of the Mountains*.

For the anti-imperialist Morris, the Wolfings are justified in their violence because they are only fighting to defend their homeland. He employs the same solutions in *The Roots of the Mountains*, in which related Germanic tribes must unite to fight the invasion of the Huns; it is notable that, like the Roman invasions of *Wolfings*, the invaders are a separate Indo-European language group with a different (and less admirable) cultural and political tradition. In the first chapter of *Mountains*, Morris describes each of the tribes in detail, from their physical features to their psychological characteristics, all in terms of their "blood" (I). This captures precisely the nineteenth-century concept of a "national character," along with primitivist notions: "They were very hale and long-lived, whereas they dwelt in clear bright air, and they mostly went light-clad even in the winter, so strong and merry were they" (I). These are noble savages indeed: hale and healthy, preserving ancestral traditions and lore. As has been noted, *Mountains* influenced Tolkien, not the least in opening with a description of an idealized rural world:

> Thus then lived this folk in much plenty and ease of life, though not delicately nor desiring things out of measure. They wrought with their hands and wearied themselves; and they rested from their toil and feasted and were merry: to-morrow was not a burden to them, nor yesterday a thing which they would fain forget: life shamed them not, nor did death make them afraid. (I)

The last is particularly important, as death is a primary concern of religion, and utopian convictions such as Marxism have been described as secular religions. Morris's Wanderers never discovered an Earthly Paradise, but the land Morris describes in *Mountains* is exactly that:

> As for the Dale wherein they dwelt… they deemed it the Blessing of the Earth, and they trod its flowery grass beside its rippled streams amidst its green tree-boughs proudly and joyfully with goodly bodies and merry hearts. (I)

Whereas in *Wolfings* Morris envisions the Germanic tribes' political systems, in *Mountains* he describes their agriculture, natural resources, crafts, animal husbandry, architecture, mining, metalworking and trade. Yet however meticulous Morris's attempts at reconstruction in the Germanic romances were, as reconstructions these works were necessarily more unmoored from the heritage status arguments that he had used to justify his translations and retellings. Despite creating the illusion of historicity, Morris retains a supernatural element: "They were much given to spells, and songs of wizardry, and were very mindful of the old lay-stories" (I).

Whereas *Sigurd* was a retelling of a famous story, *Wolfings* was an experiment – an original story drawing upon elements of medieval literature. Thus, Morris felt that some justification in its framing was required. Graham Seaman writes, "His solution was brilliantly simple: the story is one told by the descendants of the Wolfings many years later, and as with *The Saga of the Volsungs*, events have become garbled with retelling… This device allows Morris to intertwine a mythical element with the story" (n.pag.). Rather than presenting a "realistic" story, Morris prefers to treat magic as real in the story and attribute its presence to generations of oral tradition. Indeed, he describes just such an interpretation of saga composition in his introduction to *The Story of Grettir the Strong*, describing "the stages which mark the growth of the sagas in general" as follows: a story was "handed about from mouth to mouth until it took a definite shape in men's minds… [then] committed to writing as it flowed ready made from the tongue of the people" (n.pag.). Morris's interpretation of the sagas thus posits a strong oral background in folk tradition which makes them truly representative of an egalitarian society, *and* explains away any supernatural elements. The main supernatural elements of *Wolfings* are spells, the Valkyrie Wood-Sun, the appearance of Odin, and a magical coat of armour (or *hauberk*), which Morris makes the symbolic core of the story.

This dwarf-wrought armour retains the selfish, amoral essence of greed which Morris attributes to the dwarf-kin in *Sigurd*. It becomes a symbol of the individualism that Thiodolf abhors, since it protects the wearer by knocking him unconscious if he is about to enter a battle in which he would be doomed to die, thus robbing him of the chance to sacrifice his life for his community. To use the dwarf-kin's artifacts is to become like them, and Thiodolf is a hero exactly because he prefers to die in defense of his community than to live while it is in peril. Thiodolf is so struck with shame upon the first time the hauberk "protects" him that he wants to kill himself: "I fell to the earth unsmitten; and so was I borne out of the fight, and evil dreams beset me of evil things, and the dwarfs that hate mankind" (n.pag.). The ancestral power of the dwarves seems to corrupt his thinking: "I longed to live, thou and I, and death seemed hateful to me, and the deeds before death vain and foolish" (n.pag.). Morris here identifies his socialist views with Norse paganism so closely that cowardice *is* immoral individualism.

Like Sigurd, Thiodolf is a descendant of Odin, but kinship with Odin earns him only one appearance from the god, who tells him not to wear the hauberk. In having Thiodolf die to save his community, Morris attributes his own socialist values to the traditional story of Odin arranging for warriors to die at their peak so as to induct them into his army in Valhalla. Yet, as in *Sigurd*, a distrust of the gods has also crept into the story, as when Thiodolf complains: "It is the wont of the Gods to lie, and be unashamed, and men-folk must bear with it" (n.pag.). Moreover, one can't always trust the poets who tell the stories either, as Morris simulates the sagas' use of contemporary poetry as sources in *Wolfings*: "of their song of victory thus much the tale telleth" (n.pag.). For the saga writers, citing such poetry is a way of verifying the historicity of the account of events in the saga. Yet here both the story and the poetry are Morris's invention – a use of convention which blurs the lines between the historicity Morris wanted to establish on

the one hand and literary convention on the other. After Thiodolf's death, a poem is performed in tribute, which is apparently quite evocative: "the mighty shout of the Markmen's joy rent the heavens: for in sooth at that moment they saw Thiodolf, their champion, sitting among the Gods on his golden chair" (n.pag.). Morris does not explain whether this is an apparition, a mass hallucination, a way of describing the power of the poem, or a conventional literary addition.

Morris's friend and colleague H. Rider Haggard took the latter attitude in *The Saga of Eric Brighteyes* (1890), a simulation of a saga. In his introduction, Haggard's views on the "Old North" at first seem similar to those of Morris: the medieval Icelanders are "our Norse forefathers" and the sagas are "the prose epics of our own race" (ix). He accepts the historicity of the sagas, allowing that a "mist of miraculous occurrences and legends" has gathered around historical events. Faced with stories involving prophecy, witchcraft, and spells, Haggard makes his own views clear: "The tendency of the human mind… is to supply uncommon and extraordinary reasons for actions and facts that are to be amply accounted for by the working of natural forces" (ix). He justifies his mythicized narrative by noting that it reflects beliefs contemporary to the story's setting and calls the supernatural a matter of literary convention: "no saga would be complete without the intervention of such extraneous forces" (ix). He even supplies a mechanism by which the supernatural elements in his saga *would* have appeared, giving his own creation a whole fictional backstory as to its formation:

> In the Norse romance now offered to the reader, the tale of Eric and his deeds would be true; but the dream of Asmund, the witchcraft of Swanhild, the incident of the speaking head, and the visions of Eric and Skallagrim, would owe their origin to the imagination of successive generations of skalds; and, finally, in the fifteenth or sixteenth century, the story would have been written down with all its supernatural additions. (ix)

Haggard was so effective at close imitation of the sagas that *Eric Brighteyes* has been a consistent contender for best English-language novel inspired by an Icelandic saga, from its own time to Wawn's 2002 view that it is "arguably the finest Victorian Viking-age novel" (331).

Haggard appears to have grasped Norse concepts of the supernatural exceptionally well. Wawn writes, "Haggard's novel is a remarkable illustration of just how inward a knowledge of Icelandic sagas could be developed in 1890 by a dedicated enthusiast of the old north, even one who was in no real sense a professional philologist. No footnotes draw attention to the weight of reading that lies behind the novel, but few knowledgeable enthusiasts would have needed to be told" (333). Even compared to Morris's works, Haggard's *Eric Brighteyes* contains an unrivalled trove of authentic saga details, yet this is exactly what marks it as artificial, as a literary work in the saga genre. That is, Haggard's reading doesn't just show but shows *through*, when his saga characters actually explicate patterns found in saga literature, so that their assessment of the situation is identical with the reader's or even the critic's.

In places Haggard reaches an almost metafictional meditation on saga convention. For example, Eric expresses skepticism of the traditional Viking ideal of winning fame that outlasts death: "What is it to win fame? Is it not to raise up foes, as it were, from the very soil, who, mad with secret hate, seek to stab us in the back?" (117). Envy certainly raises up the foes of the characters Eric is modeled on, such as Gunnar in *Njal's Saga*. After capturing Eric and Skallagrim with great losses, Ospakar's men consider throwing the men overboard while they sleep; when one man objects, another reasons: "If we slay them not, then shall this tale be told against us throughout Iceland: that a ship's company were worsted by two men, and we may not live beneath that dishonour" (133). This shows characters trying to shape the story to their advantage; Haggard shows the disadvantage of reputation and fame in a way Morris does not.

However, Haggard does use Morris's method of establishling a fictional oral tradition as a source for his tale (a concept that would later produce even fictional languages with Tolkien):

It is said of Eric that in all his days he did no base deed, nor hurt the weak, nor refused peace to him who prayed it, nor lifted sword against prisoner or wounded foe. From traders he would take a toll of their merchandise only and let them go, and whatever gains he won he would share equally, asking no larger part than the meanest of his band. All men loved Eric, and even his foes gave him honour and spoke well of him. (149)

Like Tennyson's Sir Bedivere, Haggard establishes his character Jon as a witness who preserves the story and tells the tale "in the white winter of his age":

It was this Jon who, in after years, when he was growing very old, wandered from stead to stead, telling the deeds of Eric Brighteyes, and always finding a welcome because of his tale, till at length, as he journeyed, he was overtaken by a snowstorm and buried in a drift. For Jon, who lacked much, had this gift: he had a skald's tongue. Men have always held that it was to the honour of Jon that he told the tale thus, hiding nothing, seeing that some of it is against himself. (295)

Like Sir Bedivere, Jon is named as witness and tale-teller at the end of the story, though Haggard ascribes the supernatural elements to later skalds and the fictional manuscript for his saga to the fifteenth or sixteenth century. The more meticulously accurate Haggard is the stranger it is, given that he admits to inventing the whole story. He is, in effect, taking the position that suspension of disbelief is not a function of historicity but of genre convention, detail, and aesthetics.

Haggard also simulates the sagas' mixture of pagan supernatural elements, yet like Tennyson he injects contemporary doubts. Vaninskaya writes, Haggard's saga has only "atomised individuals, doomed to the path appointed to them by the gods, through the dark and

hopeless strivings of a brief and bloody life to a hardly believed-in pagan limbo" (52-53). Wawn notes that *Eric Brighteyes* expresses pessimism and disbelief in any afterlife (334). There is only one direct encounter with the gods in the story, Gudruda's dream. Yet at some points there seems to be a Christian supernatural element. For example, Haggard uses the supernatural to avert Eric's darkest deed: mad with grief after the death of his lover Gudruda, Eric prepares to commit a *Njal's Saga*-style burning (291). Just as he is about to go ahead with the deed, he hears Gudruda's voice in his ear, "and it seemed to say: 'Thine oath, Eric! Remember thine oath!'" (291). Perhaps Eric is simply remembering Gudruda (note the ambiguity of supernatural and psychological, as in Tennyson), but it is also possible that Gudruda urges mercy from beyond the grave. Gudruda's rival, the witch Swanhild, employs a "potion of forgetfulness" like the one in *The Saga of the Volsungs* to get Eric to be unfaithful to Gudruda, which Haggard actually says in his introduction is simply an excuse for lust. In other words, the supernatural is simply a projection or exaggeration of the characters' desires, hopes and fears.

Swanhild's demonic "familiar" actually explains that it can take the form of any animal or person, but manifests itself according to her mind: "Mock not my form, lady… for it is as thou dost fashion it in thy thought" (158). At the story's supernatural climax Eric thinks "the night is ghost-ridden… and I am fey." Eric's berserk sidekick Skallagrim adds that "Trolls are abroad, and the God-kind gather to see Eric die" (301). When the mountain stirs beneath them three times, Skallagrim says, "Now the dwarf-folk come from their caves" (301). Whereas Morris describes creatures such as elves, dwarves, and gods as real races of beings older than humanity, Haggard interprets them as folklore constructs, poetic language to describe natural phenomena. Often the supernatural occurs in dreams; but here Eric and Skallagrim, awake but "fey," see fate etched into the sky as three celestial female figures work a loom:

Their hair streamed… like meteor flames, their eyes shone like lightning… They wove fiercely at the loom of blackness, and as they wove they sang. The voice of the one was as the wind whistling through the pines; the voice of the other was the sound of rain hissing on deep waters; and the voice of the third was as the moan of the sea. (302)

In a poetic touch, Eric and Skallagrim see their own doom in the northern lights: a ship flying through the sky, loaded with all the bodies of those killed in the story, and those soon to be killed – including themselves (302). Haggard's vision of a flaming ship which portends Eric's end may be influenced by Tennyson's vision of a flaming ship which portends Arthur's birth. Skallagrim believes that they have seen the Valkyries (the choosers of the slain), but Eric thinks it was the Norns (the weavers of fate) (303). This sense of the blurry boundaries between trolls, ghosts, wraiths, dwarves, gods, Norns, and Valkyries is one of the most fascinating aspects of Haggard's saga: it is almost "too good" (that is to say, too scholarly) a reading of the sagas.

Haggard's *Eric Brighteyes* is an impressive achievement with a unique relationship to historicity and the framing of medievalist works; it mixes medieval literary conventions and features and creates a new story which adheres closely to the original sagas' appeal to historicity despite its own invented nature. Its supernatural elements reflect both a surprisingly effective simulation of the pagan-Christian hybrid worldview of the sagas, and contemporary doubts over religion and worries about determinism. Like Tennyson, Haggard locates the supernatural in dreams or in a visionary or hallucinatory state, and takes a folkloristic approach by framing supernatural claims as part of the dialogue between characters. The supernatural is what his characters hear that it is, dream of, wish or fear it to be; the only thing certain is death. In this surprisingly authentic artificial saga, Haggard takes literary genre to be more important than any claims of historicity or realism: "No saga would be complete without..." is his primary argument.

Haggard's saga thus belies the Morrisian claims of accurate historicity and relevance to contemporary utopian thinking, which even Morris himself was now beginning to question. Although the initial Germanic romances expressed notions of heritage status and Romantic primitivism, and utopian beliefs, it is exactly because of the slow dissolution of such literalistic and utopian beliefs that Morris once again became a literary innovator. *The Story of the Glittering Plain* (1890) is a watershed work in several ways. First, it is the last of the Historic/Germanic romances in the sense that it portrays premodern Germanic societies, in this case medieval England and medieval Iceland. Second, it is the first of the "Dream" or "Fantasy" Romances in the sense that it is not set in any particular named historic time and location, but instead in a parallel world which nevertheless exhibits great similarity with the British Isles during the Viking Age. This merging of historical context which readers can be expected to bring to the book on the one hand, with the freedom to invent history without sources or even to contradict known historical events on the other, proved to be highly influential with subsequent fantasy writers. For example, the Viking-Age North Atlantic and its ethnic-linguistic groups are similarly veiled with alternate names in Guy Gavriel Kay's historical fantasy novel, *The Last Light of the Sun* (2004). Both feature a setting which is similar to, yet not the same as or equal to, the medieval history of our world. With this innovation, Morris gave himself a new license to import the supernatural, setting his story in a parallel world which may not share its fundamental rules with ours. Henceforth, Morris would loosen the connection to our world, and increase the speculative and supernatural elements. The political elements occur in the context of dreams or time travel, then fade altogether. This coincided with Morris's political disillusionment, and a return to the skeptical irony of *The Earthly Paradise*.

In *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, the search for an Earthly Paradise is a futile and spiritually draining delusion. The romance opens with three weary old travelers, veterans of a futile search, in a manner that would inform Dunsany's similarly doomed seekers after visions of paradise. They cry to Morris's hard-working, creative, loyal and honourable Germanic society of free men and women, "Is this the land! Is this the land!" (I), meaning an Earthly Paradise of eternal youth and leisure. Morris's hero Hallblithe tells them that here they live life as it is, and when his values are put to the test in a kidnapping scheme which resembles the more comical moments in Middle English King Arthur stories, they prove true and he finds a sort of happiness. Through the wiles of a mercenary Viking, the medieval Englishman Hallblithe is transported to a sort of nightmarish consumer future, with no work or art or freedom; this is the titular Glittering Plain, a land of eternal youth and leisure in which vitality and values have died. He rejects it – and takes the Viking with him.

The Story of the Glittering Plain is both the culmination and death of Teutonic Democracy in Morris's later literary works. It admits that its fictionalized English and Norse societies, so painstakingly reconstructed in *Wolfings* and *Mountains*, *are* fictionalized, and that the hoped-for ability of the medieval Norseman to teach the Englishman to defeat dystopian, dehumanizing capitalism was a humorous adventure, but rather eccentric and peculiar. The "Blood and Soil" ethnic-linguistic arguments are being jettisoned in favour of purely intellectual analysis. Throughout Morris's literary career the notion of utopianism, or an Earthly Paradise, hovered ambiguously, reappearing time and again in different visions, so that one might even see *The Story of the Glittering Plain*'s wayworn wanderers chasing lost dreams to their folly as representations of Morris himself, just as Dunsany represented himself in his philosopher-kings and prophets, or Tennyson in his wistful artist-figure, the wizard Merlin.

IV. "Do you belong to the asylum?" Heritage, Progress and Time-Travel

One of the least difficult things in the world, to-day, is to humbug the human race.
-Mark Twain, from a letter of 1906.

While medievalism was criticized throughout the nineteenth century for its primitivist tendencies, Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) was the first major medievalist literary work to incorporate and even advance such criticisms. In *The Medievalist Impulse in American Literature* (1996), Kim Moreland states that Twain's protagonist, Hank Morgan ascribes "immaturity and primitivism to medievalism" (71). Like Morris, Twain used time travel to juxtapose visions of different times and comment on the direction of society's progress, or lack thereof. In the "Time Travel" Romances, Morris similarly changes his focus from Germanic to English societies and places them in contrast to modernity. Yet, whereas Morris laments what western society has lost, Twain satirizes the present for being too like the past. Placing a nineteenth-century world (represented by Morgan, the titular Connecticut Yankee) alongside a medieval one (King Arthur's Court), he emphasizes that the former represents intellectual and social progress from the latter. Twain sets his Arthuriana in sixth-century England, choosing a more historically probable setting for his work than the Norman High Middle Ages of the most famous versions, or Tennyson's largely ahistorical contemporary version. Yet Twain's medieval characters speak in quaint language reminiscent of Middle English (rather than the Saxon dialect that would be historically accurate); indeed, one could read Twain's *Connecticut Yankee* as a parody of Morris's medievalist romances, with Morgan as Twain's modern mouthpiece.

When Twain's protagonist Hank Morgan, thinking himself still in nineteenth-century America, discovers a man cavorting about in medieval dress, he asks the man, "Do you belong to

the asylum, or are you just here on a visit?" He quickly decides by the man's confusing language that the man must be a patient (33). The striking thing is that by Hank's standards, the medieval man, with his sixth-century beliefs, can hardly be considered sane; and yet Hank finds that as a modern man in a medieval world, he is a minority of one. Morgan finds himself in exactly the opposite situation of the eccentric (or delusional) Don Quixote: instead of being the only person who believes that he is living in a medieval age, he is the only one who denies it.

Twain depicts early medieval England as backward and barbaric; indeed, the cruelty, ignorance and superstition Twain often attributes to pre-modern peoples could be drawn directly from Darwin's description above. Morgan considers medieval life brutal: the buildings are "wretched," the fields in "an indifferent state of cultivation," peasants have "long, coarse, uncombed hair that hung down over their faces… [making them] look like animals" (28); there is "no society but some more or less tame animals" (85). He seems to feel not just cultural superiority, but even an evolutionary sort of superiority. He certainly displays a mindset of Manifest Destiny when he decides that the people around him lack "mental training, intellectual fortitude, reasoning" and have only "mere animal training" (40). Such a linear scale, from animal to savage to civilized person, interprets evolution in a chauvinistic manner. Twain's immediate influence occurred not in medievalism but in science fiction. Like the hapless protagonist in H. G. Wells's "The Country of the Blind" (1904), Morgan naïvely decides on his superiority early on and develops delusions of grandeur and plans for social engineering that soon run aground. Initially, like the protagonist in Wells's story, Morgan has such a culture shock at first that he and his new acquaintances interpret one another as insane or at least delusional.

Indeed, the very belief that there is such a thing as royalty, from Twain's view, is itself a delusion even if many people can be made to believe it. Sam Harris points out that the American

Psychiatric Association's definition for "delusion" entails beliefs which persist "despite what almost everyone else believes and despite what constitutes incontrovertible and obvious proof or evidence to the contrary," yet somehow does not include any religious beliefs (2010 157). Harris notes the most obvious problem with this: "The criterion that a belief be widely shared suggests that a belief can be delusional in one context and normative in another, even if the reasons for believing it are held constant. Does a lone psychotic become sane merely by attracting a crowd of devotees?" (158). This is what Twain sees in medieval society: a world ruled by charlatans (kings, magicians, priests, popes) who need to be unmasked. In his preface, Twain sarcastically notes that "The question as to whether there is such a thing as divine right of kings is not settled in this book" because actual monarchs were found "difficult to work into the scheme" (xv). This "King Arthur" story, that is, opposes kingship in practice and principle. Moreland observes, "Twain invokes an archetypal scene – the ruler dressing in the clothes of a commoner and henceforth going unrecognized and unhonoured – to demonstrate that this sociopolitical superiority has no relation to intrinsic superiority. Clothing, not worth, makes the king" (35). Indeed, Twain lived in San Francisco during part of the "reign" of the eccentric (or delusional) Emperor Norton I of America (1859-1880), who inspired the character of "The King" in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Emperor Norton I may also be the inspiration behind the narrator of "The Repairer of Reputations" from Robert W. Chambers's cryptic *The King in Yellow* (1895), an unhinged lunatic who believes that America is secretly ruled by an "imperial dynasty" and engages in conspiracy and murder in order to get closer to the throne.

From Twain's point of view, aristocracy, monarchy, state religion, belief in magic, legal class distinctions, and chivalry are all dangerous delusions – at best. What exactly constitutes insanity? As Harris notes, having radically different beliefs from the dominant beliefs in one's

society cannot be the only criteria. Morgan eventually learns to accept the virtues of medieval people, but initially he only considers them ignorant and superstitious. This interpretation is understandable, as they are easily led by Merlin to consider him a witch and plan to burn him to death. Noting the superstitions of those around him, Morgan decides "a humbug didn't need to have a reputation in this asylum" (64). This view of Merlin, as if Merlin were running Victorian séances, makes the striking nature of Twain's revisionism plain (64). Morgan decides to fight fire with fire and exploit an eclipse to make it seem as if he has supernatural powers. His inspiration comes from imperial conquerors like Columbus or Cortez, who similarly tricked "savages" into fearing their godlike powers (63). He claims to be far more powerful than Merlin:

> I've known Merlin seven hundred years…. [H]e has died and come alive again thirteen times, and traveled under a new name every time…. I knew him in Egypt three hundred years ago; I knew him in India five hundred years ago…. He don't amount to shucks, as a magician; knows some of the old common tricks, but has never got beyond the rudiments, and never will…. [H]e oughtn't to set up for an expert (64).

This is "magic" in the age of P. T. Barnum. Months later, in order to confirm his ascension as the supreme wizard "Sir Boss," Hank blows up Merlin's tower with gunpowder (84). Hank passes his modern knowledge for magic and debunks any competitors: when a man arrives claiming visionary power, Hank puts one hand behind his back and asks, "Tell me what I am doing with my right hand" (307). He applies critical thinking to supernatural claims and even notes the placebo effect: "Any mummery will cure if the patient's faith is strong in it" (337).

Taking a view of the matter particularly relevant for Americans, Twain's Morgan denounces aristocracy as "a band of slaveholders under another name" (226). Thus, rather than attempting to soften the inequality in medieval societies, Twain focuses on it. This justifies

Morgan's decision to lead medieval society forward; as a factory foreman he is well-qualified to begin introducing industrial technology to medieval England, an idea that would have been utter heresy to Romantics. But Twain is set on stripping any glorification away from his medieval society and portraying medieval life as "nasty, brutish and short," in general if not in every particular detail: "It is not pretended that these laws and customs existed in England in the sixth century" (xv). Thus Twain announces that the story makes no claim to historical accuracy; the important point to be demonstrated is that pre-modern living was inferior to modern living; there has been progress in history and thus primitivism is wrong: "One is quite justified in inferring that wherever one of these laws or customs was lacking in that remote time, its place was competently filled by a worse one" (xv). Indeed, the primary purpose of the time travel device that Twain uses to set up *A Connecticut Yankee* is to strip away all the exaggeration, glorification, and mythicizing which would otherwise have accumulated through centuries of transmission through oral and literary traditions. Whereas Morris and Haggard use their introductions to show how closely they are simulating saga and romance, including such a chain of transmission and supernatural elements, Twain does everything he can to circumvent this.

Twain's method of dividing history from myth exposes primitivism as a confusion of the two. Moreland writes, "For Twain, there were two Middle Ages: the historical period, marked by the social, political and religious evils that he abhorred, and the mythical period, whose beauties he admired" (59). Twain even provides a look at how history becomes legend: the hyperbole in oral tradition. Kay captures Hank Morgan, who then explains:

> Sir Kay told how he had encountered me in a far land of barbarians, who all wore the same ridiculous garb that I did – a garb that was a work of enchantment, and intended to make the wearer secure from hurt by human hands. However, he had nullified the force

of the enchantment by prayer, and had killed my thirteen knights in a three-hours' battle, and taken me prisoner, sparing my life in order that so strange a curiosity as I was might be exhibited to the wonder and admiration of the king and the court. He spoke of me… as 'this prodigious giant… this tusked and taloned man-devouring ogre.' (55)

Kay's page Clarence tells Morgan that Kay will exaggerate the capture for the court. Just as Morgan thinks medieval garb marks the first man he encounters as a mental patient, so do the medieval people fit his own costume into their worldview. Kay explains that Hank is a bizarre monster; Hank is taken aback at this hyperbolic nonsense, but Clarence notes that Kay's exaggeration will only grow greater with more wine (45). Here Hank, drinking and narrating an adventure story, implies that the only reasonable attitude toward drunken adventure stories is skepticism. Launcelot is said to have "killed seven giants at one sweep of his sword, and set a hundred and forty-two captive maidens free" (45). Rather than giving heroic stories any credibility, Twain traces their origins to ale-hall boasting; knights are "professional liars" (507).

Twain even includes his Romantic predecessors alongside the bards, poets and chroniclers whose glorification of the past has distorted it: "Suppose Sir Walter, instead of putting the conversations into the mouths of his characters, had allowed the characters to speak for themselves? We should have had talk from Rachel and Ivanhoe and the soft lady Rowena which would embarrass a tramp in our day" (56-57). The women certainly encourage the chivalric fiction (127), but the violent behaviour of the men is the root cause of the problem (43). There is nothing "noble" about Twain's knights: "I will say this much for the nobility: that, tyrannical, murderous, rapacious and morally rotten as they were, they were deeply and enthusiastically religious" (201). Twain's anti-war beliefs inform his views; like Tennyson and T. H. White, he compares violent young men to animals which need to be tamed or civilized. For

Tennyson and White, the project to achieve this was the Holy Grail, but Twain allows no legitimacy for this: the fabled Quest is "the Northwest Passage of that day… Every year expeditions went out holy grailing, and the next year relief expeditions went out to hunt for *them*. There was worlds of reputation in it, but no money" (113). Instead Morgan plans to replace tournaments with baseball, to keep men "entertained and out of mischief" (518).

Twain's reformer Morgan develops further plans to civilize medieval England: to abolish slavery, serfdom, torture (208). He will reverse the society's regressive taxation, in which the poor pay all the taxes and the church and nobility pay none (156). He plans to introduce legal equality, universal suffrage, and nineteenth-century institutions such as patent offices, public schools, and newspapers (109). He intends to introduce a new currency and to abolish monarchy once Arthur dies. When Clarence protests that a royal family could be a useful figurehead for the nation (perhaps like Queen Victoria), he says a family of cats would be just as useful (514).

Hank plans to introduce religious freedom, since "spiritual wants and instincts are as various in the human family as are physical appetites, complexions, and features" – and a united Church is a formidable power which, when it "gets into selfish hands, as it is always bound to do, it means death to human liberty, and paralysis to human thought" (118). Morgan finds that the Church is opposed to his reforms on a deep level when the priesthood opposes his efforts to establish a fire department and disaster insurance "on the ground that it was an insolent attempt to hinder the decrees of God" (382). Tennyson longed for the supernatural beliefs of past ages, attributing beauty and meaning to them; but Twain views such beliefs as false and harmful:

> Before the day of the Church's supremacy in the world, men were men, and held their heads up, and had a man's pride and spirit and independence; and what of greatness and position a person got, he got mainly by achievement, not by birth. But then the Church

came…. [S]he invented "divine right of kings"…. [S]he preached (to the commoner) humility, obedience to superiors, the beauty of self-sacrifice. (101)

Hank plans to undermine the Church by promoting education and "rudimentary cleanliness" (191). Like Macaulay, Morgan notes that even medieval castles lacked basic commodities of any nineteenth-century home, above all soap (83-84). Twain's reflections on hygiene are an easy way to make his point about primitivism versus progress, but he makes it with style when Hank suggests to a man that people should bathe: "He blenched at the idea – I don't mean that you could see him blench" (300). He also notes the pervasive presence of insects, which is hardly ever mentioned in medievalist literary works and which punctures primitivism (152). Indeed, Darwin noted the philosophical implications of parasitism: so much for wise design. But the ultimate skepticism in *A Connecticut Yankee* is the story's skepticism of itself.

Medievalist works often feature an author's preface, providing historical background and explaining authorial decisions. As Moreland notes, Twain's preface does the opposite:

The preface by the author Mark Twain… [is followed by] a frame story… in which the character "Mark Twain" (the narrator of the frame story) and Hank Morgan meet while touring Warwick Castle. The scenes composing the frame story are concerned less with historical detail than imagery of enchantment, magic, reverie, and dream. Hank seems not merely from another historical era but from another ontological realm, and his influence is so strong that "Twain" … is imaginatively transported there. (59)

In other words, just as Hank Morgan does not trust the accounts of people around him in his story, there are further layers of implied skepticism because the persona "Twain" is not the same as the author Twain, and moreover "Twain" seems hypnotized by Morgan as both are drinking:

As he talked along, softly, pleasantly, flowingly, he seemed to drift away imperceptibly out of this world and time, and into some remote era and old forgotten country; and so he gradually wove such a spell about me that I seemed to move along the spectres and shadows and dust and mould of a grey antiquity, holding speech with a relic of it! (33)

Ultimately we have four levels of narrative: Twain, "Twain," Morgan, and the characters whose accounts *he* distrusts, with intoxication, exaggeration, and imaginative reverie or even hypnosis operating at most narrative levels. Moreover, Twain allows for the interpretation that Morgan's experience, even if accurately reported, might all be a dream. By his own account Morgan awoke in medieval England and then awoke back in his own time. He offers little in support of his account: the only piece of external evidence "Mark Twain" sees is a "bullet hole" in a medieval suit of armour in the museum, which Hank claims to have put there during the sixth century.

A Connecticut Yankee also displays a significant metafictional element. Moreland notes that "Hank reappears to 'Twain' at the magical hour shortly after midnight, as if summoned by 'Twain's' reading of Malory… After four whiskeys, the intoxicated Hank in effect takes up where Malory left off" (60). Moreland adds that Morgan tries to support his account with a book:

[Hank offers] "Twain" the book he has written about his experiences. An adaptation of Malory's Arthurian legends, this book is a palimpsest, written on top of "old monkish legends" (CY 38). Not a careful history but art – legends upon legends upon legends – brings to life the mythic world of medieval England. The aesthetic and mythic impulses are thus united in the dream vision… that forms the core of the novel. (60)

A Connecticut Yankee, then, does not really support Hank's story; it complicates it and makes it even more worthy of skepticism; it is among the most skeptical medievalist literary works ever written. Moreover, although the core of the story is ostensibly told by the titular Yankee Hank

Morgan, the narrative voice is unstable. Comparing the Terror of the French Revolution to the horrors of the Middle Ages, the narrative asks, "What is swift death by lightning compared with death by slow fire at the stake?" (157). Such rhetorical questions seem more attributable to Twain than to his protagonist. Rather than aiming for aesthetic immersion through suspension of disbelief, Twain's narrative voice interrupts and contradicts; Twain's is an absurd medievalism.

At the same time, William Morris was presenting the same juxtaposition of medieval and modern in *News From Nowhere* (1890). However, it is to the latter's advantage: in an ingenious scenario, Morris describes a medieval future which looks back on the nineteenth century as an era of misguided folly, exploitation, inequality, and above all worship of the wrong things. Like Hank Morgan, Morris's narrator William Guest is a nineteenth-century man who dreams of another time, in this case twenty-second-century England. It is a utopian society organized around Morris's Ruskinian interpretation of communism, and like Twain Morris emphasizes the independence that self-directed work confers on people – and condemns what he sees as unfair and exploitative institutions and labour situations. Morris's enlightened future is one in which "the whole system of rival and contending nations which played so great a part in the government of the world of civilisation has disappeared along with the inequality betwixt man and man in society" (XIV). *Now* Morris thinks little of political nationalism: "How should it add to the variety or dispel the dullness, to coerce certain families or tribes, often heterogeneous and jarring with one another, into certain artificial and mechanical groups, and call them nations, and stimulate their patriotism – i.e., their foolish and envious prejudices?" (XIV).

Hank Morgan expands commerce, industry and trade in early medieval England, but in Morris's future medieval England, the citizens look back on "the commercial period" as a time of corruption and exploitation: "The game of the masters of politics was to cajole together or

force the public to pay the expense of a luxurious life and exciting amusement for a few cliques of ambitious persons" (XIV). In this democratic, communist, medieval-style society, "we are all bent on the same enterprise, making the most of our lives" (XIV). Morris even includes a chapter entitled "On the Lack of Incentive to Labour in a Communist Society" in order to explain the matter to "the man of the nineteenth century" who thinks that people have "a natural desire not to work." The chapter states that this is only true so long as "all work is suffering," whereas in this society all work is pleasurable, because the society has become extremely efficient at producing its basic necessities and features a total "absence of artificial coercion" (XV). Thus, although Twain emphasizes material prosperity while Morris condemns consumerism and instead focuses on meaningful work, the two time-travel romances share striking similarities.

Morris gives a future, enlightened medieval society the benefit of hindsight on his own backward century, in effect doing what Twain did to medievalism to Twain. Despite Twain's unorthodox approach to medievalism, *A Connecticut Yankee* has much in common with Morris's time-travel romances *A Dream of John Ball* (1888) and *News From Nowhere* (1890). Both writers, despite writing medievalist romances, took a strongly anti-war view personally; Moreland writes that "Twain particularly objected to their [knights'] celebration of the martial skills and dedication to battle, which he regarded as a kind of war-mongering" (Moreland 39). Twain's beliefs about history were as militant as those of Morris, but in the direction of progress rather than primitivism. For Twain, the medieval period was a long 'Reign of Terror' marked by oppression and abuse of authority, which dwarfs the revolutionary Terror of France (157). Yet this very belief justifies Hank's use of violence to try to "speed up" history; for Twain it is naïve to think that radical reforms of a corrupt and backward society can be achieved without bloodshed.

Perhaps Morgan's most interesting project is his preparing an expedition to discover America (513). This never actually happens, and Morgan says nothing as to what his policies post-discovery would be (whether, for example, a sixth-century contact between an industrializing England and the Americas would include the same tragic colonialism as actual history), but it is very telling about Morgan, and probably Twain as well, that the "discovery" of America is *assumed* to be a good thing. There seems to be an almost teleological view of history-as-progress here, that improvements can simply be "sped up." However, Morgan later seems to fall victim to this very "historical inevitability" himself; although Guenevere's infidelity with Launcelot is not even mentioned until two-thirds of the way through the story (333), all of the classic elements of the Arthurian tragedy take place while Hank is away in France: Launcelot and Guenevere are caught, Gawain's brothers are killed, and Arthur is killed. Morgan and his wife went to France for the sake of their child's health; it turns out that this was a Church plot (the child was poisoned), and now the Church takes over, planning to "keep the upper hand, now, and snuff out all my beautiful civilization just like that" (528).

Despite all Hank's efforts, he finds that, for the most part, he cannot educate people out of their superstitions (538). By trying to change an entire society, Hank eventually provokes a violent backlash, and in defending himself with superior technology he becomes a mass murderer. The final battle takes place when Hank and less than a hundred followers are attacked by thirty thousand knights who support the church and the old order. Hank and his men have fortified a cave and defend it with electrified wire, dynamite, and Gatling guns; the battle scene has an eerie resemblance to the first World War that would follow. Moreland writes,

> Modern technological war is thus naturalized in Hank's world as science displaces art, paradoxically resulting in an absurd rather than a rational end as civilization is destroyed

> to save it. To win the Battle of the Sand-Belt – which Hank persistently calls the 'episode'… with unwarranted understatement, thereby foretelling the propagandistic abuses of language in modern wartime – he employs Gatling guns, dynamite, electrical fences, flooding apparatuses, trenches, and a mined no-man's-land, this appropriation of technology for military ends resulting in the massacre of 25,000 knights, whose horrific deaths destroy their integrity as individuals, reducing them to 'homogenous proto-plasm, with alloys of iron and buttons.' (48)

Even eerier than Twain's dark omen of mass slaughter is Lord Dunsany's 1910 tale "The Field," in which the titular area is haunted by the ghosts of soldiers not yet killed, as a poet senses memories of horror and despair which come from the future – from a battle which has yet to take place. Written before the First World War, this cannot help but emphasize the idea of inevitable horror. The real villain in this story is determinism, the notion that people cannot change the future any more than they can change the past, and forthcoming suffering and death is just as set in stone as that of the past.[36] Despite the obvious satire, Twain also shows the darkest side of modernity, thus illustrating what Moreland calls Twain's "dual vision" of the Middle Ages.

Even in the chapter "Slow Torture," which dwells on the physical discomfort of knight-errantry, Twain still includes nature imagery of the sort that would be at home in the works of more Romantic medievalists like Morris, Yeats or Tolkien (118). Moreland writes, "Like Huck Finn on the Mississippi or Mark Twain on 'the shining river… as tranquil and reposeful as dreamland, [which] has nothing this-worldly about it,' Hank has 'left the world behind' and entered a mythic realm that brings him peace and contentment" (61). Calling *A Connecticut Yankee* "a backhanded tribute to the Arthurian legends" (59), Moreland quotes a surprisingly Romantic statement from Twain: "I shall hope that under my hand Sir Galahad will still remain

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[36] See discussion of the same idea in John Gardner and T. H. White's medievalist works; pages 256 and 275-277.

the divinest spectre that one glimpses among the mists & twilights of Dreamland across the wastes of the centuries" (63). Yet just when Morgan has fallen in love with the Middle Ages and committed to it completely (symbolized by his having a child with his true love, Sandy), he and his men are defeated in their fortified cave. That advocate of superstition, Merlin, proves able to exile Morgan from the Middle Ages and back to his own time – a potent comment on the power of superstition from the atheist Twain, who despised the power of charlatans in his own time (570). Morgan was lucky to escape being burned under Merlin's orders in the first place.

A postscript by Twain's narrative persona follows, to the effect that Morgan died of a fever. In this fever he referred to his adventures of heroism and love thirteen centuries before, thinking himself in Camelot again. His last words were: "A bugle?… It is the king! The drawbridge, there! Man the battlements! – turn out the –" (574). Perhaps he is the one now who "belongs to the asylum." Is medievalism the hallucination of a fevered brain? Describing medieval beliefs as superstitions even within a medievalist novel, Twain's insistence on a naturalistic philosophy discredits any longing for a Tennysonian "Gleam" of enchantment. Moreland interprets the ending as a comment on subjective experience and objective evidence:

> The mythic world gains the last word…[the story] concludes not with a final polemic against the historical cultures of the Middles Ages, an acknowledgement of the limitations of modern technology, or even a celebration of nineteenth-century America, but with an invocation of a mythic world in which 'all is well, all is peace, and I am happy again'… Dream triumphs over reality; myth triumphs over history; Camelot triumphs over not only the Middle Ages but post-bellum America. (63)

In the end, Morgan becomes a caricature of the medievalist author, a potentially delusional dreamer, his head in another time: "Exactly as I would speak of my nearest personal friends… he

spoke of… the great names of the Table Round… [how] musty and ancient he came to look as he went on!" (33). He is a sad figure, like Yeats's Oisin, abandoned in his age and out of place, recalling a lost fellowship. Yet Morgan is also comical, which places him ambiguously with regards to the question of belief and the "Philosophy of Clothes." If medieval persons and perhaps even Romantic medievalists might have beliefs worthy of an asylum, the latter may also be self-conscious performers – more properly at home in a circus than an asylum (33). The circus is, in some ways, a modern version of the carnival; Morgan's comparison of the Round Table to "a circus ring" (Moreland, 72) may not be as satirical as it initially seems. Moreland notes, "Hank must acknowledge his love of the spectacular, theatrical, and stylish, though ruefully identifying it as 'the crying defect of my character' … Hank acts upon what he self-consciously identifies as 'the circus side of my nature'" (73).

Making a joke of medievalism was, by the time of Twain's writing, perhaps entirely understandable. All the rational arguments in the world had already failed to dispel this powerful spectre; and seancers continued to conjure without any apparent difficulty. Perhaps humour was the only response left. Yet in his cataclysmic skepticism Twain only paved the way for further medievalism, as an even more skeptical perspective served as the very foundation of the literary works of perhaps the single most influential medievalist writer of the twentieth century, Lord Dunsany. The unlikely intermediary stage was the supposed idealist, William Morris, who represented everything that Twain was satirizing. Twain shared Morris's commitment to advocating on behalf of the oppressed, and yet advocated political conclusions which were quite opposed to those of Morris.

V. To the World's End and Beyond: Mapping Morris's Receding Utopia

In the Middle Ages Morris saw noble savages, but for Twain even the nobles were savage. Both used time travel and dream-vision to discuss the direction of social change. This device allowed for new experimentation with genre, which freed medievalist romances from the conventions of retelling. Ultimately, these literary innovations came from the point of view of skepticism, and paved the way for the rise of literary mythopoeia a decade later. Morris had spent his literary career in search of an ideal – the Earthly Paradise. Where might it be located? The far west, the medieval past of England or Iceland, a utopian future? Morris was, like Keats, a self-aware Romantic dreamer, and he vacillated from doubt to belief and back again. His final disillusionment corresponded with his locating of the ideal world only in dreams.

For much of the 1880s, Morris threw himself into political activism with characteristic vigour. Yet after a decade spent speaking, writing, protesting, and organizing, he had become disillusioned with the socialist movement. Violent repression (i.e. "Bloody Sunday" in November of 1887) and both ideological and methodological divergence led to fragmentation, and by the end of the 1880s Morris no longer believed that the revolution would occur in his lifetime. Indeed, this is reflected in the romances; Tony Pinkney writes that in the revised 1891 edition of *News from Nowhere*, Morris "pushes back some of the political dates in the text, which may be an index of a growing pessimism" (n.pag.). Indeed, when a German archaeologist wrote to Morris asking about *Wolfings*, Morris's response shows his disillusionment: "Doesn't the fool realize… it's a romance, a work of fiction… it's all LIES!" (Shippey 2007 286). Thompson notes that after the turbulent 1880s, Morris was happy to return to his former artistic focus and go for walks in the woods (513-514).

Morris's translations were arguments for heritage status, and he framed *Sigurd, Wolfings*, and *Mountains* in the same way. Yet *The Glittering Plain* takes place in an alternate medieval world which does not claim to be historical, nor does the story explain its supernatural element. Morris slowly abandoned his faith in a revolutionary future, resulting in a shift in his imaginative life from utopianism to apolitical dreams which left practical questions behind. This resulted in the "Dream" romances, his final literary contribution and innovation. From the Historical romances to the Time Travel romances and finally the Dream/Fantasy romances, Morris's attitude toward his own work changed significantly, particular its relation to history and its status as literature. *The Glittering Plain* marks a transition; the story takes place in an invented world and concerns a hero's quest to unknown islands to recover his lost bride. The final romances, notably *The Well at the World's End* (1892) and *The Wood Beyond the World* (1894), are also set in mythic invented worlds and are concerned not with utopianism but with magic.

The shift in genre in the prose romances corresponds to Morris's fading belief in the socialist revolution. As Morris's idealism fades, the realism of his "historic" romances shades into the supernaturalism of the "dream" ones. While Morris's conversion to Marxism is often discussed by scholars, a sort of de-conversion in the late 1880s led him to return to an aesthetic rather than utopian medievalism. Morris's evolution is indicative of broader trends in medievalism – from an early and relatively uninformed enthusiasm, to an assertive, even militant utopianism, to a later disillusionment and nostalgia in which love of medieval literature had become uncoupled from claims about medieval history and society.

The question of a direct connection to the past was important; Moreland notes that American authors like Twain may have had a particular and unusual relation to literary medievalism because their country has no medieval past (99). Yet even Morris eventually

abandoned the concept of direct historicity; and as we shall see next chapter, even the Irish Lord Dunsany ascribed little historical value to the past, choosing instead to view medievalism in purely literary terms. Taken together, these simulated sagas and romances introduce satire and speculation, and indicate a total intellectual shift which can be summarized as the abandonment of literalism. Historicity, primitivism, and nationalism all fell away. Twain, Haggard, and Morris approached these issues in different ways, but their most influential innovation was the shift in genre to simulation and the newfound freedom that came with it. In 1906 Lord Dunsany, following in the tradition of thought experiment and time travel established here, imagined a conversation in which a medieval king asks a prophet about his future life, should he achieve immortality. The prophet replies that he will see the rise and fall of his own legend, and survive into modernity, a time when kings are abandoned and the hyperbolic and fictional nature of legends has been exposed; a time when people no longer believe in heroes like him:

> When all that spake with thee of thine old deeds are dead, those that saw them not shall speak of them again to thee; till one speaking to thee of thy deeds of valour add more than even a man should when speaking to a King, and thou shalt suddenly doubt whether these great deeds were; and there shall be none to tell thee. (1906 n.pag.)

Desperate and doubtful neo-Romantic medievalists had looked to Arthur and Sigurd for a medieval messiah, hoping for a firm foundation for their preferred identity, values and dreams. Yet they projected so much wishful thinking onto these heroic figures that claims of historicity were doomed to crash; the divorce of myth and history was imminent. And yet the end of naïve nineteenth-century views on medievalism was not the end of medievalism itself, for no one is better than Romantics at mourning for lost dreams.

Chapter 3

I. "The Fires of Belief Burn Low": Mythopoeia From the Embers of Mythography

A dream it is friends, and no history

Of men who ever lived; so blame me nought

If wondrous things together there are brought,

Strange to our waking world – yet as in dreams

Of known things still we dream, whatever gleams

Of unknown light may make them strange, so here

Our dreamland story holdeth such things dear

And such things loathed, as we do; else, indeed,

Were all its marvels nought to help our need

-William Morris, *The Earthly Paradise* (1868)

By the late nineteenth century, primitivist enthusiasm had swelled medievalism to a tsunami ready to crest and crash. Atop this wave were figures whose reputations are, in some cases, *still* recovering – Tennyson, Morris, the early Yeats, Dunsany. This crash left ruin in its wake, so that much of medievalist literature post-1900 was disdained, particularly as the new cultural wave of modernism gained in prestige. Criticisms of the excesses of Teutonic Democracy or Victorian Arthuriana were used to dismiss contemporary medievalism: *naïve, escapist, simplistic, adolescent*; even terms like *heroic*, *legendary* and *mythical* acquired a derogatory sense. In *A Dream of Order,* Chandler concludes her analysis of medievalism with "The Failure of the Vision" around 1900 (248). Tolkien's work is so prolific that it cannot be ignored, but under such periodization the neglect of "missing links" like Dunsany and Eddison has made it seem like this body of work appeared out of nowhere. This chapter aims to connect the aforementioned three great mythopoeic writers of the early twentieth century to their more conventionally acknowledged medievalist predecessors Morris, Tennyson, and Yeats. This

chapter follows the premise that intellectual acknowledgement of medievalism's crumbling foundations in ideological matters need not mean the defeat of *literary* medievalism; even Chandler admits that the motivation for medievalism was primarily emotional. What Anne C. Petty calls "the urge to seek unity and completion in the universe… the *mythic impulse*" (9) is ultimately psychological and subjective in nature, and remains even when attempts to build an objective scaffolding of ideology around it collapse. Instead, this very collapse enabled a far more radical creativity than medievalism had featured before.

At the end of Robert Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" (1855), the titular character discovers his forebears, all the old legendary figures of medieval literature.

> Names in my ears
>
>   Of all the lost adventurers my peers, –
>
> How such a one was strong, and such was bold,
>
> And such was fortunate, yet each of old
>
>   Lost, lost! one moment knell'd the woe of years.
>
> There they stood, ranged along the hill-sides, met
>
>   To view the last of me, a living frame
>
>   For one more picture! in a sheet of flame
>
> I saw them and I knew them all. (194-202)

One interpretation is that this represents Browning's commentary on how his age was losing its faith in the traditions of the past, which formerly made life meaningful; such an interpretation would not be entirely unprecedented in the annals of Victorian literature. Perhaps it is true that the "sheet of flame" incinerated idealistic beliefs as symbolized by the heroes of legendary tradition, as Browning feared. Yet like the phoenix, in the early twentieth century mythopoeia

arose from the ashes of mythography. Indeed, rather than retelling legends which came at the end of a long mythical tradition, medievalist writers began to invent their own mythical traditions.

Thus, although the Romantic illusion of a lost golden age had faded and cynicism was now the fashion, medievalism did not admit defeat. The intellectual freedom that came with the collapse of Victorian idealism led to aesthetic freedom – the chance to create without concern for convention, fashion, posterity, politics, morals, or bothering to appear *avant-garde*. Thus, this low ebb of medievalism's respectability produced some of its boldest literature. As skepticism of primitivism increased, medievalist authors responded by loosening the connection between their works and any direct historical, political, or metaphysical claims. This resulted in the emergence of a major new genre in literary medievalism: mythopoeia, or artificial mythology.

Approaching the year 1900 medievalist writers, rejecting the strong historical, cultural, or metaphysical claims which had previously characterized medievalism, arrived at self-consciously invented medieval worlds. Here Morris was a key contributor one last time. He hinted at a mythopoeic direction when, disillusioned with politics at the end of his life, he set his prose romances in fictional worlds which, although modelled on the medieval North Atlantic, were neither identical to it nor stated to be it. Lin Carter thus calls him the creator of modern fantasy: "Morris invented the imaginary-world novel… [with] his pioneering romances, which are laid in Medieval worldscapes completely his own invention" (7-8).

Despite the influence of Morris, Yeats did not follow his friend's final path toward skepticism and fantasy, but instead reaffirmed all the nineteenth-century Romantic ideals attached to medievalism. With "Down by the Salley Gardens" (1889), Yeats tried to "reconstruct an old song from three lines imperfectly remembered by an old peasant woman" (Abrams and Greenblatt 2024). Like his predecessors of a century ago, Yeats idealizes rural life as the

wellspring of uncorrupted traditions, a gateway to a lost golden age: "In the beginning the earth was perhaps made to fulfil the desire of man, but now it has got old and fallen into decay" (86). Yet in "The Fisherman," Yeats admits that he invented his idealized Irish fisherman archetype. He is more skeptical than his Welsh contemporary Arthur Machen (1863-1947), who similarly uses ideas of ethnic-linguistic essentialism to assert a Romanticized link to nature and the past:

> It has struck me that many people in reading some of the phrases that I have reported will dismiss them with laughter as very poor and fantastic inventions; fishermen, they will say, do not speak of 'a song like heaven' or of 'a glory about it.' And I dare say this would be a just enough criticism if I were reporting English fishermen; but, odd though it may be, Wales has not yet lost the last shreds of the grand manner…. [Welsh fishermen] come trailing, let us say, fragments of the cloud of glory in their common speech… [of] the things that were reported were of their ancient rite and former custom. (249)

This "Argument from Welsh" appears to have been enough to convince Tolkien, who thought that Welsh was the "natural language" even of English people who did not know a word of it. Shippey explains, "Tolkien said that he had only needed to see a vocabulary-list of Gothic for his heart to be taken by storm…. [S]omething of the sort had flashed on him at the sight of Welsh names on English coal-trucks" (129). The ethnic-linguistic essentialism shared by Yeats, Machen and Tolkien entails the belief that legends and language somehow live in the blood (and soil).

Like Blake, or Morris at his most idealistic, Yeats similarly hoped that a cultural awakening would provoke a political uprising against the greed and oppression of his own time. Yeats, however, interjected true supernaturalism into his view of the legacy of the past, with his lifelong interest in the occult as demonstrated by *A Vision*. With Yeats we encounter the full list of Romantic ideals attached to literary medievalism: ethnic-linguistic essentialism, true love,

nationalism, revolutionary politics, supernaturalism, nature-worship, and primitivism. Like Blake, Yeats consciously cultivated naïveté and claimed epistemological independence from the science of his time. As Katherine Ebury comments, "Blake's anti-materialist, mystical aesthetic was certainly a profound influence on Yeats" (32). For both writers, the convergence of radical creativity with radical epistemology is no coincidence. Indeed, Yeats opens *The Wanderings of Oisin And Other Poems* (1889) with a quotation from Blake: "The stars are threshed, and the souls are threshed from their husks." This is a direct assertion of anthropomorphism and the precedence of consciousness (the soul) over empirical reality (the body, a mere husk). This is the permission Romantics give themselves to believe in "consciousness as our fundamental reality… [so that] we are free to speculate on the ultimate problems of metaphysics" (xxii), as Eddison put it in *A Fish Dinner in Memison*.

Yeats attached a metaphysical significance to his creativity to as great a degree as Tolkien, who similarly linked essentialist views on language to nationalism. In "To Ireland in the Coming Times" (1892), Yeats assessed his hoped-for contributions to Ireland's cultural history:

Know, that I would accounted be

True brother of that company,

Who sang to sweeten Ireland's wrong,

Ballad and story, ran and song. (1-4)

Similarly, in *The Silmarillion* Tolkien explained that he aimed "to make 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 simply to: to England, to my country" (xii). Both felt that they were uncovering a deeper truth in their mythologies, rather than inventing, and both spent a great deal of time thinking about elves. Perhaps the most remarkable feature of *The Celtic Twilight* is

Yeats's own first-person accounts of encountering elves, even if this occurred in "a kind of trance, in which what we call the unreal had begun to take upon itself a masterful reality" (55). Thus Yeats metafictionally blurs the line between reality and unreality. He asks the queen of the fairies whether she and elves are merely "dramatisations of our moods" and "other questions, as to her nature, and her purpose in the universe, but only seemed to puzzle her" (56). Yeats did occasionally worry that his experiences might be hallucinations; Tolkien similarly noted, "of his own sanity no man may securely judge" (Shippey 2003 384). Yet both felt that mythology offered a connection to – and even validation of – their deepest intuitions.

In "On Fairy Stories," Tolkien similarly mentions that among his aims in his artificial mythology is to achieve "the satisfaction of certain primordial human desires," such as the desire "to hold communion with other living things" such as nature-spirits. This accounts for his depictions of the immortal, beautiful elves, who belong to the natural world that humans have become alienated from. The nature spirits Tom Bombadil and Goldberry fit this idea even more, as do the tree-like giants Toklien calls Ents. These "Speaking Races" of Middle-earth, wondrous as they seem, place humanity in an anthropomorphic, animistic reality. Yeats strikes a very Tolkienian note when he proposes the idea of ancestral memory, "a Great Memory passing on from generation to generation… an extension of one's knowledge" (345). Natural transmission of myth is unreliable; manuscripts burn or disappear, so Yeats instead proposes a sort of supernatural transmission, through dreams.

Yeats's concept of partly recovering (perhaps in dreams or visions, or even in the sense of nostalgia or déjà vu) an otherwise forgotten memory, perhaps through some sort of ancestry leading back to a higher reality, proved one of the pre-eminent concepts for Dunsany, Eddison, and Tolkien; it allowed them to overcome the sense of amnesia and disconnection from the past

that writers of their generation felt with such intensity. If one can "remember" the experience of past generations without recourse to external evidence or records, then private intuition is a deeper source of knowledge than anything else. Yeats often begins with the *feeling* invoked by "true" mythologies, and only then asserts their epistemological value.

Thus, whatever artifice might be involved in presenting and interpreting myths, artifice itself reflects some higher truth (this is metafictionality taken to the point of circularity). Yeats found music an excellent symbol of the evocative power of art, asserting of Irish folk music that:

> I seemed to hear a voice of lamentation out of the Golden Age. It told me that we are imperfect, incomplete… that the world was once all perfect and kindly, and that still the kindly and perfect world existed, but buried like a mass of roses under many spadefuls of earth. The faeries and the more innocent of the spirits dwelt within it, and lamented over our fallen world in the lamentation of the wind-tossed reeds, in the song of the birds, in the moan of the waves, and in the sweet cry of the fiddle…. [T]he best of our Moments are marred by a little vulgarity, or by a needle-prick out of sad recollection, and… the fiddle must ever lament about it all. (105)

Yeats acknowledges the origin of this concept in Celtic folklore: "Carolan slept upon a faery rath. Ever after their tunes ran in his head, and made him the great musician he was" (108). Yet even Yeats displays a contemporary interpretation of mythology: namely that myth symbolically projects human concerns onto Nature, explaining natural phenomenon that are not anthropomorphic to begin with. Haggard's description of the Norns weaving in the Northern Lights in the conclusion to *Eric Brighteyes* is a good point of comparison. Yet somehow Yeats aims to set aside this modern "metaphorical" interpretation, and instead achieve a subconscious, symbolic or even religious interpretation when it comes to aesthetics and myth.

Yeats's skeptical friend Dunsany treated very similar concepts in his own mythopoeia. Yet for Dunsany, there was no golden age, and no gods exist that humanity could have become separated from (thus explaining alienation). Thus, Dunsany is free to invent any story he likes to explain alienation; if one ascribes no epistemological value to any myths, a newly invented story is as good as any other. The sense of alienation can be expressed and explained in numerous ways, but *it* is the fact, any mythic explanation the *fiction*. For Dunsany, Romanticism is a matter of beautiful illusions, as he makes clear in a Yeatsian passage in *The King of Elfland's Daughter*:

> [She] sang a melody like a wind in summer blowing from wild wood gardens that no man tended, down valleys loved once by children, now lost to them but for dreams, a song of such memories as lurk and hide along the edges of oblivion, now flashing from beautiful years a glimpse of some golden Moment, now passing swiftly out of remembrance again, to go back to the shades of oblivion, and leaving on the mind those faintest traces which when dimly perceived by us are called regrets… Alveric wondered… if this were the ghost of some day lost to man, called up by the force of her song from times that were fairer. (6)

The passage from Dunsany's 1924 novel echoes Yeats's passage above from 1889, either from having read Yeats or because both were Irish writers of a generation drawing on a common store of lore and a common cultural framework for approaching it. Yet for Dunsany the fact that the song makes Alveric wonder if such an age existed is only a testament to its aesthetic power, rather than evidence for any such age. For Dunsany, beauty is not "a gateway out of the net we were taken in at our birth" as Yeats had hoped – but it was still beauty.[37] Where Yeats believed in a *real* lost divine design and golden age, for Dunsany, Eddison, and Tolkien, both are self-consciously *invented*. By separating aesthetics from belief, they moved past Victorian idealism.

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[37] See discussion of Yeats's ideas on beauty on page 49.

II. "Cities Resting Upon Nothing, Having No Place in Time": Dunsany's Radical Whimsy

During the late nineteenth century, Nietzsche famously denounced the long prevalence of monotheistic orthodoxy in Christian Europe: "Since then they have failed to *create* a God! Almost two millennia and not a single new God!" (qtd. in Joshi 1995 86). The situation was shortly to be remedied. Medievalist writers have always used the gods to express their generation's intellectual concerns – from the Romantic lament for the passing of the pagan gods (which was really a lament for the lost illusions of the pre-industrial world) to the notion of absent or indifferent gods prompted by Darwin's ideas. Whereas the Romantics had lamented the loss of the gods, and the Victorians had tried in vain to conjure them like ghosts during a séance, now mythopoeists conjured them freely, and striking new creation myths appeared out of nowhere. Yeats called freedom fantasy's "breath of life" (1998 37), yet he ultimately represents a conservative medievalism, in line with nineteenth-century conceptions at exactly the time that his contemporaries were abandoning such views. The freedom Yeats wrote of was an attempt to assert independence from empiricism in order to commune with spirits or supernatural influences that scientists would consider unreal. But Dunsany was bound to no ideology at all, and he demonstrated a radical new conception of freedom based on accepting empiricism.

In 1905 Dunsany published *The Gods of Pegāna*. This strikingly original volume introduces an entire invented pantheon of deities, casually giving them temporal and epistemological precedence over any other gods humans may have envisioned in the past and with no concern for how seriously humans may still take such gods. There is a clear relationship between Dunsany's radical philosophy and his radical whimsy. With serene indifference and startling creativity, Dunsany introduces and destroys an entire universe on page 1:

Before there stood gods upon Olympus, or ever Allah was Allah, had wrought and

rested MANA-YOOD-SUSHAI. [whose dream is our cosmos]

….But at the Last will MANA-YOOD-SUSHAI forget to rest, and will make

again new gods and other worlds, and will destroy the gods whom he hath made. And the

gods and the worlds shall depart, and there shall be only MANA-YOOD-SUSHAI.

Having conjured a new metaphysical orthodoxy from precisely the same location as all the previous ones asserted by "the metaphysicians of the ages," to borrow Nietzsche's phrase, Dunsany then destroys this too in his sequel, *Time and the Gods* (1906), with tales of different gods, conflicting and contradictory gods, powers above the gods, imaginary gods, and untrustworthy priests and poets. Thus, while aesthetically and creatively taking a similar path to Blake (and moreover sharing Blake's distaste for industrialism and urban life), Dunsany's intellectual views are much more in line with the tradition of the dissident Romanticism of Keats, Swinburne, and Nietzsche. Indeed, the title of *Time and the Gods* (1906) comes from a line in Swinburne's poem "Hymn to Proserpina" (1866): "Time and the Gods are at Strife" (19). Dunsany realized this only later, an appropriate situation given his mythology's dominant theme of amnesia and recovered memories. Moreover, an anonymous reviewer's assessment of Swinburne applies perfectly to Dunsany: "A faith that laughs at itself, that insults its own deities and defiles its own temples – this is the wildest and dreariest aberration of all" (Schweizer 101).

Time and the Gods satirizes its predecessor, which was already full of satire. In "The Sayings of Kib," Dunsany satirizes the basis of religious faith: accepting any book's claim to total epistemological credibility: "Because this is written, believe! For is it not written, or are you greater than Kib? Kib is Kib" (1905 n.pag.). The tautology of Holy Writ is ingeniously clear here; replace "God" with "Kib." Has a religious metaphysics ever been dismissed more

efficiently? Dunsany's "Sayings of Kib" moreover acknowledges that evolution took place: "out of beasts he [Kib] made them [humans], and Earth was covered with Men" (1905 n.pag.).

Dunsany places human life in a cosmic context. When a man is afraid of Mung (the God of Death), whom all must meet eventually, Mung asks: "Were the forty million years before thy coming intolerable to thee? Not less tolerable to thee shall be the forty million years to come!" (1905 n.pag.). This may be inspired by Mark Twain's quotation, "Annihilation has no terrors for me, because I have already tried it before I was born – a hundred million years – and I have suffered more in an hour, in this life, than I remember to have suffered in the whole hundred million years put together" (1959 272). When the man wishes he had taken another path in life, Mung explains that this is not possible, since *this* reality is deterministic:

> Had it been possible for thee to go by any other way then had the Scheme of Things been otherwise and the gods had been other gods. When MANA-YOOD-SUSHAI forgets to rest and makes again new gods it may be that They will send thee again into the Worlds; and then thou mayest choose some other way, and not meet with Mung. (1905 n.pag.)

This speculation on multiple realities can be located somewhere between Hinduism and multiverse theory. Yet despite the expanded consciousness which Dunsany derives from science, the Romantic roots of his mythopoeia are clear as he evokes Death on a riverbank at dawn: "Mung walketh in all places at all times. But mostly he loves to walk in the dark and still, along the river mists when the wind hath sank, a little before night meeteth with the morning upon the highway between Pegāna and the Worlds" (1905 n.pag.). In the Romantic tradition of a radical politics which disdains divine right, Mung satirically displays proper etiquette before royalty: "Mung entereth the poor man's cottage; Mung also boweth very low before The King. Then do the Lives of the poor man and of The King go forth among the Worlds" (1905 n.pag.).

From such a position of distrust of authority, Dunsany's view of organized religion is obvious: he describes how charlatans exploit humanity's fear of death to achieve power in "The Chaunt of the Priests" who, it turns out, have one thing to say: "Bring ye gifts to the Priests, gifts to the Priests of Mung" (1905 n.pag.). Similarly, in "The Sign of Mung," a man claims power over death, so that those who submit themselves to him will live eternally; but the lie is plain when he himself dies. Dunsany's early work is Nietzschean in its concern over nihilism, its blending of disparate mythologies, its use of the prophetic voice, and its overthrown deities. Joshi calls Dunsany's early collections "a fascinating farrago of biblical sonority and very advanced philosophical views – Nietzsche in a Fairy Tale" (46). Like Nietzsche, Dunsany approached mythology, religion, parable and prophecy with a radically inventive attitude. As Marion Gibson writes in *Imagining the Pagan Past* (2013), "There is something especially daring in imagining a deity, of any kind" (5). Even after the laments for overthrown gods of Keats, Swinburne, and Nietzsche, Dunsany's vision of fading divinities has a striking pathos:

> At last thou shalt come to a grey place filled with mist, with grey shapes standing before it which are altars, and on the altars rise small red flames from dying fires… These are the altars of the people's faiths, and the flames are the worship of men, and through the mist the gods of Old go groping in the dark and in the cold. There thou shalt hear a voice cry feebly: 'Inyăni, Inyăni, lord of the thunder, where art thou, for I cannot see?' And a voice shall answer faintly in the cold: 'O maker of many worlds, I am here.' (1906 126)

This is only one of many prophets in "The Journey of the King," each with a different vision. Schweitzer writes, "the story doesn't particularly mean anything. It merely *is* for its own sake" (12). He moreover claims that the sections do not provide a cumulative conclusion: "A long story is not merely a short story stretched out longer. It must have greater complexity and a

larger overall structure to accommodate it. But this piece is merely one vignette after another, all strung together by the device of the prophecies" (12). Actually, the parts do add up to a greater whole, one which explains Dunsany's view of the mythical past perfectly: accounts of the gods, the cosmos, and the soul's journey, have *only* aesthetic worth. "The Journey of the King" offers a metafictional key to Dunsany's creative inspiration, founded on his attitude toward tradition: if the old gods were only projections, then new ones can be projected and will be just as valid.

Another of the prophets thus relates a competing, contradictory creation myth in which nothing exists but a race of gods, who slowly die of sorrow over their incapacity to create. When only the youngest and least of them, Shimono Káni, is left, he makes a harp from his fellows' corpses and composes a lament for the lost gods and their dreams. His performance of that song is the universe we inhabit, merely the mournful echo of an impossible design: "And the dirge and the voices crying, go drifting away from the Path of Stars, away from the Midst of Things, till they come twittering among the Worlds... And every note is a life, and many notes become caught up among the worlds to be entangled with flesh for a little while" (1906 142). This myth explains experiences which have been obsessed over in the Romantic tradition, such as alienation. It explains artistic inspiration; Dunsany even uses it to explain déjà vu:

> Although in the prison houses of earth all memories must die, yet as there sometimes clings to a prisoner's feet some dust of the fields wherein he was captured, so sometimes fragments of remembrance cling to a man's soul after it hath been taken to earth. Then a great minstrel arises, and, weaving together the shreds of his memories, maketh some melody such as the hand of Shimono Káni smites out of his harp; and they that pass by say: 'Hath there not been some such melody before?' and pass on sad at heart for memories which are not. (1906 143)

This myth uses the idea of echoes of a lost divinity to explain the timeless conviction, so emphasized by Romanticism and so wronged by modernity, that the world *should* match our intuitions. This prioritization of subjectivity can easily lead to epistemological chaos; one of the prophets claims that "only dreams are real," and that after death dreams alone will exist:

> Thou shalt build palaces and cities resting upon nothing and having no place in time, not to be assailed by the hours or harmed by ivy or rust, not to be taken by conquerors, but destroyed by thy fancy if thou dost wish it so or by thy fancy rebuilded. (1906 138)

One prophet says all people have come into the world from a "Sea of Souls" (1906 127). Souls return to the sea when their bodies die, and the Sea provides souls when the living are born:

> Into this sea from fields of battle and cities come down the rivers of lives, and ever the gods have taken onyx cups and far and wide into the worlds again have flung the souls out of the sea, that each soul may find a prison in the body of a man with five small windows closely barred, and each one shackled with forgetfulness. (1906 128)

The five windows are obviously the senses, and the soul is trapped in a prison with only these inadequate ways of gathering information about the world, though its divine origin can still be witnessed in dreams. Yet in this world all is forgotten except for the longing that causes the king to consult the prophets in the first place. This prophet belittles human sensory perception and projects meaning outside of human life; like several of Dunsany's Romantic predecessors, he asserts that imagination and intuition are *epistemologically* superior to empiricism.

Another prophet tells the king that he will be blessed with bodily immortality, but Dunsany's interpretation is similar to Tennyson's "Tithonus." The king's life will last so many centuries that he will live into modernity and he will experience all of its doubts, he who was once a medieval king thinking himself safe in the bosom of the gods (1906 155). He will see the

fragmentation and corruption of history; he will see his own deeds and words distorted, doubted, and forgotten, before knowledge of the same is claimed anew in a manner unrecognizable to him who was there; he will doubt himself (1906 156). Disconnected from history, he will feel only despair over beliefs departed; alone among the ruins of gigantic industrial cities, he will "pine for air and the waving grass again and the sound of a wind in trees. Then even this shall end with the shapes of the gods in the darkness gathering all lives… when the hills shall fling up the earth's long stored heat back to the heavens again" (1906 158).

This resembles a science fiction account of mass extinction more than any mythic apocalypse. The king is not inquiring into the fortunes of his species, kingdom, or dynasty. Instead, he asks the timeless questions of mythology: how the cosmos began, where humans come from, the nature of the soul's journey, what is humanity's place in the world and relationship to the divine. Each prophet relates a beautiful myth describing a metaphysics of meaning, each drawing on imagination, intuition, and dreams. Each provides, in Chandler's terms, "A Dream of Order." The prophets attempt to explain why humans have certain hopes and intuitions, and why the world does not match them; yet still, their stories fail to satisfy the king.

Near the end of the story, the king reveals the sort of answer he *wanted* to the questions he asked: "I had hoped, O prophet, that those gods that had smiled upon my childhood, Whose voices stirred at evening in gardens when I was young, would hold dominion still when at last I came to seek Them" (1906 174). The king contrasts his pastoral longings with the modern view of the universe: "The gods that have made me to love the earth's cool woods and dancing streams do ill to send me into the starry spaces that I love not, with my soul still peering earthward through the eternal years, as a beggar who once was noble staring from the street at lighted halls" (1906 153). Here the king makes the metaphor of a "dethroning" in accepting

modern scientific views on humanity's place in the universe and among the tree of life: we are no longer central as we once imagined ourselves to be, with the earth as our dominion.

But the king's intellectual conclusion is even more devastating than his emotional disappointment; he attaches no epistemological value at all to the prophets' radically ambitious and mutually exclusive claims about existence. This is a modern atheist's view of religion: "Prophets of my Kingdom," he explains, "you have not prophesied alike, and the words of each prophet condemn his fellows' words so that *wisdom may not be discovered among prophets*" (1906 177, italics added). Beautiful and resonant as the myths may be, there is nothing to distinguish one from another epistemologically; all are projections with no value but an aesthetic one. Thus the king identifies two ways to go where he wanted to go through religion: art and intoxication. He tells the prophets, "ye shall perceive that the power of my wine is greater than all your spells, and dancing more wondrous than prophecy" (1906 177).

One of the king's performers then sings "of an island builded by magic out of pearls, that lay set in a ruby sea, and how it lay far off and under the south, guarded by jagged reefs whereon the sorrows of the world were wrecked and never came to the island" (1906 177). After all the prophets' visions, the vision of this "idle singer of an empty day" differs only in that it is self-admittedly artificial. In the end, the king rejects all of the prophets' stories; his investigation of religion and metaphysics is at an end. He assesses them as illusions, and opts instead for art and intoxication as *honest* illusions. This king represents Dunsany himself: although he is sympathetic to the prophets, he is not so seduced by the beauty of their myths that he will grant them actual belief. Moreover, his skeptical attitude gives him the freedom to create anew at the same level as the prophets: to compare himself to Dante.

For Dunsany there is no Fall from Grace or Golden Age and Decline, as in Christianity or its secular historical equivalent, primitivism. There never was a perfect world which was then sabotaged by a malevolent force (whether this is Satan or industrial capitalism). Dunsany himself is clearly immersed in just such Romantic sentiments of loss and alienation, and recovery through myth and "fancy" or "romance" on the other; he even confessed to the feeling that with his works he was not making stories up but instead simply relating the "history of lands I had known in forgotten wanderings" (Schweitzer 10). Unlike Yeats, Dunsany attributes no intellectual credibility to such feelings on account of their intensity. Indeed, in his edition of Dunsany's tales, Yeats wished that Dunsany "could bring his imagination into the old Irish legendary world instead of those magic lands of his with their vague Eastern air; but even as I urged him I knew that he could not, without losing his rich beauty of careless suggestion" (iii). Yeats recognized that Dunsany worked with "the persons and images that for ancestry have all those romantic ideas that are somewhere in the background of all our minds" (iii), but for Yeats mythology was the basis for metaphysical assertions. Dunsany's apolitical, purely literary mythopoeia left Yeats's preferences for vitalism, supernaturalism and nationalism unfulfilled.

To use Yeats's phrasing, the "rich beauty" of Dunsany's early work is only *possible* because of the "careless suggestion" of his philosophical detachment. Instead, Dunsany admits that we imaginatively project beauty, romance and mystery onto times and places we do not inhabit: "There is no beauty or romance or mystery in the sea except for the men that sail abroad upon it, and those who stay at home and dream of them" (1908 n.pag.). For Dunsany beauty, romance and mystery are all defined by *distance* – exactly the factor which creates inaccuracy, rumour, and fragmentation, and thus leaves room for dreaming and projection. Dunsany *begins* with the premise that there is no "Earthly Paradise" past the western horizon.

"The Sorrow of Search" portrays the search for ultimate meaning characteristic of mythology, religion, and Romanticism, as inherently futile: "It is told that the traveler came at last to the utter End and there was a mighty gulf, and in the darkness at the bottom of the gulf one small god crept, no bigger than a hare, whose voice came out in the cold: 'I know not'" (1906 50-51). In Dunsany's early work our entire universe is but one dream among many; the gods themselves are dreams, and they invent humanity and make us fight just to pass the time. One of Dunsany's favourite themes is the futility of prayer: time and again, his characters try to negotiate with forces above themselves. Yet the only thing learned is the futility of the attempt. Dunsany's characters, thinking themselves mighty, chase phantoms until they are forced to stare into the abyss – and it stares back. Like Nietzsche in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883-1891), Dunsany creates a new mythology which speaks the same symbolic language as what it would parody or displace. Schweitzer comments, "In some irrational, obscure way it *fits*. That part of the awareness which perceives things religious responds to it" (9). Dunsany's hypnotic fables thus bear a distinctly post-Nietzschean relationship to the Romantic tradition in their skepticism. Only from the radical perspective of a Zarathustra can one so fearlessly juggle the myths of many ages. Carelessly mixing classical myth, Celtic lore, Hinduism, the King James Bible, Romanticism, modern science, anti-clerical satire, and wistful nihilism, Dunsany's whimsical mythopeia tears down all of our self-aggrandizement in a serene cataclysm of the spirit.

If Yeats followed Tennyson at his most hopeful (or deluded), Dunsany took Tennyson's doubts as foundational. Tennyson had metafictionally equated art and magic as forces that seem to give the world the order which we seek – even if this order is an illusion. The similarities between Tennyson and Dunsany do not end at "Lord." Dunsany's "In the Land of Time" reads like an extension of Tennyson's phrase, "The war of Time against the soul of man" (GL) – a war

in which an ambitious king besieges the castle of the malevolent Time, who defends it with decades. Moreover, both writers glimpse an idealized life in childhood, myths, and dreams – a vision which must slowly fade. Tennyson writes of a vanishing twilight "Gleam" of mythic experience in the autobiographical "Merlin and the Gleam," and Dunsany writes of an "Elfland" whose borders with reality actually recede over time. Dunsany builds upon Tennyson's metafictional framing, in a context not just of lurking doubt, but of disbelief and fragmentation.

Believing in no great nationalism, no golden age or grand ideology, in no religion nor metaphysics, Dunsany's framing was as contradictory, whimsical and inventive as his tales themselves: some are dreams, visions, or hallucinations; others are a primordial "pre-mythology" and share points of reference with world history and myth; and still others are the metafictional inventions of schizophrenic prophets and other unreliable narrators. Dunsany's metafictionality is relentless: as he is inventing myths he is also nonchalantly undermining his own inventions. "The Fortress Unvanquishable, Save For Sacnoth," for example, concludes in this self-undermining manner:

> This is the tale… as it is told and believed by those who love the mystic days of old.
>
> Others have said, and vainly claim to prove, that a fever came to Allathurion, and went away; and that this same fever drove Leothric into the marshes by night, and made him dream there and act violently with a sword.
>
> Others say that there hath been no town of Allathurion… that Leothric never lived.
>
> Peace to them. The gardener hath gathered up this autumn's leaves. Who shall see them again, or who wot of them? And who shall say what hath befallen in the days of long ago? (1910 n.pag.).

Was there ever a Leothric? Was there ever a King Arthur, or a Sigurd the Volsung? The question is naïve and the answer is irrelevant. Concluding a dreamlike invented legend framed by doubt, Dunsany tells readers that historical accounts are unreliable, evidence of the past is fragmentary, and hallucination is a likely explanation for reports of supernatural events. So much for historicity, primitivism, or any vitalistic metaphysics; only the story itself exists. A mere decade after Morris's death, this is a major intellectual leap. Skeptically abandoning even the most diluted ethnic-linguistic claims such as "heritage status" arguments, Dunsany dreams of "Cities Resting Upon Nothing," (art for its own sake, a temporary and illusory distraction from the void) and "Having No Place in Time" (no historical context or relationship to human history at all).

In a time of renewed nationalism, Dunsany's relationship to Irish tradition was complex and was sometimes considered iconoclastic, like Halldór Laxness (1902-1998) later in Iceland. In "Idle Days on the Yann," Dunsany's narrator gives his nation as Ireland, in Europe, only to be told "There are no such places in all the lands of dream" (2004 146).[38] They laugh at Dunsany's deluded narrator who thinks that the the "real world" is real, until he tells them of places where his "fancy" dwells: "When I said this they complimented me upon the abode of my fancy, saying that, though they had never seen these cities, such places might well be imagined" (146). A striking aspect of this story, and the logical end-point of Dunsany's radical whimsy, is that it was inspired by the river Nile – *before* Dunsany had even gone there (Schweitzer 24). Considering life in a profound sense as a sort of dream or hallucination, Dunsany was not inclined to take the historical, teleological or religious claims which had been attached to various mythologies seriously. In "A Shop in Go-By Street" (1919), a metafictional exchange makes this clear:

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[38] Morris's influence may be detected here, with his protagonist, the Ralph who enters dreamland in *The Well at the World's End* (1894), and Eddison used the same device to bring his protagonist Edward Lessingham to his dreamland Zimiamvia in *The Worm Ouroboros* (1922) albeit in spirit only. Perhaps the best comparison, however, is Twain's Hank Morgan. Tolkien used a similar concept in "The Lost Road" and "The Notion Club Papers" although in his case ancestral memory, rather than spirit travel, accounted for the dream-visions.

'Tell me something,' I said, 'of this strange land?'

'How much do you know?' she said. 'Do you know that dreams are an illusion?'

'Of course I do,' I said. 'Every one knows that.'

'Oh no they don't,' she said, 'the mad don't know it.'

'That is true,' I said.

'And do you know,' she said, 'that Life is illusion?'

'Of course it is not,' I said, 'Life is real, Life is earnest–' (2004 170)[39]

At this point the foolish (or at least philosophically naïve) narrator is interrupted by his wise interlocutor's laughter, showing Dunsany's radical skepticism. Dunsany did not do research; he had no concern with historical accuracy; he often did not even revise his stories. Dunsany's worlds are not consistent but unfinished, not coherent but fragmentary. Joshi writes, "Dunsany has singularly little concern with the relation of his invented realms to the "real" world" (54). He is constantly inventing new relationships for his fiction to have to his "reality," with endlessly innovative framing built on metafiction. Whether this framing is the hallucinations of a madman, the prophecies of an unknown religion, the drug-induced visions of a poet, the dreams of a deity, or the hoax of a scholar, Dunsany pushed literature forward exactly because of his skepticism.

Dunsany's early mythology, with its echoes of Hinduism, classical antiquity, and Celtic lore, appears as a parody of the entire concept of an "Indo-European" root mythology, to which "the Fine Caucasian Mind" as Tennyson put it, could trace its origins to and thus affirm some bedrock identity in the face of the uncertainties of modern science and historical perspective. For Dunsany one invention is as good as another; and this perspective on the epistemological and historical value of mythology, as opposed to its aesthetic and psychological value, lies behind

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[39] Compare to Dunsany's "The King That Was Not": "But in the royal palace of Runazar, Althazar, passing suddenly out of the remembrance of the gods, became no longer a thing that was or had ever been" (1906 n.p.).

Dunsany's groundbreaking early mythopoeia. To a much greater degree than has previously been recognized, it is a response to nineteenth-century conceptions of literary tradition – one grounded in parody, satire, and a sense of the absurd which turn at the drop of a pin to poignantly sad reflections on the ephemeral nature of human existence in the style of Shakespeare and the King James Bible. Hardly has a writer been more radical and yet more traditional in the same time.

Of all the eccentric geniuses that medievalism attracted, Dunsany was perhaps the most eccentric and certainly among the most ingenious. Yet with friends like Yeats, disciples like Lovecraft, and successors like Tolkien, Dunsany was often eclipsed. His hostile relationship with Modernism did not help; his work was critically neglected after his death although, as Schweitzer notes, "in recent years has undergone a considerable revival" (155). Schweitzer attributes to Dunsany "staggering powers of invention" (8) and Carter calls him "a writer of incomparable style… the greatest of all fantasy writers" (30). From the point of view of literary medievalism, Dunsany is unique and pivotal. Despite the despair a Romantic might find in intellectual capitulation to the knowledge of science, Dunsany finds beauty in mapping new mythologies from an unprecedentedly skeptical perspective. As a modern Irishman writing about imaginary worlds, he invokes the medieval Italian Dante, retroactively interpreting even true believers as the same as him: dreamers projecting their empty ideals onto an indifferent cosmos. Dunsany's assertions that we and our world are tiny relative to extreme scales of time and space delegitimize any intellectual basis for Romantic feeling: so that only the feeling itself is still left suspended in the void, and *that* characteristically Dunsanian view is ultimately why medievalism survived culturally. Of all the writers discussed in this study, Dunsany is the most important "missing link" between nineteenth- and twentieth-century medievalism, and his work is among the most intellectually progressive and philosophically sophisticated of any medievalist writer.

III. "That Defaced, Gelded, Exiled Creation": Eddison's Invented Metaphysics

If we were Gods, able to make worlds as we chose, then fling 'em away like out-of-fashion garments, and renew them again when we pleased: what world would we have, my friend?

-E. R. Eddison, *A Fish Dinner in Memison* (1941)

After 1924's *The King of Elfland's Daughter,* Dunsany gradually abandoned medievalism, but another major English medievalist was only beginning. E. R. Eddison published the mythopoeic novel *The Worm Ouroboros* in 1922, whose opening frame device invokes Dasent's 1861 translation of *The Story of Burnt Njal* (Wawn 2007 v). He followed this with the Haggard-esque historical novel *Styrbiorn the Strong* in 1926, in which he cited Morris and Magnússon's translation *The Story of the Ere-Dwellers* (1892); as Carter remarks, "It quickly becomes obvious that Eddison was a great admirer of William Morris" (34). He also published his own version of *Egil's Saga* in 1930, thanking Sigurður Nordal, Finnur Jónsson and Bertha Philpotts in his introduction; Wawn calls Eddison "a serious and imaginative Icelandist" (2007 vi). Eddison declares his obsession with the Icelandic sagas in terms that even Morris might have found divisive: "I have graduated in a hard school these 23 years – the school of the sagas, the most bare-rock mountain type of grand epic prose the world has ever seen. Those… romanticisms of the admired Celt are, I fear, so far alien to my affections that I find it hard to do them bare justice" (Burns 18). Yet like Morris, who noted that saga prose was a good corrective to "the maundering side of medievalism" (Frith 122), Eddison did not actually write in a sparse style, but instead in an archaic style reminiscent of Malory and Shakespeare. Whereas imitating the King James Bible suited Dunsany's ominous philosophical pronouncements, Eddison imitates Shakespeare's dialogue, in which power and identity are expressed though metaphors and double meanings.

Style affects framing and suspension of disbelief, and shapes readers' understanding of where what they are reading is allegedly "from." Eddison wants readers to envision a late medieval world full of proud generals and scheming courtiers, although this world has no connection to our history. Eddison's signature work, the mythopoeic "Zimiamvia" trilogy of *Mistress of Mistresses* (1935), *A Fish Dinner in Memison* (1941), and *The Mezentian Gate* (1958), explains the world that Lessingham glimpses in *The Worm Ouroboros*. Carter finds Eddison's framing of *The Worm Ouroboros* awkward, stating that Eddison began the book "rather clumsily, and in an unnecessarily complicated fashion, with a modern-day Englishman named Lessingham who ventures to the planet Mercury in a dream…. [T]his viewpoint character is an artificial device which both the reader, and the author himself, quickly forget all about" (33). This criticism is unfair: in what book, including classic English novels like *Frankenstein* and *Wuthering Heights*, does the reader not forget about "outer" frames while reading an "inner" one? Moreover, Eddison is certainly on solid ground within literary medievalism: from Keats's "The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream" to Morris, Twain, and Dunsany, narrators have encountered and told their medieval tales through the device of the dream-vision. Moreover, Eddison uses this device to interject skepticism, or at least speculative complexity, into his mythopoeic world.

Since the entire story of *The Worm Ouroboros* takes place inside the framing of the British aristocrat Lessingham's dream, it might be termed a masculine imperialist fantasy (xiv). Moreover, in the frame narrative of *Mistress of Mistresses*, a friend of Lessingham's comments that Lessingham subscribed to a very superstitious metaphysics (1967 17). In his dream-vision, Lessingham's guide tells him that he is present only spectrally: he can never change what he observes: "Child of earth… dost think we are here in dreamland?... here thou canst not handle aught, neither make the folk ware of thee, not though thou shout thy throat hoarse. For thou and I

walk here impalpable and invisible, as it were two dreams walking" (2006 1). Like Dunsany's dreamer in "Idle Days on the Yann," Lessingham soon loses track of which world is real, which life a dream. And yet quite unlike Dunsany, Eddison locates his dreamland in our universe, on the planet Mercury. Far from "an artificial device," Eddison's location is important because it draws on the idea of other planets as parallel versions of earth also found in Ray Bradbury's "Mars Is Heaven!" (1948). This concept is at the core of Eddison's mythopoeia as a whole, as the "Zimiamvia" trilogy makes clear. Carter calls the trilogy "dull" and "talky" with its focus on philosophy and political intrigue, in contrast to *The Worm Ouroboros*, a "magnificent epic filled with swordplay and adventure" (36-37). However, in its cleverness and complexity, the trilogy is far superior; it offers the key to Eddison's mythopoeia.

In the first volume of the trilogy, *Mistress of Mistresses*, Lessingham is reborn in Zimiamvia after his death on earth. Despite Eddison's protestations, this notion of reincarnation in parallel worlds is a very Celtic idea. But *Mistress of Mistresses* hints at greater revelations than this: Lessingham is not just an individual spirit reborn in world after world, but instead merely one iteration of an ultimate spirit, endlessly reborn in endless worlds. Thus, just as his name is Lessingham in Zimiamvia, he encounters a man eerily similar to himself fighting for his enemy's army, one Duke Barganax. As in Dunsany, the sense of déjà vu is epistemologically meaningful; yet whereas Dunsany intends his metaphysical assertions satirically or parodically, Eddison is more in earnest. At the very least, Lessingham's values and emotions are Eddison's. Both mortal men, Lesisngham and Barganax, are in fact parallel manifestations of an "Eternal Masculine" spirit. Indeed, Barganax has strange memories of a life on earth during the twentieth century; he is, in fact, remembering Lessingham's life.

The "Eternal Feminine" spirit is even more powerful; she is the "chooser and giver of worlds."[40] In *A Fish Dinner in Memison*, Eddison explains the metaphysics of his invented world – and perhaps, depending on how one interprets his works, of *our* world as well. Suspecting some connection between that life and his current one, Barganax chides Fiorinda for choosing such a contemptible world as the earth of the dreams they both remember: "I think you were in a bad mood when you commissioned this one. The best I can suppose of it is that it may be some good as training ground for our next. And for our next, I hope you will think of a real one" (1969 xxvi). The Borgesian[41] ironies of all of this are deliciously confusing: within this fiction, the fictional characters in a fictional world are more real than the fictional characters whose lives take place on earth; indeed the latter are merely an echo of the former.

Eddison later confirms this account of our world's creation; the Zimiamvia characters have carelessly created earth on a whim, as an aesthetic diversion and a reflection of their mood: "Lady Fiorinda, in a dangerously irresponsible bad contrary mood… asks him [King Mezentius] to make her a strange mechanical hitherto undreamed-of world which she describes at large" (1969 179). Fiorinda bases our world on hers, but places bizarre, arbitrary limitations on it. This accounts for the imperfections of our lives in our world: earth is "the same as this world [Zimiamvia]: but crooked… spoiled" (1969 191). Earlier, Eddison explains that the King:

> did in very truth create, to her specification, this world we ourselves live in…. [T]hey saw it evolve, a large teeming bubble, as this whole material universe might present itself under the eyes of the Gods, its miniature aeons passing beneath Their immortal gaze, as millions of years condensed into half an hour…. [I]n a desire to *know* this new world from within, [they] entered it and lived out a life-time here (in our own century). (180)

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[40] Eddison includes all human characters, mortal or divine, real or fictional, in his list of archetypal manifestations.
[41] See discussion of the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) on page 187.

Eddison takes a metafictional view on mythology: books which inform readers about deities imply that we and our world existed in the minds of deities before we were created. Those deities of whom we learn in such books thus purport to be more real than ourselves; if our universe ended, they would still exist. Eddison deals with the issue head-on: when Duchess Amalie asks if the world they envisioned was real, King Mezentius responds by quoting Keats's "Lamia":

It was no dream: or say a dream it was

Real are the dreams of Gods, and smoothly pass

Their pleasures in one long immortal dream. (1968 309)

The characters in Zimiamvia recognize their world as ideal: saying with a choice of all worlds, they would choose it. *Their* world is the most beautiful; our world is ugly in comparison. Indeed, Eddison quotes Keats on beauty at the start of *The Mezentian Gate*, to the effect that a woman's beauty inspires semi-religious love (1969 vi). This appears to be the starting point for Eddison's consistent notion that in love (and in dreams and intuitions) humans can discover – or at least can *appear* to discover – evidence (purely subjective of course) of the existence of higher worlds. Keats, perhaps the most skeptical of the English Romantics, was still not very skeptical when he wrote "I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of the imagination – what the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth – whether it existed before or not" (347). This is an assertion of a one-to-one coordination from subjective intuition or even invention *to* objective truth; this is certainly a reaction against scientific empiricism. Eddison announces an ambitious set of themes: the True, the Good, and the Beautiful, and discusses the matter in terms reminiscent of Keats and Tennyson:

[Do they] relate to any objective truth, or are they empty rhetoric… expressions of vague needs, wishes, fears, appetites of us, weak children of a day, who know little of (and

matter less to) the vast, blind, indifferent, unintelligible, inscrutable, machine… on the

skirts of whose darkness our brief lives flicker for a moment and are gone? (xiii-xix)

This opposition is clearly in the intellectual genealogy of Carlyle and Tennyson. Eddison, in fact,

makes exactly the sort of total surrender to modern empiricism that Carlyle and Tennyson

dreaded: "It is not to be gainsaid that a position of complete skepticism and complete nihilism in

regard to objective truth and objective value is, logically, unassailable. But… he who takes up

that position must remain speechless… and do nothing" (1968 xxii). The problem, for Eddison,

is that empiricism, by discrediting the metaphysics upon which human values formerly rested,

leads to a sort of paralysis. But, exactly because there is nothing to believe in, one can believe

anything: Lessingham himself states that "The advantage of complete skepticism… is that,

having once reached that position, one is free: free to believe or unbelieve exactly what one

pleases" (1968 300). This might also be compared to the Nietzschean overman, who defeats the

nihilism of a modern view of human existence with his own mythmaking. In his discussion of

epistemology, ethics and aesthetics, Eddison reduces all three to aesthetics.[42] One might view

this as the sort of wishful thinking characteristic of Romanticism, but a major part of Eddison's

rejection of modern life is aesthetic in nature. Duke Barganax, the Zimiamvia "original" of

which Lessingham is a projection, condemns modern life in Morrisian terms: "I seemed to have

lived a life-time in that world… A cheap frippery of a world it was… made tolerable, as I

bethink me now, but by rumours and fore-savourings of this" (1969 195). Like Dunsany's King

in "The Journey of the King," Eddison's narrator on earth praises wine as, like dreams and art, a

gateway to another world: Wine can "mellow thought and steady the senses to a quiet where the

inner voices may be heard… whispers of that eternal sea and of that eternal spring-time towards

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[42] See Auden's discussion of Yeats's aesthetic reasons for accepting cosmological ideas in footnote 21 on page 49.

which all memories return" (1935 107).[43] Despite having forgotten these other lives, echoes of memory remain.[44] The Zimiamvia characters heap condemnation on our world; in parallel to Dunsany's reflections on amnesia, projection and disillusionment in "The Journey of the King," they refer to their lives on earth as "a prison-life… now well forgotten; and yet half tasted in remembrances which, slight, smudged, fleeting, were now blessedly lost again" (1969 191).[45] Similarly, Dunsany's prophets term our world a prison for souls which rightfully belong to a higher, more divine reality. And yet just as their manifestations in our world remember this higher reality, their manifestations in the higher reality remember their lives here. Just as Romantics are haunted by dreams of the beauty, nobility and justice of another world, that world's people are haunted by nightmares of the ugliness, futility and alienation of *our* world.

A letter of Eddison's, published as an introduction to *A Fish Dinner in Memison*, makes it clear that for him the most important choice is between a worldview which ascribes epistemological validity to humanity's deepest intuitions, particularly as encoded in myths, and a nihilistic materialism which, in his view, denies the importance of consciousness (1968 xx-xxii). By undermining the fact/fiction distinction, Eddison presents the world as a stage for various permutations of eternal archetypes. Like much anti-positivism, this is deeply solipsistic, as if "Only Dreams are Real"; it is an intellectual construct unsupported by empirical evidence, indeed "Resting Upon Nothing." There is, of course, the question of to what extent Eddison was writing metaphorically or poetically, but there is also an important distinction to be made between the various intellectual ingredients here: a deep aesthetic and psychological appreciation of mythology, a love of metaphysical speculation, and even a distaste for science and positivism. When all of these are combined, they *still* need not necessarily entail believing in metaphysics.

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[43] See discussion of Dunsnay's creation myth on page 150, and Tolkien's creation myth on page 177.
[44] See discussion of Anamnesis in mythopoeia on page 187.
[45] On the term "prison-life," see Dunsany's prophets on the body as a prison for the soul, pages 149-150.

Yet Eddison chooses to believe in, or at least suspect, the existence of a world matching his own idealism: "A very unearthly character of Zimiamvia lies in the fact that nobody wants to change it… like the saga time; there is no malaise of the soul" (1969 xii). In Zimiamvia, there is social hierarchy, but "men and women of all estates" occupy places "well fitted to their faculties and dispositions" (1969 xii). The Zimiamvia characters, at their most insightful, suspect that they must be living in the best of all possible worlds (1968 255). Yet this Panglossian perspective is soon interrupted by the villain, Vicar Horius Parry, who interjects his "brutal laugh" and comments, "I cannot speak as a God. But I'll stake my soul there's no man born will choose to be in the shoes of one judged to die some death, as (saving your presence) be flayed alive" (1968 255). It is supremely appropriate that the most evil character in Eddison's mythopoeia should bring up the Problem of Evil, in effect asking "If this is the best of all possible worlds, then why is it that I can torture people?" He *does,* in fact, torture people, to the point that he is called "The Beast of Laimak" – never to his face, of course.

In response, Eddison explains, "It may be thought that such dark and predator personages as the Vicar… are strangely accommodated…. [T]he answer surely is (and it is an old answer) that 'God's adversaries are some way his own'" (1969 xii). Like Nietzsche, Eddison uses an analogy with nature to explain such predators: "When lions, eagles, and she-wolves are let loose among such weak sheep as for the most part we be, we rightly, for the sake of our continuance, attend rather to their claws, maws, and talons than stay to contemplate their magnificences…. [Yet] they too, ideally… have their places…. [A] tedious life… were all such great eminent self-pleasuring tyrants to be banned (1969 xii-xiii). Nietzsche, of course, famously described moralities in terms of eagles and sheep. Although this sort of moral relativism (or amorality) certainly influenced Eddison, one can accept Nietzsche's creative provocation without it.

Whereas Dunsany absorbed from Nietzsche views on art, religion and Romanticism, Eddison absorbed Nietzsche's amoral veneration of heroic figures. Eddison's protagonists love war and are obsessed with honour, at the expense of moral accountability to anyone outside of their own social class. If Dunsany's foolish kings and selfish gods look ominous in the lead-up to World War I, Eddison's fanatical generals and power-hungry courtiers are positively troubling in context of both World Wars. Eddison's heroes refrain from Machiavellian deception not because it is immoral, but because it is low: "Treachery and double dealing proceed commonly from fear… [W]hen the high Gods made a person of my quality they traced between his two eyes something… which the common sort durst not look upon without trembling" (2006 347). This is Nietzschean megalomania, an attempt to replace fallen gods with supermen, and Zimiamvia itself is a sort of Valhalla. Just as the slain warriors in Valhalla return from death so that they may battle endlessly, Eddison's eternal masculine spirits reappear to fight countless worlds on countless worlds while his eternal feminine spirits satirize, scheme, and seduce. Yet on earth, "That Defaced, Gelded, Exiled Creation" where people are weak, it is rational to dismiss the epistemological claims of all the world's religions, despite the gleams of meaning in their myths.

Thus, despite his own private metaphysical beliefs, Lessingham himself rejected religion while alive. For example, when a religious conservative tells him, "you are fundamentally immoral. And unreligious," Lessingham responds, "I have never professed to have any morals whatsoever" (1968 284). Lessingham's paramour states that only "quibbling cheap-jacks" "hold out to poor mankind hopes of… immortality of persons" which has been "whittled away to the barest improbability" (1967 8). Lessingham's best friend agrees with rejecting religion on the Nietzschean grounds that it is balm for the desperate and weak-minded: "Because there is no wine, it is better to go thirsty than lap sea-water" (1967 9). In other words, those of Lessingham's

party reject religion; and they do so even in the face of death. Thus, when Lessingham lies dead, his best friend has no words of comfort because he is an unbeliever. Instead, he simply quotes Swinburne's "Ballad of Death" (1967 7).

Yet despite his skepticism, he still hopes that perhaps Lessingham's intuitions, hopes and speculations about reincarnation may hold some truth: "I could almost cheat reason to believe there was in very truth eternity in these things: substance and everlasting life in what is more transient and unsubstantial than a mayfly" (1967 4). He assesses Lessingham's beliefs as "Rank bad philosophy" but notes the power of myth to motivate creativity; Lessingham's imagination was his Tennysonian "Palace of Art":

> It was out of such marsh-fires that he built up in the secret places of his mind… a palace
>
> of pleasure or house of heart's desire, a creed, a myth, a fabric of pure poetry, more solid
>
> in its specifications and more concrete in its strange glorious fictions and vanities beyond
>
> opium or madness than this world is, and this life that we call real. (1967 15)

In the tradition of Keats, Nietzsche and Dunsany, Eddison metafictionally confesses that Romantics like Lessingham are often seduced by the intensity of their own visions; yet even denying their visions' epistemological credibility, these visions possess power and beauty. Even if "he followed will-o'the-wisps in metaphysics," in every respect, Lessingham "moulded life to his dreams" (1967 16). For Eddison, one must choose to "Follow the gleam," as Tennyson puts it in "Merlin and the Gleam"; the alternative is to dwell on "dust and ashes" as in *In Memoriam*.

The message is similar to *In Memoriam*: war, death and suffering have evolutionary roots. Eddison's invented sage, Doctor Vandermast, is aware of the deep scale of time and can converse with shape-shifting nature-spirits (Anthea and Campaspe) who are ten million years old (1967 116). As a scientist, he takes a dim view of belief in reincarnation: "that vision beyond the

veil … is but impossibility, fiction and vanity" (1967 119). Nevertheless, the Lady Fiorinda, the character most aware of reincarnation and most able to remember other lives (1967 269), dismisses his arcane pronouncements humorously: "Truly, I could listen to him a whole summer's night and ne'er tire of his preposterous nonsense" (1967 110). The scientist-figure is limited: his attitude of rationality and respect for evidence makes him an outsider relative to the memories, dreams and intuitions which really do carry some metaphysical significance.

Eddison takes a very Nietzschean middle ground on the conflict between science and religion: science is insufficiently imaginative to understand the most meaningful aspects of human life, and the truly great creative thinker is haunted by intuitions comparable to those found in the world's mythologies; yet only weak-minded lackeys actually believe in religion. On earth, Lessingham's servant's banal mention of Jesus upon the death of his wife is one example, but another occurs in Zimiamvia itself. When defeated in battle and hounded by enemies, the Lords Juss and Brandoch Daha escape into a mountain range so dangerous that no one dare follow them. They have with them the lackey Mivarsh. Among towering glaciers haunted by sinister supernatural monsters, the Lords do not fear death, only lack of glory, but Mivarsh is terrified. He prays to his gods, whom Eddison satirically names Shlimphli, Shlamphi, and Shebamri. This only demonstrates how pathetic he is, crying "for help unto his mumbo-jumbos, where no help was" (2006 172). Eddison was likely inspired by Dunsany's "Chu-Bhu and Sheemish," which relates the petty rivalry between the titular two gods. They are only small idols with a dim consciousness, just like the pieces of garbage outside the city walls whose spirits converse with in Dunsany's "Blagdaross." Shlimphli, Shlamphi, Shebamri, Sheemish or Chu-Bhu; Eddison and Dunsany display a wonderful sense of how silly religion can be.

Instead, Eddison's characters find their proper attitude toward death in Norse literature. As Lessingham prepares for his last battle he comments that the situation is "like the Twilight of the Gods" (1967 355), and Eddison provides a quotation in Old Norse. Duchess Amalie tells King Mezentius, "Death we know not: but without that unknown, to look it in the eye, even as did Hogni, and even as did Gunnar after, when he was cast into the worm-close [snake-pit]: without that, I wonder, could there be greatness of heart and courage in the world?" (1968 260). This reference to the brave and defiant death of the Niblungs in the Volsung legend not only ties Eddison's mythopoeia to Norse legend and to William Morris, it also justifies the existence of death as a contribution to a greater aesthetic design – as Signy tells Sigmund in Morris's *Sigurd* (though he doubts it). The notion is that death exists as a test of bravery; Eddison thus explains the problem of evil in terms of his aesthetics: "The answer surely is that there is a beauty of action (as the Northmen knew), and only seldom is suicide a fine act" (1968 xxix). Similarly, Eddison's astoundingly brave King Mezentius, deliberately alone and on the point of singlehandedly challenging the brutal villain Horius Parry and his co-conspirators to battle in a small hunting lodge, tells them that the situation reminds him of an omen from *The Saga of the People of Eyri*: dead men were seen feasting inside a mountain. This saga reference is a direct threat: "There's the difference: that here, at present, all are yet alive" (1968 105).

How do people in the world of Zimiamvia know the literature that was written on earth? This is exactly where Ray Bradbury's exasperated cosmonauts in "Mars Is Heaven!" deem themselves likely mad; Mars might resemble earth as a result of parallel evolution, but that it should display cultural and linguistic similarities to the point of the exact same songs stands in total opposition to the possibility of rational explanation. In *Imaginary Worlds*, Carter considers this a result of mere carelessness: "Eddison forgot all about the fact that he had set the story on

the planet Mercury. He also had an avenue lined with 'Irish yews' in one scene, and several of his characters quote from Sappho and some of the Elizabethan poets" (36). A more Tolkienian view would be to ask how they know the languages these literary works are written in, whether English, Norse, Greek, or Latin: indeed, Eddison even comments at one point that in his world one dynasty speaks English, but the locals they conquer speak their own "gibberish" (1969 80). Perhaps all of this is inconsistent; even Tolkien, who like no other writer truly thought through issues of invented worlds and languages with the goal of being consistent and plausible, was ultimately inconsistent. Perhaps this mighty and yet doomed attempt explains his obsessive themes of fragmentation and forgetting, whereas in Dunsany's case inconsistency is the point.

Where does Eddison stand on the subject? Given Eddison's own obsession with archetypal manifestations, memories and dreams as the means by which to remember lives in parallel worlds, the jump to culture does not seem too great. Bradbury's astronauts conclude that only divine design could explain worlds that so closely parallel one another, and Eddison uses a similar explanation except that the gods are mortal characters, who have forgotten their divinity and are caught in an endless cycle of creation and destruction. Many of them suspect this to be the case (1968 250). Even at the point of his own death, Mezentius accepts that only doubt and amnesia makes omnipotence bearable – otherwise life would be too boring (1969 257).

Thus, if humans actually unconsciously shape and create worlds, linguistic and cultural similarities are not just logically consistent but inevitable. The Zimiamvia trilogy is a pastiche; even more than Tolkien, Eddison claims the right to assemble a miscellany of great art and view it as a fragmentary reflection of a coherent higher and more meaningful reality which we have become alienated from. Even after Dunsany's sophisticated parodies of metaphysics, Eddison is extraordinarily clever. And as Eddison attributes varying degrees of masculine or feminine

"soul" to his characters, in some sense the characters in great literature may be more "real" than their readers; like Dunsany, Eddison takes the metafictional approach pioneered by Keats and Tennyson to new levels. Yeats did the same: "There is Lear, his head still wet with the thunder-storm, and he laughs because you thought yourself an existence who are but a shadow, and him a shadow who is an eternal god" (1998 275). Yeats invented his own metaphysics and then believed in it; this may well be what Eddison did as well. But as a post-Nietzschean thinker, Eddison might well say that it has precisely the same value as any other metaphysics.

For Eddison, at the very least mythmaking is a human necessity, even if it can be used to manipulate for ill ends. Eddison's protagonists face the dark illusions of sorcery in the climax of *The Worm Ouroboros*. Seeking his brother Lord Goldry, held in a mountaintop prison hardly reachable even from Koshtra Belorn, Lord Juss is challenged by magical illusions: a seductress tempts him, monsters threaten him, and false visions of his brother try to trick him. A damsel in distress begs him for rescue as an evil knight is about to kill her (2006 361); another illusion *claims* to be an illusion, and a man with Goldry's voice but not his shape claims he is cursed (2006 362). Eddison portrays Juss as more or less walking through mythical scenarios, which are illusions: "the firm fabric of that palace quivered like the leaves of a forest under a sudden squall. Colour went from the scene, like the blood chased from a man's face by fear" (2006 191).

Finally, behind all these illusions is an utter emptiness more horrifying still. At Zora Rach, the final peak, the pain of the cold can not compare to what "he never before had known; a death-like horror as of the houseless loneliness of naked space" (2006 360). Now it seems that his own values are illusions, mere instincts in an indifferent, meaningless, mechanical cosmos. The scene could hardly be more Nietzschean, as a heroic figure confronts nihilism upon a mountaintop after casting aside the illusions of the ages. Here he discovers his brother's corpse:

The horror shut down upon Juss's soul like madness. Fearfully he stared about him. The cloud had lifted from the mountain's peak and hung like a pall above its nakedness. Chill air that was like the breath of the whole world's grave… dim far forms of snow and ice, silent, solitary, pale, like mountains of the dead: it was as if the bottom of the world were opened and the truth laid bare: the ultimate Nothing. (2006 364)

If truth clothed or naked may be, as Tennyson put it, Eddison's use of the latter terminology shows how terrifying he considers it. Juss imagines a voice saying, "Thou art nothing… all thy desires and memories and loves and dreams, nothing" (364). It is as if Eddison has imported the most nihilistic of Dunsany's prophets from "The Journey of the King."

Like Dostoevsky,[46] Lord Juss finds nihilism more intolerable than even damnation, and reacts with violent passion to this most terrifying of modern ideas: "Fling me to Tartarus, deliver me to the black infernal Furies, let them blind me, seethe me in the burning lake. For so should there yet be hope" (2006 364-365). For Eddison, as for Tennyson, the solution is to recall and meditate on the experience of meaning – in childhood, dreams, and myths:

To hold off the horror from his soul, Juss turned in memory to the dear life of earth, those things he had most set his heart on, men and women he loved dearest in his life's days; battles and triumphs of his opening manhood, high festivals in Galing, golden summer noons under the Westmark pines, hunting morns on the high heaths of Mealand; the first day he backed a horse, of a spring morning in a primrose glade that opened on Moonmere, when his small brown legs were scarce the length of his fore-arm now, and his dear father held him by the foot as he trotted, and showed him where the squirrel had her nest in the old oak tree. (2006 364)

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[46] See my discussion of Fyodor Karamazov's desire for hell over nihilism in *The Lovecraft Annual* 2014, page 120.

This Romantic vision of medieval Europe (the woods, hunts, festivals, and battles) is very similar to the vision of the same conjured by the titular *King of Elfland's Daughter* in Dunsany's novel of two years later. But whereas Dunsany describes the vision's nostalgia as an aesthetic effect rather than any real reflection of the past, Eddison takes the Nietzschean view that Juss can *make* this vision and its values real by living it. Thus, the human will (or at least the will of certain heroic humans) regains its pre-Darwinian place "above" materialistic Nature.

At the moment of their triumph, the Lords of Demonland realize that they will never exceed their current glory: "Like Gods they seemed, in the glory of their youth and pride, seated about that table; but sad and tragical, like Gods exiled from wide Heaven" (2006 433). Upon their victory they choose not peace but eternal recurrence, for it is the struggle that provides them with meaning in an otherwise meaningless universe: "We have flown beyond the rainbow. And there we found no fabled land of heart's desire, but wet rain and wind only and the cold mountain-side. And our hearts are a-cold because of it" (2006 423). The rainbow unwoven, they would rather face a fight than the void; they wish for the villains to return. This echoes Dostoevsky's devil, who claims that evil is necessary because there must be events in the world.

In Dunsany's mythopoeia, when Mana Yood Sushai awakens, the dream that is our reality will end, as will the illusion that we are real. Similarly, Eddison places his mythopoeia before and behind our reality; we and our world are but a mere temporary whim of the ultimate goddess. When she tires of us, we will return to nothingness: Fiorinda, "having understandably had more than enough of this not very admirable world, snuffed it out for ever as though it had never existed, by idly pricking the bubble with a bediamonded hair-pin idly drawn from her hair as she passed" (1969 180). Eddison himself clearly shares Fiorinda's disdain for our reality. The question which remains is to what extent Eddison actually believed in his invented metaphysics.

If Eddison's metaphysics is true, it justifies itself: the best attitude is intellectual skepticism of religion and yet intuitions of other lives; this is Eddison's attitude and the attitude of his characters. Eddison embraces eternal conflict as a meaning-making mechanism; Dunsany uses Nietzsche's concept of the eternal recurrence to show humanity's tiny place in time:

> Those things which have been shall be again, and under the same bank in the same land a sudden glare of sunlight on the same spring day shall bring the same daffodil to bloom once more and the same child shall pick it, and not regretted shall be the billion years that fell between. (1906 n.pag.)

Dunsany's interpretation emphasizes the melancholic; the act of a child picking a flower is set against a billion years and seems tiny, ephemeral, and sad in comparison: human souls are trapped in a vast cycle which they cannot conceive of or understand. For Eddison, on the other hand, reincarnation is part of an eternal contest of wills (2006 196). The key to Eddison is his Carlylean belief that all who are great – whether real historical persons, mythical figures, or characters in fiction – are all manifestations of one of two eternal essences, a god and a goddess. Thus, whereas Dunsany used invented mythology to undermine any notion of historical accuracy or national heritage, for Eddison any questions of accuracy or fidelity are irrelevant. If every symbolically powerful figure necessarily possesses a true, eternal, Platonic significance, then a pastiche of literature from many periods and sources cannot be invalidated by a lack of any historical scenario, however speculative; Norse and Greek excerpts, often untranslated, can appear side by side (contrast this to Morris, who frames *The Earthly Paradise* as an exchange of stories between Norse and Greek explorers). Through Morris and Tennyson, through Dunsany and Eddison, these monumental questions of dreams and death, myths and metaphysics, legend and legacy reached the most famous of all literary medievalists, J. R. R. Tolkien.

IV. "The Daimonic Force that the Great Myths Have": Tolkien's Faith in Heritage

> I don't think you realize, I don't think any of us realize, the force, the daimonic force that the great myths and legends have. From the profundity of the emotions and perceptions that begot them, and from the multiplication of them in many minds – and each mind, mark you, an engine of obscure but unmeasured energy.
>
> -J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Notion Club Papers*

The above statement attributes metaphysical importance to myths. Tolkien worked for his entire life on his mythopoeia, returning to it from different angles and establishing different chains of transmission through both medieval languages and his own invented languages. With Tolkien, as with Yeats, the question of belief in metaphysics is complex but ultimately comes out on the affirmative side, as opposed to skeptics like Dunsany, or Eddison who walked the line between belief and skepticism. Like Dunsany and Eddison, Tolkien invented his own creation myth, focusing on memory and dream, beauty and design, decay and entropy. Tolkien explained his perspective on mythology, mythopoeia and archetype in similar terms to those of Eddison:

> These tales are 'new', they are not directly derived from other myths and legends, but they must inevitably contain a large measure of ancient wide-spread motives or elements. After all, I believe that legends and myths are largely made of 'truth', and indeed present aspects of it that can only be received in this mode; and long ago certain truths and modes of this kind were discovered and must always reappear. (1999 xvi)

Due to the inspiration of *Beowulf*, many scholars have noted the merger of Christianity and northern paganism in Tolkien's mythopoeia, but he was also the first major medievalist since Tennyson to hold Christian religious beliefs. Thus, rather than Eddison's private metaphysics, Tolkien simply inserts a Christian metaphysics.

Tolkien was indisputably the most creative and meticulous medievalist writer of all time in the area of his "Secret Vice," as he called it, of invented languages. The first striking thing about his creation myth, "Ainulindalë," is that its title is written in an invented language (Quenya); the title means "The Music of the Ainur." In this text, we are told that the first being, Eru Ilúvatar (the "High God" of Tolkien's mythology) created a group of immortal spirits (angels or sub-deities), the Ainur, before he created the world. He showed them the world he intended to create by conjuring a mighty symphony of music, each part of which harmoniously complemented every other in the creation of a higher beauty. The strongest and proudest of the Ainur, Melkor, rebelled because he wanted to design his own music (1999 5). When Ilúvatar created the world, Melkor sabotaged it, but other Ainur chose to enter the world and craft it in accordance with the divine plan. These become known as the Valar, a pantheon which forms the basis of paganism – deities of life and death, art and war, ocean and mountain, forest and sky.

Just as Dunsany uses his creation myth to explain déjà vu, Tolkien uses his creation myth to explain the lure of the ocean: "It is said by the Eldar [elves] that in water there lives yet the echo of the Music of the Ainur more than in any substance that is in this Earth; and many of the Children of Ilúvatar hearken still unsated to the voices of the Sea, and yet know not for what they listen" (1999 8). This is as Dunsanian as anything not written by Dunsany, and indeed Dunsany's "Dirge of Shimono Káni" is a likely inspiration for Tolkien's "Music of the Ainur." Both include the concept of music as the force behind the universe and imply that echoes of the beauty of this music live on in human spirits. Like Dunsany's "Sea of Souls" from whence all spirits derive, in Tolkien's mythology water is the element that retains its fading divinity the longest, so that when Melkor launches war against the Valar he never builds ships, and even in the Third Age (when *The Lord of the Rings* is set) the faithful can still hope for help from water.

Many scholars have noted the similarity between Tolkien's "Ainulindalë" and the Christian story of The Fall. Tolkien himself acknowledged this; in *The Silmarillion* he even asserts, "all stories are ultimately about the fall" (xvi). Tolkien is certainly on strong ground relative to the Romantic tradition when he identifies The Fall as a primary theme. The notion that there once was a paradise or golden age that humanity has been exiled from by the devil or industrial capitalism – or in Tolkien's case both – is non-modern and naïvely anthropocentric – despite Tolkien's strictly correct description of his early mythology as "not anthropocentric" because it focuses on elves rather than humans. In the same sense, Eddison's *Ouroboros* is also not anthropocentric because it focuses on Demons and Pixies and in fact there is only one human character, Lessingham, but Eddison at least considers the possibility of a world that is not centered on humanlike beings nor even life itself; a universe like the one modern science describes – indifferent to life. In contrast, Tolkien's fictional universe is conceived, created and crafted by deities in accordance with a divine design, even if Melkor sabotages it. As suits Tolkien's Christianity and the inspiration of *Paradise Lost*, there is cosmic good and evil, not cosmic indifference. Moreover, good is ultimately destined to triumph, as Ilúvatar (God) tells Melkor (Satan): "No theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrtument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined" (1999 5-6). Moreover, as suits his Christian religious beliefs, Tolkien asserts mind-body dualism:

> Now the Valar took to themselves shape.… [T]heir shape comes of their knowledge of the visible World, rather than of the World itself; and they need it not, save only as we use raiment, and yet we may be naked and suffer no loss of our being. (1999 11)

Tolkien places mind over matter when asserting that his deities need no bodies to exist, but can make and discard bodies as mortals make and discard clothes. The souls of mortals go to a place called the Halls of Mandos, where they await Tolkien's own Christianized version of Ragnarok, a cataclysmic battle between good and evil which occurs when ancient gods and monsters return to either redeem or destroy creation, and Ilúvatar's ultimate purposes are revealed.

Shippey comments that in Tolkien's view "evil cannot itself create; that it was not in itself created (but sprang from a voluntary exercise of free will by Satan, Adam and Eve, to separate themselves from God), that it will in the long run be annulled or eliminated, as the Fall of Man was redressed by the Incarnation and Death of Christ" (2003 159). In Tolkien's mythology, humans choose evil because we too were corrupted during the making of the world:

> So began their great labours in wastes unmeasured and unexplored, and in ages uncounted and forgotten, until in the Deeps of Time… there came to be that hour and that place where was made the habitation of the Children of Ilúvatar…. [Among the Valar] Melkor too was there from the first, and he meddled in all that was done. (1999 10)

For Tolkien, Melkor's sabotage of divine design explains the existence of orcs, those barbarian raiders and foot soldiers of evil. Melkor did not create orcs but only corrupted them; just as orcs are counterfeit elves, trolls are counterfeit ents (Shippey 2003 159). Shippey notes that in Tolkien's world, evil cannot make, only mock (2007 244-245).

This idea of mockery is in fact key to the believer-skeptic dichotomy in medievalist literature; both sides understand mockery and satire as a threat to the ideals of medievalism. To take Arthurian legend, for example, from Tennyson and Twain through White and Steinbeck, satire is deadly to Camelot. In White and Steinbeck, in particular, Mordred and the younger generation of knights are marked by a satirical scorn for chivalry which undermines Camelot's

moral and religious foundations. Satire can only harm if you harbor high-minded ideals; here Dunsany is invincible, but Tolkien has much to lose. Thus in Tolkien's mythopoeia, Melkor and all his disciples, from Sauron to the lowliest orc, all strike at the moral and religious foundations of Middle-earth. Shippey notes, "Orcs are marked above all by a strong sense of humour," and that they use words like sport, play and fun to refer to torture and murder (2007 246-7). Yet they do this while believing themselves following the orders of a legitimate authority: "Orcish behavior is human behavior, and their inability to judge their own actions by their own moral criteria is a problem all too sadly familiar" (Shippey 2007 252). In other words, orcs are a dark parody of humans in which we must recognize ourselves, just as Tennyson's Red Knight, among other disillusioned figures in Tennyson's *Idylls*, tries to make the people of Camelot do. This self-recognition – the cruelty, the brutality, the hypocrisy – is Tolkien at his most pessimistic.

Contrasting the Boethian view of evil (as an absence) and the Manichean view of evil (as an active presence) in Tolkien's work, Shippey explains, "Shadows are the absence of light and so don't exist in themselves, but they are still visible and palpable just as if they did. That is exactly Tolkien's view of evil" (2003 166). Thus, evil can be both an active supernatural force, and the inevitable moral failings of humans themselves. Shippey explains that Tolkien

> left a space for the traditional story of the Fall of Man. There is no Garden of Eden for
>
> humans in *The Silmarillion*, but when humans do enter Middle-earth from the east all that
>
> is known about them to the elves who are imagined as the preservers of these traditions is
>
> that something dreadful had happened to them already, a 'darkness' which 'lay upon the
>
> hearts of Men' and which was connected with an unknown expedition of Morgoth [a later
>
> title for Melkor]: one could believe that Morgoth here is identical with Satan, and his
>
> expedition was to lure humanity into their 'original sin.' (2001 242)

When humans first appear in Tolkien's mythology, they are already speaking different languages (Shippey 2003 268). This, perhaps, could be a space that Tolkien left for the biblical story of the Tower of Babel. If this is the case it is ironic, as Tolkien based his mythopoeia on philological foundations; philology tracks the evolution of languages, whereas the Tower of Babel story attempts to explain humanity's linguistic diversity via special creation.

The question of to what extent Tolkien – or any modern Christian – literally believed that biblical stories like The Fall or the Tower of Babel actually happened, as opposed to presenting a metaphorical truth about human life, will always be open to interpretation. Tolkien's "Middle-earth" may be a parallel world like Eddison's Zimiamvia, or it may be a possible past for earth itself. Tolkien approached the question of Middle-earth's relationship to his own reality from many different angles over the course of his life. In its inspiration, however, it displays this professional philologist's obsession with the ever-battling twin themes of tradition and entropy. Even in Middle-earth, whether it represents our world's past or a parallel world, what Tolkien calls "The Long Defeat," or the slow decay of divinity and the resulting alienation, dominates.

Here Tolkien draws on one hundred years of Romantic tradition. Shippey calls Tolkien's poem "The Sea Bell" a poem of disenchantment (2003 322). This poem's narrator visits a magical island where the elves live but fails to establish contact with them and is driven out; returning to our reality he is old and wretched, a delusional and lonely beggar. If this is not "Bloody Romantic" it would be difficult to say what is; the influence of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* could hardly be clearer. Shippey argues that "Tolkien was not by any means cut off from the mainstream of English poetry" (2003 217). One might place "The Sea-Bell" (1934, revised 1962) alongside earlier works like Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci" (1819), Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" (1832, revised 1842), and Yeats's "The Stolen Child" (1889);

all depict encounters between the world of mortals and the world of the elves which leads to heartache, in the classic terms of Celtic lore. Indeed, Shippey notes that Yeats's "The Man Who Dreamed of Faery-land" (1893) "could stand as a Tolkienien epigraph" (2003 217). All are Romantic meditations on the beauty of dreams, and terror that these are but illusions.

Tolkien was supremely aware of the illusory nature of the "Dream of Order." He was hesitant to publish *The Silmarillion* and thus more fully reveal the historical background of his world, explaining in characteristically Romantic terms that the sense of depth in his world comes from "glimpses of a large history in the background: an attraction like that of viewing far off an unvisited island, or seeing the towers of a distant city gleaming in a sunlit mist. To go there is to destroy the magic, unless new unattainable vistas are again revealed" (qtd. in Shippey 2003 260). This implies that Romanticism, even within an invented world, *relies* on distance, fragmentation, and mystery; it relies on the dreamlike idealization of somewhere one is currently not. This is a highly Dunsanian admission, and yet in his philosophical thinking Tolkien was far closer to Yeats, believing that "Fantasy is not entirely made up" (qtd. in Shippey 2003 56).

Philology, the study of languages through written sources, combines meticulous comparative study with imaginative intuition. Tolkien believed that traditional words had an internal consistency which distinguished them from unhistorical words, and which ultimately guide philologists back toward a "true" original mythology and worldview. Shippey acknowledges that this implies an anthropomorphic view of the universe: "The theme that flashes from much of Tolkien's work is that of the identity of man and nature, of namer and named" (2003 150). Indeed, when Tolkien envisioned an "original language" he did not envision primitive grunts of animals, but rather poetry trailing clouds of glory (as represented by his most ancient character, the nature spirit Tom Bombadil).

Like Yeats, Tolkien attributed a high degree of evidentiary value to his own aesthetic, emotional, moral, and indeed spiritual or religious, intuitions. Similarly, Tolkien thought languages could be intrinsically beautiful or ugly. Morris had pursued and finally given up the ideal of an "Earthly Paradise" as a land to the far west, over the ocean and beyond the reach of sorrow to the west; Dunsany's King recognized this ideal as an aesthetic illusion. For the philologist Tolkien, however, the very fact that such an ideal has a long basis in tradition is itself an affirmation of it in some sense. Tolkien's "Earthly Paradise" was, in an early incarnation, the Isle of Avalon, where King Arthur traditionally goes to be healed of his wounds after his last battle. It is an ideal island, similar to the island the narrator visits in Tolkien's "The Sea Bell," and the unfallen, immortal elves still dwell there. Tolkien's choice of name is of great importance, since with Tolkien names precede and create stories. The name *Avallon* is indicative of Tolkien's entire approach to mythopoeia: to reconstruct a coherent whole behind the fragments of the past through linguistic analysis and imaginative intuition.

Whereas Morris imagined Europe during the medieval period and the "Dark Ages" and attempted to reconstruct models of Germanic society and culture during that time, Tolkien went further still and envisioned a sort of "pre-mythology," an original European or even Indo-European set of deities and legends which would account for all the apparently contradictory cryptic references in medieval literature to places like Avalon and to things like "eotenas ond ylfe ond orcneas," as the famous phrase in *Beowulf* goes. In the manner of his predecessor and his contemporary Joseph Campbell, Tolkien sought a "Key to All Mythologies." Dunsany had placed his invented "ultimate Dreamer" Mana-Yood-Sushai before all other gods, as a myth which somehow precedes and contains the mythologies that we know. Yet he had done so in a sarcastic, rather than serious, manner: readers soon find Dunsany's mythology as inconsistent

and contradictory as any real one – indeed, that is the point. In Dunsany every word is obviously untrue, and this extreme approach to narrative style and substance expresses Dunsany's perspective of boundless skepticism. Tolkien, on the other hand, attempts to create a philologically plausible mythical past so that even if we do not accept the stories as literally true descriptions of historical events, we recognize them as in some sense an accurate representation of what our ancestors believed and thus connect to them on the same intuitive level as we connect to more "genuine" myths preserved in historical sources.

Tolkien admitted that if we had all the medieval material which has been lost, including all the mythical poems in Old English which described the "original" version of England's pagan mythology, this material might not be as amazing as he imagined. Yet he was inspired by fragmentation, by the very myths and legends which had not survived. He admits that his reconstruction of this body of legend must necessarily be idealized and artificial; he is creating that which is *not* there (1999 xi). Morris had considered *Beowulf* to be representative of a lost literature, comparable to the Norse myths and sagas, which might have been composed in English were it not for the events of 1066; Tolkien similarly saw the events of 1066 as culturally disastrous and had a special affinity for *Beowulf*. The lost literature and languages Tolkien invents are necessarily an artificial heritage; Tolkien's project is *defined* by the condition or perceived condition of modernity, which is amnesia. He had to *invent* the languages of the elves, which Burns assesses as "somehow pre-Celtic" (13). A purported "pre-mythology" necessarily purports, however vaguely, to epistemologically and historically precede the real myths that it draws on, and even to explain their origins.

In Tolkien's early mythopoeic collection, *The Book of Lost Tales*, the frame narrative is that a human traveler, Ælfwine of England, arrives at the island Tolkien calls *Tol Eressëa* or

Avallon.[47] Here he hears stories of the history of the world – all the traditions Ælfwine's Anglo-Saxon contemporaries long for but have lost (Tolkien went so far as to compose works in Anglo-Saxon dialects). Later, Tolkien uses the Hobbits themselves as a framing device: the Red Book of Westmarch (containing the stories of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Ring*s) is written and compiled by Bilbo, Frodo, and Sam (Burns 21). Burns compares *The Book of Lost Tales* to Morris's *The Earthly Paradise* (91). The comparison is well-founded, and not just because Morris is perhaps Tolkien's most obvious predecessor: Morris's hope of rediscovering the kernel of ultimate meaning at the core of Indo-European myth by an exchange of stories anticipates Tolkien's attempt at combination and distillation. Yet whereas Morris seeks the perfect society, Tolkien injects the truly supernatural. However vaguely, the geographical device of *The Book of Lost Tales* contrasts our world with the world of the elves, where divinity and enchantment still survive, and offers us a balm in memories and meaning they preserve.

Tolkien wavered regarding the pre-mythology concept; Middle-earth might be the distant past of our earth, or it might be a parallel world to ours which, like Zimiamvia, stayed closer to an ideal pattern than ours did. Burns interprets it as its own world, one "quite independent of twentieth-century awareness and in no way in need of its approval or its patronage. When the last book is finished and laid aside, there is a feeling that Middle-earth – its business, its history, its destiny – still moves on" (44). Although questions of imagination, religion and belief are always complex in the age of science, Tolkien's *aesthetic* goal with his famous theory of sub-creation is suspension of disbelief; he wants readers "to believe in his world as an alternate reality, a reality as complete and as valid as the one we occupy" (Burns 44). Tolkien quite self-consciously announces that he intends to create an aesthetic illusion by using internal consistency:

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[47] *The Book of Lost Tales* is the foundation of Tolkien's mythopoeia, and it may well be considered a simulated *Poetic Edda* or *Prose Edda* (both are major thirteenth-century sources on Norse myth).

> You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather, art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside. (2006 132)

Dunsany *felt* as if he was uncovering the history of worlds he had wandered in dreams but laughed at the thought; Eddison intellectually justified it, and Tolkien may well have believed it. Like Morris, Tolkien worked on translations, retellings, and mythopoeic works and in that order: understanding the sources first, interpreting them, and then ultimately projecting beyond them. In *The Long Road*, Tolkien used frame stories in an Eddisonian manner: a mortal man on earth during the twentieth century experiences a sort of time travel of the spirit in his dreams. This would seem to imply a notion of "blood memory." Far from Dunsany's skepticism mere decades before, Tolkien matches and exceeds the vitalism and idealism of any nineteenth-century thinker.

Tolkien would argue that as a result of humanity's heretical, self-willed desire for innovation (and unfortunate historical events such as those of 1066), heritage must necessarily be artificial and can ultimately do no better than to be plausible. The philosophical divergence between Dunsany and Tolkien could hardly be greater; in fact Tolkien's very ability to create linguistic consistency, like Eddison's ability to create metaphysical consistency, arguably functioned as an intellectual seduction. With regards to this artificial heritage which he himself thought true in a representative sense as well as a symbolic one, Tolkien apparently shared Eco's dictum, that "if you can't find it, make it." Like Eco's medieval theologians in *Baudolino* (2000), Tolkien was so enraptured by his own imagination that in some way, he believed in its creations. The question of belief is complex with every mythopoeic writer, but as Eco points out in *Baudolino*, perhaps even some medieval theologians were in fact mythopoeic writers.[48]

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[48] This applies to medieval authors reinterpreting pre-Christian stories such as Snorri Sturluson, but in the twentieth century, hoax editions of H. P. Lovecraft's fictional tome of demonology, *The Necromonicon*, appeared.

V. "The Metaphysicians of Tlön": Mythopoeia as Meta-Mythology

The works of Dunsany, Eddison, and Tolkien are often categorized as fantasy, but a more accurate term would be "Medievalist Mythopoeia." More than any other western literature of the time, the works of these three great mythopoeists of the early twentieth century take on Nietzsche's task of inventing new myths. In a scene of Nietzschean cataclysm, Dunsany's Time breaks his chains and overthrows the gods; we see him lounging on their blood-soaked thrones, sword still in hand. The gods were gone, or had been reduced to curious little voices in people's heads, not direct and powerful dictums echoing throughout all ages. Although the sense of amnesia haunted Dunsany, Eddison and Tolkien, they all experimented with narrative devices which resembled Plato's doctrine of Anamnesis, or remembering knowledge one had before one was born.[49] Upon his death, Tolkien's Aragorn promises his beloved, "Beyond the Circles of the World there is More than Memory" (qtd. in Shippey 2001 177). With new powers of the imagination they peered further into the purported past than any previous medievalist, and in crossing the line from reconstructing history, to projecting prehistory and finally sheer dreaming, they achieved their quest – in a way. As Anne C. Petty puts it, "With the "old gods" swept away in the tide of modern technology and cynicism, where does that leave us? Once again, at the mythic source. From the deep wells of the human subconscious …the artist of our present age is confronted with exciting possibility of forging radical new mythologies" (14).

Any artificial mythology must necessarily be a meta-mythology, because it comes from the sense of *absence* – absence of belief in a grand ideology that already existed (such as Teutonic Democracy) and thus the need to invent something new out of previously existing components. Looking at what the old myths and building new ones that do the same thing raises

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[49] Kierkegaard resurrected the same concept in *The Repetition* (1843); for discussion see Bjarnadóttir 16.

the question of the nature of myths in the first place, which explains how all three mythopoeists took metafiction to new levels with constant commentary on deities, theology, history, philology, folklore, prophecies, poetic and manuscript traditions – none of which ever existed.[50]

Thus, the best theorist of their works may be their contemporary, the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986). In "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (1940, first translated into English in 1961), Borges envisioned a conspiracy of intellectuals trying to invent a fictional country (Uqbar) and convince the world that it is real. In his distinct fashion, Borges cleverly questions the nature of knowledge, its gatekeepers, and the distinction between scholarship, ideology, and fiction. How much of the world outside of our immediate experience – distant lands, the medieval past, indeed all of those times and palces where Romantics, utopians, and metaphysicians, stow their favourite concepts – comes from biased, fictionalizing intellectuals? Dunsany and Eddison completed the process of casting off historicity, primitivism, and heritage status; and each embraced fragmentation in his own way. Tolkien attempted to bring internal consistency and invented languages to a mythopoeic world; he was the first to articulate the theory of "sub-creation." Borges throws light on the history of medievalism, with its archives, mistranslations and mysteries; its constant struggle to sort fact from fantasy or merge the two; its attempts to build systems of organized fictions. Indeed, as co-editor of *The Book of Fantasy Stories* (first published 1940, revised 1965 and 1976), Borges recognized the connection between mythopoeic writers and his own speculative fiction in selecting Dunsany's "The Idle City" (1910), a curiously framed tale of fiction and silence, dreams and death.

In "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," a nineteenth-century millionaire wanted to invent Tlön as a planet just like earth, so he financed a secret society with branches in every country. Tlön has its own civilizations, such as Uqbar, which posses their own histories and their own literary

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[50] See the definitions of of metafiction and mythopoeia on page 29.

traditions. These traditions even include authors of speculative fiction, who themselves never set stories in their own world but prefer to invent fictional worlds for their literary works. Perhaps there is contact between some of these worlds. We soon find out that Tlön has a very different epistemology than those we are familiar with; perhaps dreams are more important than the waking life here? Tlön's epistemology denies its own reality, just as Dunsany deems life an illusion. Encyclopedia accounts start changing first, but the changes don't stop there. At the end of the story, "the world" cannot tell whether it is in fact Tlön or not, that is to say, which side of the fiction-reality divide it is on. One would think this would be a hard thing to mistake, but each of us may find the parallel more suitable on the brink of our own nonexistence. Interestingly enough, Borges adds another layer by explaining that: "The metaphysicians of Tlön seek not truth, or even plausibility – they seek to amaze, astound. In their view, metaphysics is a branch of the literature of fantasy" (74). Are writers such as Dunsany, Eddison and Borges himself, the true "metaphysicians of Tlön"? How is Tlön dissimilar to Dunsany's Elfland or even to Eddison's Zimiamvia, which purports to explain *our* world as a sub-creation of *its*? Tolkien went further in the sense of giving his sub-created or invented worlds their own languages.

In Borges's story, the millionaire claimed that the territory of Tlön could be mapped in any direction with increasing complexity, but that it nevertheless must have nothing to do with "the impostor Jesus Christ" (79). Perhaps Borges is providing a wry comment on the leading myth that convinced the people that it was real: "It was nonsense to invent a country – what they ought to do was invent a planet. To that giant of an idea he added another, the brainchild of his nihilism: The enormous enterprise must be kept a secret" (79). Yet even if the modern mythopoeias of Dunsany, Eddison and Tolkien might be "the brainchild of nihilism," their illusions told profound truths, and as mythopoeists they were honest about their inventions.

Macpherson's *Ossian* poems, arguably the original text for literary medievalism in the British Isles, founded the tradition amidst immediate and passionate allegations of hoaxery or fraud (i.e.: *how* literary?). At least the creative distortion running through the history of medievalism has been a force for aesthetic evolution and some form of intellectual or thematic progression. Eccentric as may seem all of the notes on pronouncement and translation, glossaries, maps, appendices, forewords, paratext, or other scholarly apparatus, whether genuine or sheerly invented, they are meant to make the work more accessible even if they also contribute to the sense of depth and distance.

In any case, all of these "metaphysicians of Tlön" recognized their work's deeply heretical implications for western religion, indeed for earth's religions. In writing connected bodies of mythic fictions inspired by dreams, and passed down through generations of oral and written tradition, they implicitly place their own work on the same level as any other mythical tradition. Dunsany and Eddison, not being orthodox religionists in the first place, were much more comfortable with this; and both, moreover, made clear the influence of Swinburne and Nietzsche, two anti-religious iconoclasts of a generation before, on their work. The skeptic Sam Harris once compared the Christian afterlife to Tolkien's description of the afterlife of elves in the Halls of Mandos. The comparison implies that each view of the afterlife is epistemologically equivalent: the *only* evidence for it is that it was written in a book, and were we to use such naïve standards as faith assigns to one book (but no others), we may as well believe in the Halls of Mandos. The irony was not lost on Tolkien himself, who recognized the potentially heretical nature of his work. Yet overall, with Tolkien we see faith regained after its dwindling in Tennyson, its total loss with Dunsany, and its rekindling with Eddison. With Tolkien the "Secret Fire" of religious Romanticism burned brightly once again. Through his philology, the phoenix

of mythology arose from its own ashes. Thus in an age of doubt the gods rise again, when it becomes necessary to invent *them*. A century after Morris's *The Earthly Paradise*, Tolkien completed *The Lord of the Rings*, which has defined medievalism ever since. Folly as it may seem, humans are meaning-generating machines who are unlikely to abandon the search for a "Key to All Mythologies" any time soon. Tolkien's discussion of sub-creation in his classic essay "On Fairy Stories" (in *The Monsters and the Critics*), makes this clear:

> Although now long estranged,
>
> Man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.
>
> Dis-graced he may be, yet is not de-throned,
>
> and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned:
>
> Man, Sub-creator, the refracted Light
>
> through whom is splintered from a single White
>
> to many hues, and endlessly combined
>
> in living shapes that move from mind to mind.
>
> Though all the crannies of the world we filled
>
> with Elves and Goblins, though we dared to build
>
> Gods and their houses out of dark and light,
>
> and sowed the seed of dragons – 'twas our right
>
> (used or misused). That right has not decayed:
>
> we make still by the law in which we're made. (144)

Dunsany, Eddison, and Tolkien responded to the skepticism of their age by inventing whole new mythopoeias. The intellectual vertigo of the abyss proved strangely inspiring. Freed from all truth-claims, medievalism was no longer metaphysics: it had now become speculative fiction.

Chapter 4

I. "Thy Precious Flattering Jargon": Medievalist Gender Dynamics

She smiled, and it seemed as if all the sultry night freshened and sweetened at that lady's smile. 'Thou art a dear companion to me,' she said. 'Thy melancholy is to me as some shady wood in summer… and never thou crossest my mood. Save but now thou didst so, to plague me with thy precious flattering jargon.'

-Lady Prezmyra, from Eddison's *The Worm Ouroboros*

From its origins in Romanticism until the second half of the twentieth century – the entire period of this dissertation – literary medievalism was overwhelmingly male-dominated. As Wawn notes, "The vast majority of the novels were by men about men, with all that this can imply in the presentation of women within the novels – loyal wives and self-sacrificial homemakers, gossiping beggarwomen, trouble-making grandmothers, haughty young shrews in need of the taming that only a good husband could bring, and cackling gap-toothed soothsayers in touch with elements beyond the pale of civilised male society" (314). This was recognized and critiqued at the height of medievalism's Victorian popularity – in Eliot's mythology-minded Casaubon, for example, who eventually admits his morbid and obsessive nature: "I have spent too much time with the dead" (518-519). Indeed, the critique of medievalism's retreat into the past as a masculine fantasy symptomatic of disdain for the present was most effectively made by women. In "Poets and the Present Age" from *Aurora Leigh* (1857), Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861) explains her perspective on Romantic attempts at communion with the past thus:

I do distrust the poet who discerns,

No character or glory in his times,

And trundles back his soul five hundred years,

Past moat and drawbridge, into a castle-court,

> To sing – oh, not of lizard, or of toad
>
> Alive i' the ditch there, – twere excusable,
>
> But of some black chief, half knight, half sheep-lifter,
>
> Some beauteous dame, half chattel and half queen,
>
> As dead as must be, for the greater part
>
> The poems made on their chivalric bones;
>
> And that's no wonder: death inherits death. (V)

This is a poet who believes in that concept so often vilified in medievalism – progress. The warriors medievalists glorify were really just opportunistic, violent men, while the queens may have held relatively high status but were still treated as property. It is psychologically unhealthy to idealize such a society; it is better to accept reality: "King Arthur's self / Was commonplace to Lady Guenever; / And Camelot to minstrels seemed as flat / As Fleet Street to our poets" (V). Browning adds that Homer's heroes were normal men, not twelve feet tall, and Helen grew old (V). For her, it is irresponsible to portray the medieval period unrealistically; it may even amount to envying its sexism. "Chivalric bones" certainly cannot be the foundation for any modern gender equality. Sarah R. Wakefield has noted "the paucity of women writers in the Victorian medievalist craze," and agrees with Florence Boos's assessment that it may be "revealing that no Victorian woman novelist of greater stature than Charlotte Yonge was prepared to grant the dignity of idealization to 'medieval' fiction" (53). But perhaps the most damning assessment of the portrayal of women within male-dominated medievalism comes from Christina Rossetti. In "In An Artist's Studio" (1856), she describes how Pre-Raphaelite painters like her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti are so obsessed with an idealized *image* of women, that they are not interested in anything else: "Not as she is, but as she fills his dream" (14).

All of this leads to the question of feminine agency in a literature largely written by men. To what extent could female characters voluntarily climb down from the pedestal upon which courtly traditions had placed them? And, should female characters display agency equal to that of male ones, would they be judged by the same ethical, emotional and sexual standards or would they be condemned for stepping outside of traditional boundaries? Guinevere spent centuries as the morally condemned lynchpin of Camelot's downfall; the "revisionist" style of medievalist retelling offered the chance to view her actions from different perspectives. Of course, the stock female roles in Celtic and Norse legends display stark differences.

Celtic traditions are marked by what Pugh and Weisl describe as "magical femininities" (64), a feminine identity which is passive, even ghostly, and marked by hypersensitivity in aesthetic and psychological matters; she is vulnerable but she also makes *others* vulnerable. As Barczewski notes, the appearance of the Lady of Shalott's corpse at Camelot is foreboding: "Upon sighting her corpse, Arthur's knights 'cross'd themselves for fear,' suggesting that her escape from the tower endangers Camelot" (173). For Barczewski, "The danger lies in her attempt to subvert conventional gender boundaries by refusing to remain confined to the private, female sphere" (173). There is certainly something to this interpretation, conventional as it is, but surely it is the intrusion of the supernatural and death upon the normal world of Camelot which provokes this fear. Keats's Belle Dame sans Merci is another example of a Celtic woman whose apparent passivity is undermined by the threat of the supernatural forces with which she is associated. The most famous medieval example of this sort of character is Morgan Le Faye in Arthuriana, though Celtic legends like "The Love of Fand" also associate femininity with a mythical Otherworld whose very beauty makes it dangerous and life-sapping (Ellis 79). This material was easily assimilated into Romanticism and indeed suited it.

In Norse tradition, on the other hand, women deliberately cause violence, either directly or by proxy. The Celtic tradition had its own battle goddess, the Morrigan, but Germanic myth is full of female characters that fight just as the males do: Valkyries, giantesses, troll-wives, Grendel's mother. Some of the greatest saga characters are women who shaped and directed many waves of violence – Gudrun of *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* and Hallgerd of *Njal's Saga* most famously. Moreover, the central act of violence in *Njal's Saga*, the burning, is ordered by a woman, Hildigunn. She takes her dead husband's bloody cloak and places it on her uncle's shoulders in public, thus compelling him to kill to protect family honor:

> This cloak, Flosi, was your gift to Hoskuld, and now I give it back to you. He was slain in it. In the name of God and all good men I charge you, by all the powers of your Christ and by your courage and manliness, to avenge all the wounds which he received in dying – or else be an object of contempt to all men. (195)

Although one interpretation of her gesture is that it shows how much she loved her husband, her uncle is enraged and horrified: "You are the worst monster and want us to take the course which will be worst for us all. Cold are the counsels of women" (195). There are even episodes in *Njal's Saga* where women are able to shame men into sacrificing their lives in futile battles. For example, the Norwegian merchant Thorir's mother-in-law tells him: "My daughter Gudrun was wrong to put aside her pride and sleep with you, if you don't dare to go along with your father-in-law. You're just a coward" (104). He agrees to go to his death: "I'll go with your husband… but neither of us will come back" (104).[51] These female characters are not passive; they are very active. Unlike the otherworldly princesses of Celtic tradition, the ruthless women of the sagas did not easily fit into a Romantic framework. Indeed, Jane Carlyle was taken aback by the "savagery

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[51] Thorir then tells his friend Thorgrim: "Take the keys to my chests since I won't be unlocking them any more. I want you to take as much of our property as you wish and leave Iceland, and don't think of avenging me. If you don't leave, it will be your death" (104). But Thorgrim stays, marries Thorir's widow, and is killed in battle.

about some of the Icelandic *Ladies*" (qtd. in Wawn 153-154). Despite the horror that Victorian readers may have felt at reading about women encouraging violence and ordering specific killings, the White Feather phenomenon during the first World War displayed the same gender dynamic: masculine honour depends upon willingness to fight and die, and while men certainly did shame men for any failure or refusal in this matter, in northern tradition women were especially effective at shaming men for cowardice.

Much criticism of literary medievalism thus far has focused on the negative portrayal of women's typical roles in the stories (though some critics, such as Lori Campbell, have recognized feminist ideas in Morris's late romances). In her chapter "'Shun that lovely snare': The Arthurian Legend and Gender Roles in the Nineteenth Century," Barczewski argues that male authors consistently portrayed female sexuality as subversive of proper moral values:

> Concerned for their own apparently weakening power, men began to fear and denigrate female strength…. [N]ineteenth century Arthurian literature was explicitly concerned with the degree to which women acted as guardians or destroyers of the moral… fabric of the British nation. And more often than not, they functioned in the latter role. (170)

Wawn argues that women in Norse tradition were also seen as destructive in the Victorian era:

> Readers could have been forgiven for thinking that in saga literature, for every admirable Frithiof or Vagn, there seemed always to be two doomed Grettirs, or Gislis, or Gunnars… Kjartans, or Sigurds… destroyed in the prime of life with women prominent among the engines of destruction. For every saintly Gudruda or stout-hearted Aud, there seemed always to be an unfathomable Swanhild, or Hallgerd, or Brynhild. (334)

Barczewski, writing about literary responses to Celtic traditions, identifies the destructive female role as that of a seductress who keeps men from their honour-bound duty to fight. Wawn, writing

about literary responses to Norse traditions, focuses on the negative female role of honour-shaming men *into* fighting. How did medievalist authors approach character agency? In both Celtic and Norse traditions, one might explain the recurrence of certain types of characters, male or female, as a matter of stock characters or conventions. Some of these may be sexist but it is also possible for characters to reject conventions through metafiction.

Clichéd and sexist gender interactions certainly exist in the male-dominated field of literary medievalism; but simply noting this is not necessarily the best way to approach the subject. This vein of criticism, however strongly supported it is, has become so conventional and automatic as to lack nuance, and it no longer provides new insights. Some medieval legends viewed male-female relations from a naïvely condescending male perspective (i.e., the knight defeats the dragon and gets the damsel), but these were mocked even at the time by no less a dead white male than Geoffrey Chaucer. If Chaucer can write the Wife of Bath, who rejects sexist conventions, then post-industrial male medievalist authors can (and should) do much better than to naïvely accept the sexism of a past society; they can reject sexism and write vivid female characters with no less agency than Alysoun herself. Yet if metafiction seemed to give characters more agency to reject the gender conventions that bound them, contemporary scientific views on human sexuality were feared as draining agency and presenting instead biological determinism.

Like the application of Darwinian ideas to biology (contra creationism), anthropology and history (contra primitivism), the application of Darwinian ideas to matters of human sexuality proved controversial. In his masterpiece of evolutionary history, *The Ancestor's Tale* (incidentally framed in the Chaucerian manner of a pilgrimage), Richard Dawkins describes how biologists have used Darwin's "competitive males, choosy females" concept of Sexual Selection

to explain dimorphism (size difference between sexes) in humans and other species. In short, dimorphism results from selective pressure on males to physically dominate other males: "Surplus mass, which in extreme cases must cost a great deal of food to build up and maintain, is the price they pay to be competitive with other males" (214). Evolutionary pressure toward competitive dominance for males has obvious implications for war, and the epics and sagas which glorify it. In its least nuanced application, it explains why stories of powerful warriors might be popular among men.

Discussion of gender roles in the humanities has often proven hostile to any suggestion of a biological basis underlying human behavior. Understanding human behaviour in naturalistic terms is not an *endorsement*: and few accuse biologists of endorsing killing, parasitism or extinction by recognizing these phenomena as natural. However, when the matter turns to gender dynamics, biologists have been accused of undermining the moral fabric of society. Yet concepts stemming from the sciences, such as Darwin's Theory of Sexual Selection, surely have something to say about human behavior. Moreover, this was recognized by many medievalist authors; many viewed the biological study of sexuality as one more area of science-driven disillusionment. Barczewski, for example, assesses a sexual double standard in Victorian Arthuriana: "Since… women were supposed to function as the guardians of the nation's moral virtue, the female participant in an adulterous relationship was customarily held to be at fault. For men, sexual lapses were regarded as regrettable but inevitable due to their strong, 'natural' physical urges" (182). Placing quotation marks around this word in this context raises the issue of whether Barczewski means to impart skepticism toward Victorian views of male sexuality, or toward the notion that males, on average, have different physical characteristics than females.[52]

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[52] In *The Blank Slate*, Steven Pinker discusses how the idea of the Blank Slate (total social constructionism, which denies any biological basis for behavior) relates to the humanities, and how it relates to research in biology.

To deny that humans are an evolved species like any other is to take the traditional (but, after Darwin, reactionary) view that the west inherited from Christianity: human exceptionalism. In this view, humans are above and apart from nature and fundamentally different from all other animals; due to their possession of souls, humans have a kind of metaphysical freedom otherwise unknown in nature. In fact, the issue of gender roles is quite intertwined with the question of the supernatural; sexuality and supernaturalism have long been interlinked in myth. Joseph Campbell describes a Judaic tradition which projects the concept of psychological wholeness onto a male-female relationship: "[every soul], prior to its entering into this world, consists of a male and female, united into one being. When it descends on this earth the two parts separate and animate two different bodies" (240). In this essentialist religious view, male and female are intelligently designed for one another. There is only one soul and it is both male and female. However, in monotheistic tradition, this supernatural idealism of heterosexual love was displaced by the supernatural sexism more familiar to history. Milton, for example, describes gender roles as an innate characteristic of human souls: "Not equal, as their sex not equal seemed; / For contemplation he and valor formed, / For softness she and sweet attractive grace, / He for God only, she for God in him" (86). Despite medievalism's reputation for naïveté, truly romantic relationships indicative of a "two halves made whole" metaphysics are rare. In fact, the best portrayals of both masculinity and femininity result from characters in conflict with the metaphysics of their world. Framing medievalist gender roles as a matter of evolution versus essentialism makes it clear that gender roles depend on a given medievalist work's supernatural framework. As medievalist writers consider the implications of evolution on every subject, they similarly confront the implications of evolution for human sexuality. Here as elsewhere, there was a thematic struggle between fear of biological determinism and the concept of the soul.

II. Arthuriana: Souls and Seductions

Either sex alone

Is half itself, and in true marriage lies

Nor equal, nor unequal: each fulfils

Defect in each, and always thought in thought,

Purpose in purpose, will in will, they grow,

The single pure and perfect animal,

The two-celled heart beating, with one full stroke,

Life.

-Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *The Princess* (1847)

Tennyson's views were often taken to represent the zeitgeist of his time. In "The Woman's Cause is Man's" from *The Princess* (1847), he argues for an idealistic vision of love. The term "pure and perfect animal" certainly stands out; in both *In Memoriam A. H. H.* and in the *Idylls*, the "pure and perfect" and the "animal" would be very much separate. Indeed Tennyson is known for his despair at the notion that human beings are part of nature and no more. This is well before Darwin's ideas on human sexuality, but Tennyson's "two incomplete halves" view of human sexuality (and intelligent design) is highly idealized and thus vulnerable. What occurs over the course of Tennyson's career is a failure to naturalize this idealized concept.

In early poems such as "The Lady of Shalott" and "The Palace of Art," and in the later poems "Merlin and the Gleam" and "Merlin and Vivien," Tennyson links together beliefs about the soul, the imagination, and gender. In the autobiographical "The Palace of Art," Tennyson portrays his own soul as feminine – a conceit that relies on traditionalist views of women as sensitive and vulnerable, whereas men are rough and stoic. Tennyson's speaker builds a high palace where "My soul would live alone unto herself" (I). The palace is decorated with scenes

from mythology, religion, and literature, the art which sustains the soul: "every legend fair / Which the supreme Caucasian mind / Carved out of Nature for itself was there" (III). In other words, a sort of pan-Indo-European mosaic of meaning, exactly the sort of psychological bedrock that Eliot's Casaubon and the scholars, writers and poets he represents hoped to discover with *The Key To All Mythologies*. Here Tennyson's soul hopes to commune with the "silent faces of the Great and Wise, / My Gods, with whom I dwell!" (IV). The problem here is the same as with Casaubon, however – misguided escapism: "All these are mine, / And let the world have peace or wars, / 'Tis one to me" (IV). The result is contempt for the world, as this "soul" is disgusted by the instinct-driven masses and literally demonizes them with a biblical reference:

> O God-like isolation which art mine,
>
> I can but count thee perfect gain,
>
> What time I watch the darkening droves of swine
>
> That range on yonder plain.
>
> In filthy sloughs they roll a prurient skin,
>
> They graze and wallow, breed and sleep;
>
> And oft some brainless devil enters in,
>
> And drives them to the deep. (IV)

The cost of viewing the world from this feminine soul's "Intellectual throne" is abandoning real people's pain and struggles (V). Here, as in "The Lady of Shalott," Tennyson empathizes with the cloistered feminine spirit; we might call her "The Angel in the Palace." But Tennyson's speaker recognizes that this retreat is the result of emotional vulnerability; it is not "God-like isolation" but instead an amoral retreat that does nothing to address the psychological problems that caused it in the first place: as in "the dark corners of her palace," the soul faces "phantasms

weeping tears of blood, / And horrible nightmares" (V). Eventually, a "Deep dread and loathing of her solitude" overwhelms her (V). The palace has become a prison, even a tomb; the soul leaves the Palace of Art, but does not want it destroyed, since she may return to it one day. Thus Tennyson recognizes the potentially morbid psychology behind obsession with the past.

Like Tennyson's female soul in "The Palace of Art," The Lady of Shalott is sensitive, vulnerable, and cloistered away; Barczewski notes that this character (Elaine in Arthuriana) was popular in Tennyson's time, since "she represented the archetype of the Victorian female: beautiful, passive, and safely sequestered" (171). Yet, as in "The Palace of Art," Tennyson clearly empathizes with her desire to escape. I do not intend to add much to the interpretation of "The Lady of Shalott" above, namely that it is more about Celtic myth than Victorian domesticity, other than to say that the common factor in both is the implication that feminine beauty does not belong in the normal world: in the former, it is otherworldly, while in the latter, it must be preserved by being held apart. Whether it is the Lady of Shalott's weaving or the feminine soul's architecture, tapestries and paintings, in Tennyson's early medievalism women are artists whose retreat from the world leaves them with no way to express agency but to shape myths and legends. Indeed, the argument might be made that, themselves threatening in their beauty, these female characters are actually threatened by the beauty of the visions *they* create. Indeed, the Lady of Shalott only sees Lancelot through her weaver's mirror: perhaps she sees him only, to paraphrase Christina Rossetti, "Not as he is, but as he fills her dream." Barczewski hints at such an interpretation in her discussion of Tennyson's depiction of Elaine in the *Idylls*: she is "no passive recipient of male adoration. Quite the contrary – it is she who is the active subject, she who adores" (174). In fact, Barczewski admits that in Tennyson's "Lancelot and Elaine," "the act of looking is usurped by a female viewer" as in "The Lady of Shalott" (174).

Yet late in his career, in "Merlin and the Gleam," another autobiographical poem, Tennyson portrayed himself in a less "Victorian" and more "Romantic" way: abandoning any moral critique, he focused on the positive side of inspiration. Here Tennyson portrays his soul as the enchanter Merlin, motivated by the endless search for beauty and meaning, rather than condemning that search as escapist. This may correspond to a loss of belief in Victorian hopes of building a better world – a parallel may be found in the late-career William Morris, who also self-consciously returned to the Romantic dreamlands of his early years after disillusionment with efforts to improve his society (Thompson 513). The interaction of these two views – the active seeking of beauty and the passive withdrawal from the world that becomes a sort of imprisonment – come together in one of Tennyson's most powerful and troubling meditations on gender roles, "Merlin and Vivien." Here Tennyson places Romantic dreams of beauty and wisdom in a purely naturalistic context which reflects a deeply pessimistic interpretation of Darwin's ideas on human sexuality. It is worth briefly jumping forward to the most successful twentieth-century Arthurian retelling in English, T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* (written 1939-1958), to note how influential Tennyson's version was (as the most successful nineteenth-century Arthurian retelling in English) and to clarify Tennyson's own ideas.

For Tennyson, if people are in fact an evolved species of animals, related not just to chimpanzees but to fish, clams and barnacles, then this not only discredits the Christian religious notion of special creation (which includes aesthetic and moral *intentions*), but threatens to dispel idealized notions of love and chivalry as well – which will wreak havoc with human aspirations and motivations. Anyone who dismisses Tennyson's concern over Darwin's potential for disillusionment on the matter of relations between the sexes, as mere Victorian prudery, should consider the degree to which the very idea of evolution still terrifies millions worldwide today.

White's treatment of the implications of evolution (in his case, specifically the neo-Darwinian synthesis first achieved in the 1930s) shows the influence of Tennyson, but is so intensified that it borders on satire – an appropriate stance since White seems to have understood Tennyson's despair in general, but his views of human nature during World War II became so pessimistic that he thought that "Nature, red in tooth and claw" would be an improvement. Indeed, White persistently used biology to disillusion naïve human beliefs such as the exceptionalism of special creation; yet he thought that accepting evolutionary biology's description of humans was the only possible basis for any future improvement: naïve idealism (whether religious, political economic, etc.) was part of the problem. White's Merlyn trains the child Arthur in biology by transforming him into animals of different species, and takes him to see a predator Pike in order to understand exactly those aspects of Nature that Tennyson found abhorrent. Merlyn tells Arthur, "You will see what it is to be a king" (47). The "King of the Moat" explains:

> 'There is nothing,' said the monarch, 'except…power to grind and power to digest, power to seek and power to find, power to await and power to claim, all power and pitilessness… Love is a trick played on us by the forces of evolution. Pleasure is the bait laid down by the same. There is only power. Power is of the individual mind, but the mind's power is not enough. Power of the body decides everything in the end, and only Might is Right… Now I think it is time that you should go away, young master, for I find this conversation uninteresting and exhausting. I think you ought to go away really almost at once, in case my disillusioned mouth should suddenly determine to introduce you to my great gills, which have teeth in them also.' (48-49)

The passage is Tennysonian in the extreme, red in tooth claw and maw, perhaps to the point of verging on satire in phrases like "my disillusioned mouth." Moreover, this is not simply an

interesting literary passage, but a sophisticated observation on the implications of evolution for psychology. The implications were there in Darwin's work and Darwin discussed some of them, but there was a lot of work yet to be done, and much of the twentieth-century research in biology which Richard Dawkins summarizes in *The Selfish Gene* (1976) moves in that direction.

For Tennyson, if humans are animals, then trust is subservient to lust and love becomes "a trick played on us by the forces of evolution." This is how he depicts Merlin's seduction by Vivien – an episode which many previous writers had glossed over. How could the wisest man in the world fall prey to "slight and sprightly talk, / And vivid smiles"? (MV). This poem's discussion of Victorian apprehensions over sexuality was so provocative that even Swinburne dismissed it as a depiction of "vacillations of a dotard under the moral and physical manipulations of a prostitute" (Buckler 111). One has touched a nerve when even Swinburne is offended; "Merlin and Vivien" takes, in Tennyson's own terms, a devastatingly naturalistic view.

According to Engelberg, "Merlin and Vivien" uses animal imagery to suggest sexual activity, particularly images of hunting which express Vivien's "hunt for Merlin's soul" (290). He notes that whether bird, serpent or cat, Vivien always takes the form of predator, even though she claims to be the prey, a "fly caught in a spider's web" (290). As "The Palace of Art" makes clear, Tennyson felt only disgust for the instinct-driven masses who "graze and wallow, breed and sleep." Merlin is suspicious of Vivien from the start, observing that "fine plots may fail, / Though harlots paint their talk as well as face / With colours of the heart that are not theirs" (MV). For her part, Vivien deems men "brainless bulls, / Dead for one heifer!" (BB). She views Arthur's knights as pretentious brutes, who are ripe for disillusionment as she exploits their instincts and confronts their beliefs.

We have seen the identification of Merlin with Tennyson in "Merlin and the Gleam," and here Tennyson emphasizes Merlin's fallibility as an aged and lonely man: "The old man, / Tho' doubtful, felt the flattery, and at times / Would flatter his own wish in age for love, / And half believe her true" (MV). But despite the fact that both Merlin and Vivien know exactly what is going on, Merlin accepts his fate because he is suffering from an *In Memoriam*-style depression: "Then fell on Merlin a great melancholy; / He walked with dreams and darkness" (MV). He decides that it is no longer worth resisting nature, in its clearest manifestations of sex and death; his art, powerful as it was in the *Idllys*, is no more help; all he can see is a "Death in all life and lying in all love, / The meanest having power upon the highest, / And the high purpose broken by the worm" (MV). Vivien seeks to extract Merlin's magical knowledge and then use it against him – especially the charm that immobilizes its subject:

> The man so wrought on ever seem'd to lie
>
> Closed in the four walls of a hollow tower,
>
> From which was no escape for evermore;
>
> And none could find that man for evermore,
>
> Nor could he see but him who wrought the charm
>
> Coming and going, and he lay as dead
>
> And lost to life and use and name and fame. (MV)

Merlin protests to her, "I fear, / Giving you power upon me thro' this charm, / That you might play me falsely, having power, / However well ye think ye love me now" (MV). He tries to flatter her with the charitable and naïve interpretation that although she surely loves him, she may become corrupted by power, or she may even suffer "some wild turn of anger, or a mood / Of overstrain'd affection, it may be, / To keep [him] all to your own self, – or else / A sudden

spurt of woman's jealousy, / Should try this charm on whom ye say ye love" (MV). He wants her love and approval without giving her the knowledge which would give her power over him. Merlin refuses to trust Vivien because he suspects she is seducing him for the sake of power.

No matter how he tiptoes around the issue, there is no rhetorical strategy that will allow him to avoid offending her (or allowing her to act offended) while still withholding his trust. Of course, readers know that the charm is all she wants; they know that although Vivien demands absolute trust, as soon as she obtains it she will promptly betray it. But in playing this game she uses the nature of the charm as a rhetorical weapon: she implies that Merlin has probably used this charm on many women, who remain alive but imprisoned in hidden locations where only Merlin can access them, in a sort of eternal sexual slavery. This is a shocking accusation, but it is also not entirely without a basis as a description of what *some* men (or at least the most heinous caricatures of men) might do with access to such a charm. The charm is basically a supernatural form of abduction, and surely men have abducted women far more than the reverse. Indeed, once Vivien obtains Merlin's charm and uses it on him, she never visits him at all, whereas if he were to use it on her he would likely continue this pathetic courtship forever (and other male characters would behave in a more obviously evil and exploitative manner).

The cynical gender dynamic is even clearer when Merlin explains the charm's origin: it was discovered ages ago by a sage whose obsession with knowledge consumed and physically transformed him in a manner very similar to Gollum's long corruption in Tolkien's mythopoeia:

A little glassy-headed hairless man,

Who lived alone in a great wild on grass;

Read but one book, and ever reading grew

So grated down and filed away with thought,

> So lean his eyes were monstrous; while the skin
>
> Clung but to crate and basket, ribs and spine.
>
> And since he kept his mind on one sole aim,
>
> Nor ever touch'd fierce wine, nor tasted flesh,
>
> Nor own'd a sensual wish, to him the wall
>
> That sunders ghosts and shadow-casting men
>
> Became a crystal, and he saw them thro' it.
>
> And heard their voices talk behind the wall,
>
> And learnt their elemental secrets. (MV)

This ascetic is approached by a king who wants to possess the most beautiful woman in the realm, and has no concern at all for her consciousness, agency, personhood – or soul:

> Then he taught the King to charm the Queen
>
> In such-wise, that no man could see her more,
>
> Nor saw she save the King, who wrought the charm,
>
> Coming and going, and she lay as dead
>
> And lose all use of life. (MV)

In enabling this ultimate dehumanization, the ascetic rejects all the king's rewards. As a representation of pure intellect, he is utterly disinterested in worldly pleasures; his single-minded pursuit of knowledge for its own sake is its own reward. The ancient king, a monstrous figure of male lust and jealousy, desires this beautiful woman only as a possession – literally a warm body inaccessible to all others, a sexual slave stripped of all will, freedom, dignity and individuality, in a harem whose walls cannot be breached. This horribly pessimistic view of male sexuality is similar to Swinburne's scandalous depiction of necrophilia in "The Leper" (1866).

Merlin's sexist arrogance proves his undoing: he thinks that only he, and not Vivien, can read the ancient ascetic's book (160). Protesting her innocence and mere desire for Merlin's trust, Vivien says that if she has lied, may heaven incinerate her with a bolt of lightning. Amusingly enough, the sky darkens and a storm closes in, but no lightning strikes her. As is consistent with Tennyson's doubtful depiction of religious themes elsewhere in the *Idylls*, this might just be a cruel coincidence upon which the faithful impose their wishful interpretation. Or perhaps God is being merciful to Vivien, although she has none for Merlin. Proving herself untrustworthy the very moment he hands over the charm, she locks him away in involuntary seclusion, just like the ancient ascetic imprisoned the ancient queen – could this even be a sort of poetic justice? In any case, this isolation is far worse than that found in "The Lady of Shalott" or "The Palace of Art," and now Vivien is the wisest enchanter at court.

Vivien, like Mordred and, in a parallel context, even Loki, holds the moral standards of court she seeks to destroy against it; though she adheres to none of these standards herself, she charges Camelot with hypocrisy. Like Loki, by revealing the sexual indiscretions of the court, she degrades them and dispels their aura of honour and wisdom. Like Loki, she objects that any ideals built on lies and delusions are not worthy of the name and deserve to fall.[53] It is she who assesses that the figurehead of all this hypocrisy, King Arthur, is well aware that his ideals are fraudulent: "Man! Is he man at all, who knows and winks? / Sees what his fair bride is and does, and winks?" (MV). Brashear notes that Tennyson attributes knowledge of Guinevere's infidelity to exactly those characters who use sexuality to undermine the moral fabric of society: Vivien and Tristram (47). Vivien spreads this knowledge like a plague through Camelot. Arthur has failed to live up to a man's responsibility to punish his wife's infidelity; for Tennyson the moral fabric of society seems to derive from proper behavior; that is, control of human sexuality.

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[53] At least, this is one interpretation of Loki's role in Norse mythology, i.e. in "Loki's Quarrel" in *The Poetic Edda*.

Buckler observes that beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, criticism of gender roles in the *Idylls* has focused on Tennyson's chauvinism, priggishness and prudery (Buckler 246-249). The term "woman worship" recurs in the *Idylls* (LT), suggesting that Tennyson is well aware that chivalric ideals are unrealistic when it comes to gender dynamics, since they place women on an impossible pedestal. Yet generally, it seems difficult to deny that Tennyson's interpretation of gender roles in the *Idylls* became both more pessimistic for both sexes (the ancient ascetic and the ancient king make it hard to argue that masculinity is particularly glorified in "Merlin and Vivien") *and* more sexist than in his early work. This is especially clear in Tennyson's revisions to the story. By removing Arthur's sexual indiscretion and unwitting incest, which produces Mordred, Tennyson tips the scales against women, in terms of moral responsibility; in Tennyson's version, unlike in Malory's, Mordred is not Arthur's son (Rosenberg 55). Similarly, Tennyson creates doubt as to whether Galahad is the son of Lancelot and Elaine: "some / Call'd him a son of Lancelot, and some said / Begotten by enchantment – chatterers they… For when was Lancelot wonderingly lewd?" (HG). Thus Tennyson's natural versus supernatural views occur, here applied to sexuality. As with religion, it seems most plausible to interpret the ambiguity and tension as the result of "Wandering between two worlds," as Arnold put it.

Buckler argues that Tennyson's Arthur *must* be naïve about his wife's affair in order to remain idealized: "Could not Arthur be the perfect king and still entertain a small suspicion? For Tennyson, the answer is clearly no; the ideal moral cosmos that the poet has conceived will not permit a suspicious nature in the King. Even when told[,]… Arthur remains suspicious only temporarily…. [He seems like] a hypocrite who pretends not to notice… to maintain harmony in the kingdom" (249). By Tennyson's time, *everyone* knew the story of Guinevere's infidelity, and this readerly awareness found its way into his retelling. He responded to "What the king knew

and when he knew it" with *more* and *earlier*, than in any previous telling. Tennyson makes this knowledge the intellectual lynchpin of his *Idylls*; from faith to doubt, supernaturalism to naturalism, essentialism to evolution, from immortal souls to "dust and ashes."

Buckler connects Guinevere's infidelity to a Victorian view of sexuality; to physical lust and instinct rather than to any religious ideal of love (31). Tennyson's fear of human sexuality is more related to fear of philosophical disillusionment in general than any misogny. For Pelleas, disillusionment with the divine is also disillusionment with true love: both chimeras belied by humanity's true nature. His faith in God dies with belief in Guinevere's faithfulness to Arthur:

> Fool, beast – he, she, or I? myself most fool;
>
> Beast too, as lacking human wit – disgraced,
>
> Dishonoured all for trial of true love –
>
> Love? – we be all alike: only the King
>
> Hath made us fools and liars. (PE)

Gone is the true love that king and queen symbolized. Barczewski's interpretation of Guinevere's place in Victorian culture may describe Tolkien's retelling better than Tennyson's; Tolkien describes her affair with Lancelot thus: "Her smile dazzled, and her sudden weeping / with tears softened, tender poison, / steel well-tempered. Strong oaths they broke" (37). Yet Tolkien's Guinevere is also a supernatural force of doom in the terms of northern tradition:

> Dear she loved him
>
> with love unyielding, lady ruthless,
>
> fair as fay-woman and fell-minded
>
> in the world walking for the woe of men.
>
> Fate sent her forth. (37)

Barczewski argues that the Victorian notion of separate spheres caused Victorian medievalists to portray women "as threats to Arthur's realm who at best distract the knights of the Round Table from the path of virtue and duty and at worst actively plot the downfall of Camelot" (164-166). Her argument regarding Victorian Arthuriana may be summarized as follows: Elaine was the ideal of femininity, Vivien was its antithesis, and Guinevere represented the fall from the former to the latter (171). Victorian authors "emphasized Merlin's utter helplessness in the face of Vivien's sexual power" (177). This is a sort of body-over-mind dynamic; given Tennyson's concern with the behavioural implications of a worldview, this expresses fear of a "reduction" of gender roles from Romantic idealism to Darwinian naturalism. The connection between evolutionary naturalism (as opposed to supernatural creation) and conflicting, rather than cooperating, gender roles (as opposed to idealized true love) occurs throughout the *Idylls*. Tennyson interprets gender roles along the same sliding scale as theism.

Barczewksi's interpretation of the Lancelot-Guinevere affair in the *Idylls* is that Tennyson blames it entirely on the queen: it is "a straightforward account of the consequences which female adultery could have for the nation…. [S]he challenges patriarchal values by indulging her sexual desire with Lancelot, whose complicity is mitigated due to the irresistible nature of the temptation she presents" (184). This interpretation ironically downplays *male* agency. Barczewski calls Morris "the only Victorian author who truly attempted to vindicate Guinevere" by supporting a single, rather than double, standard of romantic obligation (188). Guinevere's admission in the poem named after her, "Mine will ever be a name of scorn," can be taken as an admission of eternal guilt borne of Victorian misogyny, or as an anachronistic expression of awareness of the nature of the legend, which by no means accedes to its own vilification; in the *Idylls* reputation itself is exposed as unreliable rumour and wishful thinking.

III. The Northern Tradition: Charms and Curses

Morris, despite "The Defense of Guenevere," shifted away from individualism; the later Morris would never condone Guenevere's choice to follow her own passions at the expense of the community. Richard Frith identifies two phases in Morris's medievalism: the initial aesthetic phase and the later utopian socialist phase (118). The emergence of this ideal of selflessness is clear by the time of Morris's *Sigurd* (1876), who as Heather O'Donoghue notes is "improbably, a just and humane ruler, whose political dictum, like Morris's own, was 'that the sheaf shall be for the plougher'" (161). Similar views are already apparent in "The Lovers of Gudrun," from *The Earthly Paradise* (1868). Some scholars argue that, due to the affair between Morris's wife Jane and his friend Rossetti, Morris is sympathetic to Bodli as the "third wheel" in a love triangle. This may be true, but Morris makes Bodli an underhanded Christian and glorifies Kiartan as a principled, democratic pagan and a follower of Odin. Insofar as Morris saw Christianity in the Marxist manner, he was hostile to it. When Kiartan and his fellow Icelanders visit Norway and King Olaf pressures them to convert, Morris emphasizes the clash between pagan democracy and monarchist monotheism as Kiartan defiantly replies, "Tell the king / That I left Iceland for another thing / Than to curse all the dead men of my race" (n.pag.). Later, when the king tries to force Christianity on Iceland, Kiartan even considers war – not in the original saga, but Morris's Icelanders are champions of (a defiantly pagan or at least secular) democracy:

> And so it may be, friends, that we shall free
>
> The land this tide of the long tyranny
>
> That Harald Fair-hair laid on it, and give
>
> Unto all folk beneath just laws to live,
>
> As in the old days. (n.pag.)

Kiartan justifies his stance by saying that Christianity is just as warlike (n.pag.). Then he cites

the pagan ideal of fame achieved by dying in battle, saying that such a story will please Gudrun:

>As in Atli's Hall

>The Niblungs fell; nor worser will it sound

>That thus it was, when we are underground,

>And over there our Gudrun hears the tale (n.pag.).

This indicates Morris's understanding that in the saga world, men earn women's approval by

achieving a reputation for prowess in battle even at the cost of their lives; it frames Gudrun as a

consumer of violent tales. As Morris's Kiartan rides to his doom he sings one of Odin's songs;

his death, according to Teutonic Democracy, is the death of both freedom and paganism.

The tension between the Victorian idealization of women as innocent and passive and the

active, clever, sarcastic, ruthless women of the sagas is made humorously clear when Morris uses

terms like *damsel* and *dainty* in "The Lovers of Gudrun." Yet he does capture Gudrun's forceful

character as she bitterly condemns Bodli for deceiving her into marriage:

>Great is thy gain herein I

>A bitter broken thing to seem to win,

>A soul the fruit of lies shall yet make vile;

>A body for thy base lust to defile. (n.pag.)

In other words, she argues that Bodli's unscrupulous conduct was a result of his (instinctive,

animalistic) lust rather than his (idealistic, romantic) love for her as a person. It is, in short, a

matter of body rather than soul, just as Tennyson frames these issues. When Gudrun's first

husband dies in a shipwreck, Morris treats the supernatural as a matter of rumour: "drowned was

he, says my tale, / By wizard's spells amidst a summer gale" (n.pag.). As Gudrun hates him, she

laughs upon dreaming of the shipwreck; she is associated with pagan vengefulness and mystery. Morris doesn't trap her in the Angel in the House role – in Morris's retelling, she wants to go with Kiartan to Norway (n.pag.). In both her pagan defiance and her vigilant agency, she is much like Morris's Kiartan. Though Kiartan's father Olaf forbids his sons from seeking revenge while he lives, Kiartan's mother Thorgert swears revenge in terms of paganism versus Christianity:

> If the old gods by Christ and mass are killed,
>
> Or driven away, yet am I left behind,
>
> Daughter of Egil, and with such a mind
>
> As Egil had; wherefore if Asa Thor
>
> Has never lived, and there are men no more
>
> Within the land, yet by this king's gift here,
>
> And by this cup Thor owned once, do I swear
>
> That the false foster-brother shall be slain
>
> Before three summers have come round again,
>
> If but my hand must bring him to his end. (n.pag.)

It was unusual in the sagas for a woman to threaten violence personally. In *The House of the Wolfings* (1889), Morris's Germanic clans are vigilant against any encroachment on their territory; when invaded, both men and women fight to defend their land (XIV).

Morris's hero Thiodolf struggles to avoid selfishness, which his lover, the supernatural shield-maiden Wood-Sun, offers in the form of magical armour which will protect its wearer no matter what – and which makes sacrificing one's life for one's fellows impossible (XXVI). Wood-Sun's fault is covetousness – that Ruskinian flaw that informs so much of medievalism. Her attempt to get Thiodolf to save himself at the expense of his people is a reversal of the

Valkyrie's traditional role as chooser of the slain. In explaining her motivations, Wood-Sun describes a "Lady of Shalott"-style Romantic reversal, in which the supernatural female being is left longing for a real human hero, rather than the other way around: for once Thiodolf dies, "I shall be living; still on thee shall waste my thought: / I shall long and lack thy longing; I shall pine for what is nought" (XVII). As a former immortal, like Tolkien's Lúthien or Arwen, Wood-Sun gave up immortality for love of a mortal:

> A man grieves, and he gladdens, or he dies and his grief is gone;
>
> But what of the grief of the Gods, and the sorrow never undone?
>
> Yea verily I am the outcast. When first in thine arms I lay
>
> On the blossoms of the woodland my godhead passed away. (XVII)

We might compare Wood-Sun's sadness to the grief of Tennyson's Tithonus, or to the sorrow of the immortal elves in Tolkien's mythology. Caught between gods and mortals, myth and society, Wood-Sun belongs to neither world. She understands the nature of her reality in a way that no mortal does, and yet she is in conflict with it since she has refused to obey the gods and has been cast out by them. She is arguably the most lucid character in the romance.

Her daughter with Thiodolf, Hall-Sun, inherits some of her mother's supernatural abilities: she can communicate with animals, can see the future, and can make prophecies while in a trance state (V). She can also send her spirit out of her body to observe distant events – the first battle in the story is told through her visions. Her role as symbolic keeper of her people's culture is consistent both with the saga world and also with Victorian norms (Houghton 348). As in the sagas, part of the woman's role is to encourage the men to fight: Hall-Sun lights the war-flame and makes a war speech to the men. Moreover, like Tolkien's Eowyn, she becomes protector of the people once the warriors depart (XXV). Lest this seem unglorious, Morris makes

it clear that in his Germanic clans, women so inclined can fight alongside the men, describing a band of armed women thus: "There stood the ten maidens with Hrosshild, well nigh as strong as men, clean-limbed and tall, tanned with sun and wind; for all these were unwearied afield, and oft would lie out a-nights, since they loved the lark's song better than the mouse's squeak" (XIV). Each of the women is willing to commit suicide rather than provide information to their enemies. Because women were not universally expected to fight, unlike men, these women's dedication is greater than that of male warriors, several of whom are caught providing information to the Romans throughout the story (and left "for the wolves to deal with") (XII).

Wood-Sun then explains the origin of the hauberk: a goddess had a dwarf make the armour for her, in return for her sexual favours. Morris describes how "his greedy eyes devoured her" (XVI). The scenario is similar to Loki's theft of the dwarf Andvari's gold, which provokes a curse on the treasure in Morris's *Sigurd* (81). Here, the goddess waits for the dwarf to finish his work, but instead of holding up her end of the bargain, she paralyzes him with magic:

> But he saw not her girdle loosened, or her bosom gleam on his love,
>
> For she set the sleep-thorn in him, that he saw, but might not move,
>
> Though the bitter salt tears burned him for the anguish of his greed;
>
> And she took the hammer's offspring, her unearned morning meed. (XVI)

The paralysis motif is as disturbing as "Merlin and Vivien," but the workaholic Morris's use of the term *unearned* is surely significant. Like Andvari, the dwarf thus curses his own work:

> I lay this curse upon it, that whoso weareth the same,
>
> Shall save his life in the battle, and have the battle's shame;
>
> He shall live through wrack and ruin, and ever have the worse,
>
> And drag adown his kindred, and bear the people's curse. (XVI)

Merlin and the dwarf are left alone; once their temptresses have extracted their power, they have no more need of them. However wise or ancient they may be, they prove vulnerable to manipulation and have their agency stolen when the tables are turned upon them.

H. Rider Haggard's *The Saga of Eric Brighteyes* features the anti-heroine, Swanhild, who resembles Tennyson's Vivien (in her use of seduction, schemes, and supernatural abilities to gain power). Because Swanhild is illegitimate she is called "the Fatherless," but Eric tells her: "I think that Loki, the God of Guile, was thy father" (44). Here Haggard associates Swanhild's subversive magic with Loki, known for criticizing and undermining world order in the mythology. In her struggles to shape the plot, Swanhild is the one who makes the story progress; she is the most active character in Haggard's novel. Although Germanic myth has no shortage of female fighters, in the sagas women do not fight. Yet whereas Morris's Thorgert threatens violence with her own hands, Haggard's Swanhild goes further: she is present at battles and even instructs her men on how to kill her rival Gudruda with a sword. She even states that she wishes she were a man so she could kill people directly, rather than relying on proxies and pawns (100).

Swanhild's mother Groa attributes her own supernatural powers to her Finnish upbringing (55). While this point of view has a basis in the sagas (the Finns are always wizards), Wawn argues that this convention prevents deeper psychological analysis: "That Haggard is content to allow Swanhild's Finnish upbringings to explain her behaviour marks one of the ways in which his well-crafted tale falls short of becoming a searching examination of jealousy in human relations…. [The sagas] were more daring and more revealing" (2000 334-335). Perhaps Haggard does use the supernatural as a cover for a relatively reductionist account of gender roles, but Tennyson used such a scheme in a sophisticated and critical manner – and Haggard claims in his introduction that this is indeed what the sagas did. He actually specifies in his introduction to

his own novel which elements he has mythicized, in the process illustrating an amusingly pessimistic understanding of gender relations: "Swanhild would have needed no 'familiar' to instruct her in her evil schemes; Eric would have wanted no love-draught to bring about his overthrow" (intro, iv). In other words, no magic is needed to explain a male hero who betrays his lover by sleeping with another woman; in Haggard's view, the "potion of forgetfulness" in the *The Saga of the Volsungs* is simply a magical excuse for male lust.

The person who suffers under the current order is most likely to question it – and in *Eric Brighteyes* that is Swanhild. Of marriage, she complains "this day I wed a dotard, and go his chattel and his bride across the sea" (106). Like Vivien with Merlin, Swanhild quickly masters the "dotard" in question to his detriment (103), but she also makes an important feminist criticism of the social order by equivocating "bride" with "chattel" – marriage, that is, is an exchange of property (a woman) between *men*. In other words, just like Morris's Gudrun, Swanhild complains that she is treated as a mere body and not a mind or soul with agency. Anna Vaninskaya notes that Swanhild's cynicism about marriage is justified:

> In Haggard's Iceland, father and brother, to advance their position, contemplate selling the beautiful Gudruda in marriage to an evil but powerful chieftain from the North. Such motivations are unthinkable in the world of Morris's tribes, where the two political marriages uniting the kindreds of the Wolfings and the Burgdalers are based on mutual love, historical necessity and commitment to the Folk. (52)

Of course, even if one takes the cynical view that marriage is a property transaction between men, the prospective husband also needs to prove his worth. The bride's father demanding proof of the suitor's worth is a common folktale motif, taken to extreme lengths in Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* in the legend of Lúthien and Beren. The immortal king Thingol demands that the

mortal hero Beren bring him a Silmaril in exchange for his permission to marry his daughter Lúthien; success in doing this would necessarily entail defeating an enemy who was once a god and to whom all the immortal elves have been losing a brutal war for centuries. In *Eric Brighteyes*, Gudruda's father Asmund says that since Eric lacks wealth and power, he should come to a feast "by the path over Golden Falls" (25), that is, by performing the suicidal feat of descending an inaccessible waterfall. Asmund does not think that Eric will attempt the feat and later claims to have been joking. Yet the father's authority here seems to indicate an implicit property agreement between two men over the future life of a woman. In the sagas, the woman's consent is sometimes sought, but her family, above all her father, has a strong influence.

Swanhild even seems to serve as Haggard's mouthpiece, when her speech of unrequited love to Eric Brighteyes echoes the author's own *Hamlet*-like sentiments from his introduction: "Joy is dead within me, music's but a jangled madness in my ears, food hath no savour on my tongue, my youth is sped ere my dawn is day" (106). Swanhild's notion of music as "jangled madness" speaks to an inability to interpret, to make meaning, at the most basic level. Yet even Eric views life as meaningless: "nothing but hate and strife, weariness and bitter envy to fret away our strength, and at last, if we come so far, sorrowful age and death, and thereafter we know not what" (117). At Orkney, when her "dotard" husband Atli is away, Swanhild gives Eric a drink with a love potion in it (189). It only works for one night, however, and wears off the next day. As Haggard says in his introduction this "potion of forgetfulness" (transplanted from the *The Saga of the Volsungs*) is but a magical excuse for male lust. Reflecting on her failed seduction, Swanhild expresses her intention to exploit the assumption that male sexuality is aggressive, female sexuality passive: "Now Eric will go to Atli and tell this tale. Nay, there I will be beforehand with him, and with another story – an ancient wile of women truly, but one that

never yet has failed them, nor ever will" (193). She rightly assesses this tactic as a traditional one in literature, and almost breaks the fourth wall here; if Haggard mixes some Shakespeare into his saga, it is the plotting, metafictional manipulator Swanhild who benefits the most. Haggard's narrator even creates dramatic irony by telling readers that other characters are falling for her lies *while* this happens: "'Nay, foster-father, I have been to the Temple,' she answered, lying" (18).

Perhaps Haggard's most original re-evaluation of his source material comes when addressing the sexism of Norse myth: if those who die in battle go to Valhalla where they reside until Ragnarok, and those who do *not* die in battle go to Hel, where do women, who are not encouraged to die in battle, go after death? Since the afterlife for women is not described in Norse myth, Haggard assumes that it is Hel. They doubt whether such places even exist, but reject any notion of a gender-segregated afterlife (16). Later, however, Gudruda experiences a vision which seems to confirm a sexist metaphysics (or at least that the gods require men and not women, to fight): "Gudruda dreamed that she was dead and that she sat nigh to the golden door that is in Odin's house at Valhalla, by which the warriors pass and repass forever. There she sat from age to age, listening to the thunder of ten thousand thousand tramping feet" (85). Odin appears and asks what she wants: "I seek Eric Brighteyes… who passed hither a thousand years ago, and for love of whom I am heart-broken." But Odin refuses, saying that "none shall do more service at the coming of grey wolf Fenrir. Pass on and leave him to his glory and his God." She refuses this and offers her life to Odin in payment for union with Eric (85). Odin honours her intercession as the lovers have one night together before they are parted by Gudruda's death.

Despite all of Swanhild's magic (associated with Loki), Gudruda's supernatural intercession with Odin has a defining influence on the plot. Her sorrow looking back over a thousand years is an excellent Romantic touch. This is the one place where Gudruda casts aside

the damsel role and chooses, like Morris's Wood-Sun, joy and mortality over sorrow and immortality. We might protest that even this willing martyr role might seem conventional, but Gudruda is given an extraordinary degree of agency with which to deal with the supernatural in this scene – more than even Swanhild, who quite rightly suspects that supernatural forces manipulate her as she manipulates others (308). She is doomed to become a "familiar" or enabler of dark magic after her death, whereas the two white swans that fly alongside her doomed ship at the novel's conclusion represent the spirits of Eric and Gudruda in different bodies – a fairytale ending that fulfills their prediction of union after death and draws on Victorian, rather than Viking, religious views (318).

IV. Mythopoeia: Sexuality and the Supernatural

Spirits when they please
Can either sex assume, or both; so soft
And uncompounded is their essence pure,
Not tied or manacled with joint or limb
Nor founded on the brittle strength of bones,
Like cumbrous flesh; but in what shape they choose
Dilated or condensed, bright or obscure,
Can execute their airy purposes,
And works of love or enmity fulfill.
-John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667)

We have seen how medievalist writers made use of the idea of the soul in retellings, particularly how the traditional sense of body-soul dualism was threatened by an evolutionary account of human origins. Yet although evolutionary ideas can be found in the mythopoeic works of Dunsany, Eddison and even Tolkien, mythopoeia offers an unparalleled opportunity to

design the philosophical situation of the world in which a story takes place, without any necessity to reference the worldview of the culture(s) whose tales one is retelling, or even to refer to the science of one's own time. Of course, both medieval and modern views of humanity's place in nature influenced the great mythopoeias of the twentieth century, but the connection between sexuality and the supernatural has a particular importance when one is designing a fictional philosophical situation: if there are souls, do they have a gender?

The western habit has been to separate aspects of human experience into dualistic categories. Filed under the body side of soul-body dualism are things which clearly relate to the body's needs such as hunger, thirst, exhaustion, and perhaps emotions perceived as more "vulgar," such as rage or lust, which we share with animals. In the category related to the soul are the intellect and the conscience, as well as aesthetics such as the creation and appreciation of art, and more exalted (rather than vulgar) emotional experiences such as inspiration and contemplation. Sexuality sabotages a scheme, since it incorporates both bodily functions of lust, jealousy and reproduction which humans share with animals on the one hand, and high-minded ideals of self-sacrifice, loyalty, and even worship on the other. So, given the opportunity to invent gods, spirits and souls, to define the laws and nature of an imaginary reality, how do mythopoeic authors treat these themes?

At first one might consider mythopoeic treatments of sexuality reactionary. One might question whether Eddison's explanation for the problem of evil mimics mythic stories which blame death and suffering on women, such as the story of Pandora's Box, or even more the Fall in the Garden of Eden, with Eve playing a key role. The Lady Fiorinda designs our world while in a bad mood, and this leads to our world's limitations and faults; if anything she designs our world with deliberate malice, whereas Pandora and Eve were foolish but not malicious. Yet this

is surely an ungenerous interpretation of Eddison, who portrays Fiorinda and many other female characters (Prezmyra in *The Worm Ouroboros*, Rosma in *The Mezentian Gate*) as brilliantly clever and sarcastically humorous – and as consistently among the most politically astute and philosophically aware of characters. For Eddison, sexuality is a fundamental reality, as fundamental as consciousness itself. However, as a Nietzschean, Eddison feels no obligation at all to adhere to the orthodoxies of the past, particularly those he considers poisonous. Thus, Eddison completely rejects the ludicrous idea that God is male and refuses to make women secondary to men (i.e., a scenario in which women are literally second, when Eve is created from Adam's rib). Indeed, for Eddison the idea of one male god "is poverty… not tolerable save to… insectile creatures as far removed below men's natures as men's below God's" (1968 258). For Eddison, the most intense and powerful intuitions come from relationships between men and women – so much so that such relationships hint at a truth greater than any empiricism: "What to bank on? Empirical evidence of fact? Or the knowledge inside you that cuts and burns?" (292). In other words, for Eddison such relationships are the basis of a new religion. Lessingham reflects that he and his wife must have known each other in other lives: "The scientific fact. Truth, like enough. But it means nothing. It may be the explanation of Edward Lessingham and Mary Scarnside… No explanation whatever of Me and She" (291). Thus, instead of any masculine monotheism, Eddison invents a theology of two fundamental, complex and complementary forces or deities, male and female, whose manifestations account for all life:

> All men and women, all living creatures, the whole phenomenal world material and spiritual, even the very forms of Being – time, space, eternity – do but subsist in or by the pleasure of these Two, partaking (every individual soul, we may think, in its degree), of Their divine nature. (1968 xxv)

In other words, to exactly the same degree of power, legitimacy, creativity, and manifestation that there is a male deity, there is a female one. Yet, as much as we may applaud his abolition of the multi-millennia tradition of sexism in western tradition (to the point where women still cannot be ordained as priests even under an apparently liberal Pope), Eddison's invented metaphysics still values people differently. His use of the word "degree" is particularly important, as he uses the same term in *The Worm Ouroboros* to distinguish between different species such as fish and lizards, and yet in *A Fish Dinner in Memison* it clearly refers to different individual people and the proportion of divinity each possesses. Fiorinda exists as a manifestation of the eternal feminine to a very high degree, and thus she has the most insight into the system of worlds and realities she inhabits and creates. It is no coincidence that she is an aristocrat: James Stephens, who wrote the introduction to Eddison's *A Fish Dinner in Memison*, remarks that "Every woman Mr. Eddison writes of is a Queen. Even the maids of these, at their servicings, are Princesses. Mr. Eddison is the only modern man who likes women" (xiv). At the very least, Eddison is infatuated with the female characters of the saga tradition as much as with the male ones, probably more. But his belief in meritocracy turns sinister when he begins to weigh souls against one another, in which individuals that he considers inferior are literally less real, since the maximum manifestation of male and female deities, which he refers to as "He and She," noting the many names given them in numerous mythologies, are "more real than living man" (1968 xxv). Indeed King Mezentius, the equivalent of Lady Fiorinda in terms of a character most endowed with divine qualities, kills men of lower stature without regrets, since "They are a kind of nothing." In a sense, they are empty suits, since in perhaps the most extreme manifestation of the "Philosophy of Clothes" of all, that shard of divinity called the soul is real, and the body mere clothing. Stephens writes,

> The idea, *woman*, in these pages is most quaint, most lively, most disturbing. She is delicious and aloof; greedy and treacherous and imperturbable: the mistress of man, and the empress of life: wearing, merely as a dress, the mouse, the lynx, the wren, or the hero: she is the goddess, as she pleases, or the god. (1968 xiv)[54]

In Eddison's eccentric metaphysics, sexuality is an essentialist, eternal force; lives and bodies are mere costumes animated (as the case may be) by a greater or lesser degree of spirit. Eddison himself explains that in his mythopoeia, "ultimate reality rests in a Masculine-Feminine dualism" (1968 xxiv). Interestingly, they can metaphysically "cross-dress" (the eternal feminine can manifest in a lifetime as a male hero or god) if they prefer, yet their own natures remain unchanged. This perhaps accounts for King Mezentius's doom, and one of Eddison's most complex characters: Mezentius's wife and Fiorinda's mother, Queen Rosma Parry, an intimidating and sexually conflicted woman with "a most masculine will" (217).

This extreme emphasis on the beauty of the human form as manifested in traditionally masculine or feminine forms explains Eddison's disdain for non-representational modern art. In the conclusion of *A Fish Dinner in Memison*, one character comments: "I'm a modern artist myself… But I agree… that ninety-nine hundredths of it is simply fodder for engineers or eunuchs" (1968 294). Engineers can be technically brilliant but lack artistic vision; eunuchs lack sexuality: and these are the two things upon which Eddison bases his metaphysics. Nietzsche even made a similar distinction, which Walter Kaufmann explains thus with reference to the inventor Thomas Edison (1847-1931): "Between a clever chimpanzee and Edison, if he is considered as a technician only, there exists merely a – certainly very great – difference in *degree*…. Nothing short of a 'remaking' of human nature will give it back that dignity which the

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[54] Note that this implies that although souls have gender in Eddison's metaphysics, that does not necessarily match the body that the soul inhabits, and presumably souls are not limited to humans either, but can be any species.

Bible had bestowed on it and which Darwin took away" (161). Lest anyone imagine that Nietzsche believe that human accomplishment, in whatever form, might somehow reflect metaphysics, Kaufmann explains shortly thereafter:

> Nietzsche's doctrine is dangerous insofar as he affirms that the difference between man and man is more significant than that between man and animal. One would do scant justice to his thought, however, were one to forget that he began with the assumption that *all* men were essentially animals, and that he took over this assumption from the empirical sciences. (176)

It would be difficult for anyone as enthusiastic about Machiavelli as Eddison to look at the world as a meritocracy, but Zimiamvia *is* a meritocracy. King Mezentius himself argues this:

> To be King, as I have ever opinioned and ever set my course according, should be by competency, not by privilege. If I, of myself be not competent of this thing to perform it, better goodnight then and then a new king i' the land. (1968 18)

In Eddison's single most striking scene, Mezentius puts his money where his mouth is when he secretly rides alone to a meeting of those conspiring against his rule and his life, steps into the hunting lodge where they are meeting, and tells them a story from the Icelandic sagas as a threat.

When Eddison uses words like divine, deity, god, goddess, he is therefore not referring to concepts in any established religion, but instead to that which stirs the highest, most intense, and most joyful feelings in human beings: he even reduces "the old Trinity of Goodness, Truth and Beauty" to beauty alone. From this point of view, modernism's abandonment of beauty infuriates him. Such an attitude is on display when his "modern artist" painters debate the merits of depicting idealized forms of men and women (one imagines, in reference to the pre-Raphaelites): The first one comments that paintings of beautiful women shouldn't be taken seriously: "It isn't

always 'divine' you know." The second replies by rejecting the entire possibility: "'Divine?' What's the standard? A female woodlouse will be divine… to a woodlouse" (1968 295). They soon apply the same concepts to humanity;[55] for when one notes the "beauty" of a woman, another replies: "Look out! You've shocked me and you've shocked our Willie. Don't use that word. You must say sex-appeal" (1968 298). In other words, in a Tennysonian touch, modernity reduces human love to animal mating, while medievalism restores it to its "spiritual" glory. Lessingham, a passionate believer in women's beauty based not just upon appearance but upon behaviour and indeed spirit, derives his own true "sex-appeal" not from his power or wealth, but from his spirit. The frame narrator of *Mistress of Mistresses*, an admirer of Lessingham's, explains: "Like most men who are endowed with vigorous minds and high gifts of imagination, Lessingham was, for as long as I have known him, a man of extreme attractiveness to women" (16). Although he has numerous lovers after the death of his wife, Lessingham never loses his "spiritual" connection to her. Amusingly and perhaps even self-satirically, Eddison gives this frame narrator a harshly skeptical view of Lessingham's personal beliefs: "He had a majestic if puerile belief in her personal immortality, and his own, beyond the grave… that upheld him for the years without her" (17).

The closest manifestations to Lessingham and his wife Mary in Zimiamvia are Duke Barganax and Lady Fiorinda. These two characters often spar in a manner that proves her the superior. For example, he tells her, "Tis women's minds alone are ruled by clear reason: men's are fickle and elusive as the jack-o'-lanterns they pursue" (1967 37). She responds with skepticism: "A very complete and metaphysical answer… Seeing 'tis given on my side, I'll let it stand without question; though (to be honest) I cannot tell what the dickens it means" (1967 37).

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[55] This, unfortunately, is where Eddison reveals his racism; aside from Carlyle, he is the only medievalist author herein listed who could be called racist, although the ethnic-linguistic essentialism of some writers is troubling.

Fiorinda, as the highest metaphysical authority in a universe (described in four books) which itself hints at a higher or ultimate reality, has the very entertaining and moreover wise function of critiquing and discarding all the other characters' attempts at metaphysics, religion, poetry, literature, mythology, and so forth. As the ultimate source of all of these things, she is in excellent position to dispell all false, shoddy, fraudulent, or foolish attempts in such a direction:

> To the Duke… all sensible things seemed to have attuned themselves to her: a falling away of colours: grey silver in the sunshine instead of gold, the red quince-flowers blanched and bloodless, the lush grass grey where it should be green, a spectral emptiness where an instant before had been summer's promise on the air and the hues of life and the young year's burden. She turned her head and looked him full in the eye: it was as if, from between the wings of death, beauty beckoned like a star. (1967 39)

This insight into metaphysics through beauty occurs just as she is about to argue with Barganax over who they should kill. Eddison, inspired by both Shakespeare and the sagas, clearly finds this juxtaposition of beauty and ruthlessness compelling. In the epilogue to *Mistress of Mistresses*, Aphrodite mentions the names she is known by in many places and times, including Gudrun of Laxriverdale, Lady Fiorinda of Zimiamvia and Mary Lessingham of modern England (389).

There is a contradiction here, as we are dealing with mostly male authors who are writing about male and female characters. In the sonnet tradition, the aim is to put a woman on a pedestal and hope to use such "precious flattering jargon" to seduce her (Morris or Tolkien might have called this a southern tradition). In the northern tradition there are no ideals of women as passive princesses on pedestals, but instead the most striking female characters, like Gudrun, are ruthless guardians of their family's prestige and status in a society seen as at least partly meritocratic. From the northern perspective, sonneteering is a whiny tradition unworthy of real men.

Fiorinda's husband Derxis, whom she ends up having killed, has a "High squeaking voice: if he be but half a man" (1967 214). This fits into Eddison's scheme of greater and lesser spirits. Derxis can't even get his own wife to fall in love with him – and this certainly counts as a total failure in terms of sonneteering:

> Madame… of all cruel ladies are not you the cruelest? Is not sunlight a darkness, and every minute a year of prison, out of sight of your life-giving eyes? Well, I am your slave to obey, then; asking but that your sweet lips that speak the sentence shall give me yet some promise of more private conference; haply this afternoon? (1967 225)

She gives him an amusingly dismissive response: "I pray you give us leave" (1967 225). Her lady Campaspe has a similarly low tolerance for flattery: "And how many foolish ladies ere now," said Campaspe, very demurely, "have you found to give open ear to these schoolings?" (104). Fiorinda's second husband, Morville, tells her "I love you and dote on you as the apple of my eye." To this she mockingly replies, "I see small virtue in that: to be so amorous and besotted on me. It is merely that you cannot otherwise choose" (157). She informs him that she will never love him, and that if he tries to control her at all, that is unlikely to end well for him: "Be content with what you paid for. But you bought not me. I am not for sale: least of all to little men" (158). He demands authority over her as her husband and slaps her; she tells him "This may be your death" (159). This episode is likely inspired by Gunnar's slap of his wife Hallgerd in *Njal's Saga*, which does indeed cost him his life. In Eddison's novel, Morville is torn to pieces by a wild animal, actually Fiorinda's supernatural servant Anthea, who can skin-change (1968 189). Eddison was obviously inspired by saga characters like Hallgerd in writing his own female characters, as well as Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth. Fiorinda's supernatural dream-visions also associate her with Gudrun from *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*.

Eddison's female characters reject all pedestals as flattery, manipulation and objectification. Antiope, discussing marriage prospects with her cousin Zenianthe, rejects any treatment that denies her agency, "to be gazed on like a sweetmeat or a dish of caviar" (1967 214). Unhappy in both her marriages, Fiorinda takes Duke Barganax as a lover, who becomes infatuated with her. She tells him he can't marry her, but instead should marry "some obedient commodity to all your bidding. Me you shall not have o' these terms" (1967 305). The term "obedient commodity" shows that Eddison's female characters, Fiorinda above all, understand the worst aspects of the female gender role in western tradition, and completely (and sarcastically) reject it. Fiorinda's mother Rosma, an even more complicated character, kills her husband King Mezentius, condemning their marriage in similar terms: "O monstrous perversion. You have made me your instrument, your commodity, your beast. What profit to me though my chains be of gold?" (1969 231).

Fiorinda calls love "a more intricate game" than war or statecraft (1967 111), and she understands that her family wants to use her as a chess piece in marriage alliances: "if they have a Queen, exchange her for a pair of castles and a pawn soon as they see their vantage" (1967 214). She rejects this scenario utterly: "I am not for your political chessboard… to be moved about," and asserts her agency instead: "I have an appetite… to be my own self-mover" (1967 152). She compares the matter to high-stakes gambling (1967 13). Yet despite this, love is still metaphysically idealized. Along with Greek and Norse literature (Dasent's translation of *Njal's Saga*), another of Lessingham and Mary's favourite books is Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). This is a particularly appropriate choice, since Brontë's novel implies that the love between Catherine and Heathcliff may even transcend death. Just as Cathy says that she *is* Heathcliff, Mary says that Lessingham "hardly counts as another person" (1968 219).

Yet Lessingham himself, despite all his dreams and intuitions, is a man of his time and therefore is skeptical, at least at times: "Love is stronger than Death… How glibly people trot out these facile optimisms" (1968 227). Still, Eddison's characters can discover that they are manifestations of the "eternal Masculine" and "eternal Feminine" in three ways: dreams, mythology, and as in Dunsany's mythopoeia, nearly-forgotten memories or intuitions. Duke Barganax dreams of Lessingham's life on earth (1967 263) and grasps the goddess Aphrodite's influence over his life (1967 166). When Fiorinda dances, he perceives her as Aphrodite, a manifestation of the eternal feminine, "under the breath of secular deep memories in the blood" (1968 30). The ethnic-linguistic essentialism of Morris is alive and well in Eddison and Tolkien.

Lessingham paints his masterpiece depicting Mary and titles it "A Vision of Zimiamvia" (1968 225). A short circuit occurs while he is painting and in the darkness he sees her green dress but in scarlet, the complementary colour, and she comments that this is a suitable metaphor for dreams, myths and memories they have both contemplated, which seem to come from another world (1968 230). Mezentius and Amalie remember their relationship on earth as Lessingham and Mary (1969 105). One might think that in his own way, Eddison idealizes romantic relationships between men and women, but one might also question whether this is what *Wuthering Heights* really does. It is true that the core relationship of Lessingham and Mary on earth, which parallels that of Barganax and Fiorinda in Zimiamvia, is idealized to the level of metaphysics. Similarly, the relationship of Mezentius and Amalie is presented in a metaphysical way: they "do not so much fall in love as have an intimation, at first looks exchanged… [and] without word spoken, that they are lovers, and have been so since the beginning… in some other world, or worlds" (1969 105). Yet Eddison admits that love is complex and does not always or even often align with traditional romantic ideas.

As an expert courtier, Fiorinda uses her sexuality to intimidate others, and as in the sagas jealousy is a driving force behind tragedies in the plot. Moreover, infidelity is one of the main themes of the Zimiamvia trilogy: not just the idealized infidelity of Fiorinda with Barganax; even Amalie, the love of Mezentius's life (and previous lifetimes as well) recognizes that as king, he may have the opportunity to cheat on her (she is in fact not his wife). Should this ever happen, she prefers it to occur with her knowledge and under her supervision (1968 58). The day never comes; Mezentius stays loyal to Amalie, and the only other woman he has sex with is his wife Rosma, for the sake of producing an heir. Rosma is a very unromantic person with a conflicted sense of her own sexuality, but she eventually falls in love with Mezentius: "here is a man for whose sake she might, if ever she should, which is to her inconceivable, make a fool of herself" (1969 104). His reactions to her attempted seductions vascillate, but the ambiguity and misunderstanding in their marriage, as well as the politics, proves his doom (1969 119).

Rosma has negotiated her own marriage with eyes open. Her husband King Mezentius tells his lover Amalie "that he cannot offer her a crown: kings wed for policy, not for love. But he does offer her himself, and on no temporary nor no partial terms" (1969 105). Mezentius says that Amalie, should she accept, will be his wife in all but name; and he will claim no control over Rosma, who initially has no romantic interest in him: "The queen will be free (on sole condition of avoiding public scandal) to console herself as she may please" (1969 106). As it turns out, they never produce a legitimate heir: Rosma has two children (Chancellor Beroald and Lady Fiorinda, both by Lord Beltran), Mezentius one (Duke Barganax, by Duchess Amalie). Rosma, moreover, kills every man she sleeps with: she murders Beltran on the night of Fiorinda's conception (1969 117), and much later murders Mezentius.

Such behaviour is typical of her family, the Parrys. Lord Horius Parry, Eddison's primary villain, murders his wife, his half-brother and his half-brother's entire family over a love affair; and as if in demonstration of his ruthlessness and power, Mezentius catches him red-handed and pardons him in order to secure his loyalty (1969 118). Mezentius's son Barganax later expresses a similar view, in which power and greatness are more important that any moral concerns: "better a hundred such should die, than one great man's hand be hampered" (1968 75). Lest we imagine that only Eddison's "great men" look at life this way, Lady Fiorinda displays a similar Machiavellian attitude, as when Duchess Amalie accuses her of murder: "It is a crying and hellish sin, as I conceive it, to have one's husband butchered with bodkins on the piazza steps in Krestenaya." Fiorinda disagrees with the accusation on principle: "I question whether there be in truth any such matter as sin" (1968 56). Although she notes that the man in question did not deserve to live, she denies the charge: "Fiorinda raised her eyebrow in a most innocent undisturbed surprise. 'That? I scarce think Gods would fret much at that. Besides, it was not my doing'" (1968 57). Her first husband was killed at her brother's order, but she herself orders the killing of her second husband, and when her brother asks about this she tells him, "I did not dive into your profundities in that matter… thinking your most ingenious policies your affair. You may justly use a like discretion" (1968 232). Her brother is appropriately intimidated.

Her would-be lover, Lessingham, only ever meets his match in her; she proves skilled at manipulating him and driving him insane, which is the only way for this otherwise unbearably overconfident man to get any sense of perspective. For example, on vacation he speaks nonchalantly of "darting across" the Atlantic to Stockholm to "see about" some statues the government there wants to commission him to create. Another time, he casually but quite seriously proposes taking over French Polynesia: "We might found a kingdom in the Marquesas.

I dare say the French Government are fond enough of me to stretch a point" (1968 193). The worst aspects of Carlyle's views, including his racism and imperialism, survived in the medievalist tradition in Eddison's works (206-207), all the more disappointingly given Eddison's admiration of the anti-imperialist William Morris. Eddison clearly believes that the world in some sense is a meritocracy, and thus he has the opposite impulse of Morris; whereas Morris was inclined to side with the weak against the established powers, Eddison's characters complain that the weak are causing political instability in Europe: "strikes all over the place, mines, railways… They want a master" (1968 199). Lessingham goes even further: "Many weak natures together can be cause of the greatest evils: most of all if they are used by a scoundrel of genius as his instruments" (1968 201). Thankfully, at least in Zimiamvia, Fiorinda soon punctures Barganax's high estimation of himself, criticizing "your presumption of your unmatchableness" (1968 151).

Lessingham and his brother take a reactionary view of the first World War: "we were fighting men, and had a mind to defend what we cared for…. [W]e've preserved England as a land for enuchs to dwell in, and made the world safe for short-haired females" (1968 200). Edward replies that the results of the war have been to "make the world safe for big business: for a new kind of slave state… worker ants, which only exist to run the engine, which itself exists only to run" (1968 200-201). There are traces of previous medievalist critiques of bureaucratic and industrial dehumanization here, as in Ruskin and Morris. But unlike them, Eddison has little respect for the riff-raff and his views echo Carlyle or Nietzsche at their most misanthropic:

> The vast majority of civilized mankind are, politically, a mongrel breed of sheep and monkey: the timidity, the herded idiocy, of the sheep: the cunning, the dissimulation, the ferocity, of the great ape. These facts are omitted in the annexes, but they are the governing facts; and policy will still be based upon them. (1968 211)

This comment occurs as Eddison's characters on earth discuss the aftermath of the First World War. Their ominous view of twentieth-century mass politics echoes Yeats's apocalyptic prophecy, symbolized by a monstrous hybrid beast, in "The Second Coming" (1919):

> The offspring of such a policy will be such as such a world deserves, that was mid-wife to it: a kind of bastard Egyptian beast-god incarnate, all ewe-lamb in the hinder parts with a gorilla's head and the sphinx's claws of brass… by natural consequences perishing for lack of essential organs thus unintelligently disposed of. (1968 211)

Despite the glorification of medieval-style war in Zimiamvia, Eddison's characters on earth consider the first World War a disaster with "appalling" consequences: soldiers dead, wives widowed, survivors drinking themselves to death (1968 215). This contradicts the glorification of war in Zimiamvia, but it may be that like Tolkien, Eddison thought pre-modern warfare less nihilistically brutal; in any case Eddison's ideal world certainly involves war and assassination, to the point that it is a sign that Lord Supervius and Lady Marescia are destined to have a long and happy marriage when they spend their marriage night plotting to overthrow a rival dynasty: "And so, private in that banquet-hall, and only the glow of embers on the earth showed them each other's faces, he and she sat long into the night, talking and devising" (1969 55).

The one female aristocrat who prefers personally murdering her enemies rather than assassinating them is Queen Rosma, a sympathetic but villainous figure more layered than her daughter Fiorinda. Rosma is addicted to power and intrigue; she is the only character who achieves a rise to power as quickly as her husband, King Mezentius, and while their marriage lasts their kingdom does. Prior to marrying him, she rapidly married and murdered her way through multiple dynasties to become "Queen of Meszria in her own right" by a very young age. She "hates to be a woman, hates her offspring" (1969 86), so her affirmation of the role of war-

leader and Machiavellian intriguer involves a denial of any family role, to the point where she is a danger to her children. However, her "masculine virtue" has its advantages; when her husband is away and their kingdom is attacked, she saves the realm: "Rosma, in the face of this deadly peril, directs and inspires the defence with politic wisdom and the courage and fire of an Amazon" (1969 131). Rosma's story seems to reflect Eddison's idea of a body-soul mismatch.

Like Eddison, Tolkien expresses the idea that souls could be male or female. As told in *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien's pantheon, the Ainur, preceded the world. They are eternally male or eternally female, displaying a sort of "gender vitalism" or essentialism. The Valar are Ainur who choose to enter the world as gods and goddesses. They take on male or female bodies, but they do so according to the pre-existing maleness or femaleness which they already had as Ainur:

> Therefore the Valar may walk, if they will, unclad, and then even the Eldar cannot clearly perceive them, though they may be present. But when they desire to clothe themselves the Valar take upon them forms some as of male and some as of female; for that difference of temper they had even from their beginning, and it is but bodied forth in the choice of each, not made by the choice, even as with us male and female may be shown by the raiment but is not made thereby. (11)

Sometimes the concept of the sex of souls appears in mythopoeia but with a satirical presentation. James Branch Cabell's "The Thin Queen of Elfhame"[56] combines Tennyson's cynical view of human sexuality in "Merlin and Vivien" with the critique of medievalism as escapism: the titular character is a beautiful woman that the protagonist encounters in a dream; in her supernatural beauty and silence she fits every desire he has – and she has no soul. Cabell had a Dunsanian gift for contemporary interpretations of post-Romantic ideas; thus it is no surprise that he should link supernaturalism and sexuality to the concept of agency.

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[56] This story is included in Shippey's monumental anthology *The Oxford Book of Fantasy Stories* (2003).

V. Literary Convention and Character Agency

As magic is treated as a result of expanded consciousness in much of medievalism, and it is often linked to the creative imagination (from Tennyson's Merlin onward), characters such as Dunsany's Princess Lirazel and Witch Ziroonderel, Eddison's Lady Fiorinda and Duchess Amalie, Tolkien's Queen Galadriel and Queen Melian, have the power to create, distort, and reshape reality. Some of these characters are similar to Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott" in that they are figures inspired by Celtic myth, but *these* ladies have the power to make their visions real and are not helpless or in need of rescue. Galadriel is the most powerful character in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, and Fiorinda is the most powerful character in Eddison's *Zimiamvia* trilogy. It is moreover highly advisable not to get on Fiorinda's bad side. Here as elsewhere, medievalism's evolution was driven by metafictionality. Metafictionality produced self-aware, sophisticated characters who reject rather than follow the conventions of their culture or the conventions of the genre of the work in which they appear. Forced to consider the idea of souls (associated with agency) versus materialism (associated with evolution and biological determinism), medievalist authors let the characters consider the issues for themselves in metafictional dialogues. This generally results in a rejection of convention and a reassertion of agency through some kind of self-directed supernatural ability, representing art or perhaps one's own mythmaking.

Arguing that the supernatural determines the nature and ultimate result of gender dynamics in medievalist storytelling, I have attempted to show that although medievalism overwhelmingly attracted male authors, a more nuanced analysis than reducing the agency of the characters to their sex vis-à-vis the sex of the author is possible. Nearly every literary work discussed in this dissertation was written after the literary career of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), including her famous *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). This means that there

was at least some awareness among the British reading public and educated classes of the possibility of a rational, Enlightenment-based argument for the equality of the sexes. Therefore, most authors who actually think before writing literary works must at least be dimly aware of the issue; there can be no excuse that sexism is simply the default attitude of the time. Perhaps the writer who veered closest to genuine sexism was the one, of all those discussed in this chapter, who is most recognized as a genuinely great writer: Alfred, Lord Tennyson. Yet even Tennyson seems to have been criticized unfairly: his pessimistic attitudes toward gender relations occur in the context of a larger loss of idealism regarding human nature; he does not blame Camelot's downfall on female characters rather than male characters, but instead on failures of human nature as a whole – and, at least in Merlin's account of the origin of the powerful charm that Vivien uses against him (which verges on poetic justice) he portrays male sexuality from a female perspective as genuinely nightmarish.

Throughout post-Wollstonecraft medievalism, female characters demonstrate every awareness of the sexism of their societies, and refuse to be treated as possessions. A variation or rather inversion of this theme occurs throughout medievalism, from Tennyson's "Lady of Shallot" onward, in which female characters covet male heroes, with just the implication of treating a person like a possession, an idealized image. This concept influences Morris's Gudrun and Haggard's Swanhild, who manipulate men into violent acts using the concept of honour. Each woman has a hero in mind, a man who is an embodiment of his society's ideals and is physically beautiful as well; here Morris's Kiartan and Haggard's Eric both mirror Tennyson's Lancelot. John Steinbeck echoes this theme when Morgan Le Fay and her sisters capture Sir Lancelot, explaining that "you are that rarity, a thing we do not have. And so we took you" (254). Even Haggard's scene in which Gudruda intercedes with the gods to recall Eric from

Valhalla displays this pattern of a female spectator longing for a male hero. Gudruda finds herself outside of Valhalla a millennium after her own life has ended; having thus become the author Haggard's contemporary she is a Victorian longing for a heroic age. A similar pattern occurs in Halldór Laxness's saga-inspired novel *Íslandsklukkan* (1943-1946), translated as *Iceland's Bell*, in which the eighteenth-century heroine ignores her drunken lout of a husband and locks herself away, like an Icelandic Lady of Shalott, to weave an image of the legendary Norse hero Sigurd. He is everything her husband is not: bold, brave, fair – and, in Morris's *Sigurd*, a chivalrous respecter of women. Morris himself constructs a very clever version of this dynamic in his prose romance *The Story of the Glittering Plain* (1890), the turning point between his "historical" or "Germanic" romances and his "dream" or "mythopoeic" ones.

Morris at first seems to plan to conform to convention slavishly; the hero Hallblithe's kidnapped bride is literally (and *only*) named "The Hostage" (I). Although Morris gives her the agency of identifying herself to the raiders so as to spare others from abduction (I), she is a passive figure for most of the romance. Her captors treat her as a possession and are motivated by wealth (they are ransom-seekers). Yet Hallblithe, her would-be rescuer, is himself treated like a possession by the Princess of the Glittering Plain – who sees an image of him in a book and decides that a lusty, legendary hero is the only thing she lacks in a kingdom which otherwise grants wishes on demand (XIII). Hallblithe is lured to the Glittering Plain by this princess, so that his entire quest is simply a ruse to make him a lady's entertainment. It turns out that naming Hallblithe's bride "The Hostage" is a self-conscious parody of the common medievalist quest's "damsel in distress" scenario, and the entire situation has been set up by a female character. The influence of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, that most clever Middle English meditation on gender roles in Arthuriana, is clear here, in the notion of schemes, disguises, tests, and illusions.

The puppet-master is the Princess of the Glittering Plain, who has fallen in love with Hallblithe's *image,* which she has seen in a book which tells of his exploits. Hence, for Morris, the problem is viewing people as possessions – and here, as in so much of medievalism, the influence of Ruskin runs just beneath the surface. This theme of covetousness can be considered in relation to the "art as soul-stealing" motif found elsewhere in Victorian culture – from Poe's "The Oval Portrait" and Browning's "My Last Duchess" (both 1842) to Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). Christina Rossetti summarized it with chilling efficiency in "In An Artist's Studio": "He feeds upon her face" (9). Yet in medievalism, the usual dynamic – in which an active male artist saps the vitality of a passive female whom he views as an aesthetic possession – is just as often reversed. Critics have been far too eager to deny writers *their* agency – to modify, satirize, or invert any sexist conventions.

Like Barczewski, Sandra Martina Schwab argues that male writers wrote male characters to be active and strong, but wrote female characters as passive: "the weak, helpless woman, whose rescue depends on the male hero, corresponds to the Victorian ideal of the delicate female" (218). Does this really describe northern medievalism during the late nineteenth century? In order to make her case, Schwab arguably distorts Tennyson, and turns to minor authors who may not have been so perceptive, insightful or inventive as Tennyson – exactly the sort of authors who *do* merely subconsciously channel the prejudices of their time and place. This approach may be fair since Schwab's article, "What is a Man? The Refuting of the Chivalric Ideal at the Turn of the Century," is better classified as cultural, or even socio-political, rather than *literary* history. Yet even *literary* scholars have been too eager to classify works as prejudiced propaganda rather than *literature*.

Schwab argues, in a manner comparable to the present volume's "shockwaves" approach, that there was a crisis in English notions of masculinity approaching World War I. However, this implies that readers, commentators and scholars actually looked to medieval literature for models of masculine conduct in their own time – which may have been true for the more idealistic adherents of Teutonic Democracy, and in keeping with the didactic tendencies of Victorian culture more broadly. Yet this argument is also overly literalistic; medievalism has always offered far more than mere moral instruction, and much of it is purely aesthetic or philosophical. Schwab writes that Darwin, imperial quagmires, political reform, and changes in marriage laws all undermined traditional gender roles in late Victorian Britain, thus creating a crisis of masculinity: "from the 1890s onward the medieval ideal for male behavior came under increasing attack, and this is especially true for the image of the knight in shining armor" (217).

Schwab argues that the melancholic early nineteenth-century Romantic image of masculinity (Keats's "knight-at-arms, / Alone and palely loitering") moved increasingly in the direction of heroic man of action over the course of the nineteenth century, at least partly in response to women's liberation: "In an age when female emancipation challenged the traditional gender roles, the dragon-slayer story offered the opportunity to glorify these roles" (217-218). The Victorian interpretation of the knight was no haunted poet, but instead "stood for daring and gallantry, for stoic calmness even in the worst situations, for being brave and protective toward women and children, for self-assurance, and ready action" (228). Schwab is on firm ground in arguing that war propagandists found a still-swelling source of public enthusiasm when they used Romanticized medieval imagery to manipulate men into war. Yet her argument merely reinforces the crumbling critical narrative that literary medievalism died with World War I's last cavalry charge, and thus that modernism is "real" twentieth-century literature. Schwab writes,

They died in the mud of continental Europe, disillusioned, for war proved to be nothing like a medieval passage at arms… World War I did not just end the Victorian era or the influence of Victorian ideas and norms. Even though knights, soldiers and gallantry still abounded in literature, especially in popular literature, chivalry as a dominant code of conduct received its final deathblow on the battlefields of Europe. (229)

This overstates the didactic nature of even Victorian medievalism (Tennyson's religious nationalism and Morris's socialism) and it relies on an entire series of assumptions about twentieth-century literary history that have been questioned more each year for decades; the days of the narrow and provincial narrative that Schwab relies on above now seem numbered.[57]

Literary medievalism did not die with the Great War; and over the next half-century it instead resurrected itself in two distinct new forms: mythopoeia and satire. The former were the heirs of Morris, the latter the heirs of Twain, although the two sometimes overlapped, as in certain works by Dunsany. The former, in recognition of a tension that had been present since the anti-imperialist Morris wrote violent epic poems, moved the necessity for violent epic deeds into a supernatural, symbolic, self-acknowledged invented world. The latter, particularly in the wake of the second World War, gave ideals of violent epic deeds arguably the most severe thrashing these have ever received, a simultaneously hilarious and utterly bitter assault that denied that "positive violence" could even *exist*, at the same time despairing that violence – in all its selfish, irrational futility – is an ineradicable part of human nature. Yet in their very different ways, these two divergent postwar traditions produced the greatest medievalist masterpieces of all.

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[57] Even after discussing how various medievalist writers interpreted the implications of evolution for controversial subjects like politics and religion, the implications of evolution for human sexuality and gender roles may be more controversial still. However, this chapter's approach to the subject is not entirely isolated in the humanities; see Clinton Machann's *Masculinity in Four Victorian Epics: A Darwinist Reading* (2010) in the bibliography. Balancing scientific views with metaphysical speculations while metafictionally satirizing literary conventions, medievalist authors display a sophisticated approach to human sexuality and gender roles – although, as will become clear in the final chapter, any didactic approach to literary medievalism may be inherently flawed or misconceived.

Chapter 5

I. "Long-Winded, Tediously Poetic, All Lies": Iconoclasm in Postwar Medievalism

The mass and majesty of this world, all

That carries weight and always weighs the same

Lay in the hands of others; they were small

And could not hope for help and no help came:

What their foes like to do was done, their shame

Was all the worst could wish; they lost their pride

And died as men before their bodies died…

The thin-lipped armorer,

Hephaestos, hobbled away,

Thetis of the shining breasts

Cried out in dismay

At what the god had wrought

To please her son, the strong

Iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles

Who would not live long.

-W. H. Auden, *The Shield of Achilles* (1955)

In "Auden's Icelandic Myth of Exile," Paul Beekman Taylor notes that Auden worked on the above poem at the same time that Tolkien was at work on *The Lord of the Rings* (224). But Auden's Achilles is no Aragorn, no violent messiah who slowly becomes secure in his divine destiny as heroic leader of his people. Instead he is a monster, a killing machine whose mere existence is a disaster for the world. We might take these two friends and mutual admirers as representatives of the two major medievalist traditions whose schism became so apparent after the Second World War. Tolkien had found salvation from the trenches of the First World War in

the beauty and meaning of the mythologies of the past, but a new generation of writers saw these myths themselves as complicit in the disasters that now shook the world to its foundations. Taylor terms Auden's poem a Norse praise poem or *drapa* which inverts the meaning of this traditional form. Instead of praising a ruler's authority in the context of military victory, Auden's poem rejects heroic ideals (224). Unlike many a medievalist, Auden was hesitant to simply blame science and technology for war (though the smith-god Hephaestos is surely Achilles's enabler), even in the age of the atom bomb. Writers and poets are also accountable. Auden's poem forces readers to focus on the issues that any post-Hitler epicist must confront. How can a postwar author retell stories which glorify violent heroes? How can one write about knights and princesses, dragons and unicorns in the wake of Auschwitz?

There is a famous scene in T. H. White's Arthuriana in which the knight Agravaine recruits an innocent maid to lure a unicorn. He brutally kills it and his brothers help him butcher it, creating a horrible and bloody mess, for no real reason. Regarding this senseless and disturbing scene, Gilles Davies writes: "It was some time before I could continue with the narrative" (vii). The unicorn is butchered in one of the most brutal scenes in all of literary medievalism,[58] while Gardner's dragon calmly informs readers that our species is doomed, and his Grendel displays sadistic rage. Similar to White's butchering knights, some of whose actions amount to war crimes, Gardner presents a narrator who hates his own weakness for beauty to the point that he fantasizes about torture and murder, about deliberately killing beings he considers beautiful as a rejection of beauty and indeed all values – "the ultimate act of nihilism" (93).[59] Agravaine and Achilles are supposed to be heroes, whereas Grendel is supposedly a brutal villain, but they all have one important thing in common: brutal killing.

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[58] Moreover, there is an argument to be made that this scene is a deliberate analogy for wartime atrocities.

[59] Grendel associates the Dragon with scientific truths; he associates the princess Wealtheow with idealism because of her playing her tragic role so well (108). This aesthetics drives him toward an ugly vision (109). See page 282.

Auden's poem is contemporary to three great masterpieces of medievalist retelling. In 1955 Halldór Laxness became the only Icelander to win the Nobel Prize for literature shortly after writing *Gerpla* (1952), first translated into Swedish and then from Swedish into English as *The Happy Warriors* (1958). Meanwhile, in England a similar project – T. H. White's response to Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, the tetralogy *The Once and Future King* (1939-1958), was ignored by scholars and put into the ghettoized category of "genre fantasy" to be discussed only by non-academic critics. John Gardner's response to *Beowulf*, *Grendel* (1971), occupies a territory somewhere between the two, but through the focusing lens of medievalism rather than the shattered one of conservative confusion over literary legitimacy, these works represent coherent parallel commentaries on the postwar status of medievalism.

Each of these three works rewrites its respective tradition (Arthurian, Norse, and Anglo-Saxon) from a similar point of view. This chapter aims to demonstrate an unprecedented iconoclasm in postwar medievalist traditions, one which takes the form of a metafictional indictment. These retellings rewrite the original stories so radically that their only precedent is Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), and their only contemporary is Auden's "Shield of Achilles" (1952). Above all, they apply metafiction masochistically, attacking the very cultural and literary processes which produce heroic legend. Their satire is shaped by self-searching, and tempered by despair. Perhaps the sheer horrors of the war, the failures of western civilization, and perhaps most personally of all, the abuse of northern legend as propaganda, led the final generation of medievalists discussed in this study to be so bitterly self-critical. Perhaps, like White's knights looking at the butchered corpse of the unicorn and wondering how this could have happened, "They began to hate it for their guilt" (265).

II. "He began with an atrocity": War and Human Nature in White's Arthuriana

When White began writing his tetralogy just as the war began, Arthuriana had already been subject to an ideological struggle; Twain, for example, had rejected Tennyson's idealization of the past and argued vigorously in favour of progress. White despised what he saw as "The Great Victorian Hubris" (1977 23) or the idea that evolution was meant to lead to not just *homo sapiens* generally, but to the civilization of modern England specifically. Yet although Tennyson and White were kindred spirits in their nostalgia and sense of loss, even despair, White rejected Tennyson on the grounds of jingoistic nationalism. Moreover, from a Romantic perspective such as that of Tennyson, White may appear as much of an apostate as Twain. White repeatedly attacks Romantic ideals of nationalism, ethnic-linguistic essentialism, and "blood and soil" arguments of "ancestral memory" or even philology as a connection to the divine, even as such notions motivated the medievalism of Tolkien. In framing projects like *The Notion Club Papers* and *The Lost Road*, Tolkien was concerned with the transmission of ancestral lore through an unbroken chain of links both genetic and philological, even metaphysical (back to the Word). Yet, in his introduction to *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, Tolkien admits that seeking historicity in northern legend is often a lost cause; Sigurd's story, like Arthur's, is

> founded on ancient mythology and beliefs, going back heaven knows how far, or where; legends and folk-tales and stories of centuries telescoped together, some local and prehistoric, some of the Viking age or later – but the disentanglement of the various strata would require an understanding of the mystery of the North, so long hidden from view, and a knowledge of the history of its culture, that we are never likely to possess. (21)

Tolkien's scholarship, his medievalist literary works, and his vast mythopoeia, all reflect an attempt to seek *coherence* behind the fragments and obscure hints of northern legend. Shippey comments, "a main aim in Tolkien's creations was always to 'save the evidence,' to rescue his ancient sources from hasty modern accusations of vagueness or folly" (2001 230). Tolkien thus invents an interpretation which implies consistency between the extant sources by projecting an "original" lost source which is compatible with all of them; he even did this with nursery rhymes (2001 232). This motivated his creation of a mythopoeia, but only there could he really hope to achieve coherence and, as *The History of Middle-earth* shows, in the end he never achieved it.

White takes a very different attitude: he embraces the incoherent and fragmentary nature of these traditions. He treats the historical issues in his Arthurian novels by setting them in "the Old England of the twelfth century, or whenever it was" (204). Twain had set his Arthuriana in the sixth century and removed the supernatural, as if it were a true account of the period upon which the legend is based,[60] while Tennyson had retreated from history altogether by making the setting of his Arthuriana ghostly and ethereal, filtered through notions of faith and doubt. However, what White's style of setting really shows is the influence of Dunsany: in importing wry irreverence and metafictionality into an ostensibly historical story, White places mythmaking above historicity or heritage. Like Dunsany, White was learned, eccentric, and indifferent to literary prestige. Both were thus free to experiment with narrative framing for its own sake, and both more or less *accidentally* ended up at the forefront of medievalist literature. Although both White and Tolkien were influenced by Dunsany, the fantasist Tolkien aimed for the aura of historicity (even when writing mythology), while White rejected historicity, as he explains in comments which echo Tolkien's views on "telescoping":

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[60] However, in both its narrative style and its illustration style, Twain's Arthuriana remains a garbled American vision of an English or rather Anglo-Norman vision of a Celtic world.

I am trying to write of *an imaginary world which was imagined in the 15th century*. Malory did not imagine the armour of your century, he imagined his own… but he did imagine dragons, saints, hermits etc. I state quite explicitly that we all know that Arthur, and not Edward, was on the throne in the latter half of the 15th century… By that deliberate statement of an untruth I make it clear to any scholar… [that the book describes] an imaginary world imagined in the 15th cent. as a provisional forward limit except where magic or serious humour is concerned… and often darting back to the positively Gaelic past… Malory and I are both dreaming. (Davies 24)

White uses his unnamed narrator as a means of commenting on the Arthurian story as it unfolds. He conceived his first novel, *The Sword in the Stone*, as "A prologue to Malory," and throughout the tetralogy White's narrator demonstrates an awareness of Malory's work; Malory himself famously steps onstage at the very end of the story as the only survivor of Arthur's last battle, left behind like Tennyson's forlorn Sir Bedivere to try to keep the tradition alive "in the white winter of his age" (PA). Barczewski points out that by inserting Malory as a character in the finale of his tetralogy, White crosses boundaries of history and legend, fact and fiction, authorship (outside the narrative frame) and story (inside the narrative frame). This ending device, in which a single survivor becomes the only source for the story, retrospectively confers unreliability on the entire narrative; the Malory who witnessed these events is moreover a naïve youth, full of just the idealization that White's Arthur tries to dispell. Moreover, White's narrator and his metafictionally aware Merlyn know about not only Malory, but of the subsequent literary history of Arthuriana, including Twain (1977 30) and Tennyson (1966 332).

White's Merlyn is familiar not just with post-medieval Arthurian literary history, but with modern history as well; he mentions plastic surgery, Freud, and even Einstein (295). This is in

contrast to Twain's Merlin, who really has no unique knowledge, except how to use the methods of stage magic to trick superstitious people. White's Merlyn also contrasts Tennyson's Merlin, whose magic may involve illusions, but is at least potentially supernatural, and who derives his knowledge from a tome which survived from the remote geological past:

> The text no larger than the limbs of fleas;
>
> And every square of text an awful charm,
>
> Writ in a language that has long gone by.
>
> So long, that mountains have arisen since. (MV)

Tolkien also portrays lost languages from the ancient epochs of the world as the conduit for supernatural knowledge. Inverting this Romantic premise, White's Merlyn explains his knowledge in very twentieth-century terms: "Ordinary people are born forwards in Time… and nearly everything in the world goes forward too… But I unfortunately was born at the wrong end of time, and I have to live backwards from in front, while surrounded by a lot of people living forwards from behind. Some people call it having second sight" (1966 29). Tolkien and Tennyson project modern views on geology when describing the ancient worlds from which their sages get their knowledge, but the *source* of this knowledge is still the distant past. Merlyn coming from the future is a radical change; he is not a fraud, poet, or prophet, but a scientist.

Yet even though Merlyn can remember the future, his understanding does not allow him to import modern technology into the medieval world or rewrite history, unlike Twain's time-travelling Hank Morgan – who eventually uses guns to slaughter Camelot's knights in defense of his progressive reforms. In contrast, in White's Arthuriana, the use of gunpowder by Arthur's enemy Mordred symbolizes the end of the age of idealism, as Arthur himself states: "Now that guns have come… the Table is over" (1966 658). But whereas Twain's Hank uses military

innovations to forcibly assert modernity, White's Arthur realizes that although he himself won victories through military innovations, these innovations have come back to haunt him – and others (primarily Mordred) have now innovated further. In other words, White attacks Twain's notion of progress through military innovation and technological superiority as inherently naïve, since there can be no ultimate winner in any arms race. White's Arthur despairs at this:

> The wars of his early days, those against Lot and the Dictator of Rome, had been battles to upset the feudal convention of warfare as foxhunting or as gambling for ransom. To upset it, he had introduced the idea of total war. In his old age this same total warfare had come back to roost as total hatred, as the most modern of hostilities. (1966 667)

Arthur's first innovation is to force the aristocrats to suffer the consequences of war, from which they have previously been shielded by armour and ransom (1966 311). Merlyn notes, "neither the racial maniac nor the overlord stops to consider the lot of the common soldier, who is the one person that gets hurt" (1966 241). Arthur, with a view of all life as valuable, refuses to ransom nobles, leads from the front, and kills all enemies equally. Yet this "ruthless universalism" is not influential in the way that Arthur hopes; what is influential is only the ruthlessness. White emphasizes the unity among humanity and all life, but his villains exploit human divisions. Agravaine explains to his collaborator Mordred that they can use identity politics to seize power:

> You need a national grievance – something to do with politics… you need to use the tools which are ready to hand. This man John Ball, for instance, who believes in communism: he has thousands of followers…. Or there are the Saxons. We could say we were in favour of a national movement. For that matter, we could join them together and call it national communism. It has to be something broad[,]… against large numbers of people, like the Jews or the Normans or the Saxons, so that everybody can be angry. (1966 549)

The idea of a stolen birthright, so central to Romanticism, is here exposed as one of the most politically dangerous ideas behind World War II, fuelling competing ideologies and playing multiple sides of the chessboard simultaneously. William Morris's communism in *A Dream Of John Ball* (1888) and even the "Teutonic" component of Morris's Teutonic Democracy look rather different here. With identity politics eliminated, the question is open for Arthur as to how to achieve political legitimacy. White contrasts Arthur's enemies – Emperor Lucius, King Lot, Mordred – with Arthur himself, in terms of democratic process. For example, "Lucius, who was the Dictator of Rome… had sent an embassy asking for tribute from Arthur… to which the King, after consulting his parliament, had returned a message that no tribute was due" (1966 350-51). Perhaps shades of Teutonic Democracy remain, as White attributes democratic institutions to medieval England. Arthur has to act because there are not just criminals and outlaws in his realm (as in Tennyson), but oppression and atrocities. Turquine, for example, is a sadistic knight whose castle is "a sort of concentration camp" (1966 365) until Lancelot liberates it.

The adultery crisis in Arthurian legend has always had political implications, but White, coming after at least a century of public awareness of the rough outline of Arthur's story, gives his characters expanded awareness of the situation to reflect that of his readers. Several characters in Tennyson's *Idylls* assert that Arthur knows about the Guinevere-Lancelot affair, but this is never confirmed. In White's telling, however, Arthur walks in on the two lovers: "he had let the tapestry fall and disappeared. He had gone to find a page to announce him" (1966 574). He accepts the affair as long as it is kept quiet, and is even willing to help cover it up (1966 617). Perhaps he is Chamberlain to Mordred's Hitler. The confrontation is clear when Agravaine and Mordred openly explain how they intend to publicize the affair to cause a war and then seize power during a time of confusion:

> If we could make a little merry mischief between Arthur and Lancelot, because of the Queen, their power would be split. Then would be the time for policy. Then would be the time for discontented people, Lollards and Communists and Nationalists and all the riff-raff. Then would be the time to take your famous revenge. (552)

White's Mordred is an evil dandy, ambiguous in his sexuality, fashionable in a smirking way. First he encourages the decadence of Arthur's court from within, as *avant-garde* fashion replaces the ideals that built the place: "Mordred wore his ridiculous shoes contemptuously; they were a satire on himself. The court was modern" (1966 505). Mordred reflects White's critique of modernity: he has no values or identity of his own, but exploits the identity politics of others in order to gain power. First causing the decadence of the court, he then becomes the leader of a populist party, the Thrashers, and condemns the decadence of the court, himself "dressing with… dramatic simplicity" (1966 617). Mordred takes the "Philosophy of Clothes" and turns it into a carnival of terror; Barczewski notes that the Thrashers are "clearly intended as an analogue to Nazism" (232). The night before his final defeat, White's Arthur considers many theories which might explain war: original sin, human nature, determinism, ambitious leaders, hateful populations, the "Deep Roots" theory of war, antecedent feuds, economic inequality, greed for land (1966 676). These reflections are thoughtful, intense, and desperate. White's tetralogy ends on a poignant and pessimistic note as Arthur concludes that these problems are beyond his understanding and he cannot save his kingdom. He knows what *will* happen: "Everybody was killed… except a certain page" (1966 674). Thus the medievalist retelling merges with reader consciousness of its era, and Arthur sends his page, Thomas Malory, away to preserve the dream of Camelot. The philosopher sits in darkness as the world tilts toward barbarism; here White's Arthur is very like Auden's speaker in "September 1, 1939."

III. "When Killers and Skalds Get Together": Satirizing Saga Violence

As Arthuriana was undergoing this postwar cataclysm, the same thing was occurring in Iceland's Saga tradition. Laxness begins *Gerpla / The Happy Warriors* with a description of his heroes' "manly prowess" as opposed to the "weaklings born in our time," and sarcastically undermines his novel's claim to be a true historic account (7-8). For example, "Of Havar's great and good deeds on Viking cruise there are no accounts but his own" (9), and these vary from night to night (10). Havar is a poor and discontented farmer, a torment to his neighbours, and he soon gets himself killed close to his farm, so that his seven year old son discovers his body:

> The boy got up, went to where his father was lying across the path and looked at the
>
> body. From the head was welling a porridge of blood and brains, and every lineament had
>
> been wiped out by the axe. One arm gave a jerk at the shoulder as he went limp, and that
>
> was his last sign of life. The boy wondered that his father should die so easily, when he
>
> had fought berserks in Denmark and harried Ireland with fire and sword. He had thought
>
> of his father as one of the greatest champions in the north. (12)

The boy, Thorgeir Havarsson, grows up aspiring to avenge his father and become a great warrior, and he is encouraged in this by his mother and by his friend Thormod Coalbrowsskald, a gifted poet who knows all the old heroic lore. Laxness places great emphasis on how disastrously irresponsible poets (skalds) have been in glorifying Viking heroes; they have encouraged both violent behaviour and delusional beliefs. As Thorgeir's peaceable relative Thorgils puts it, "Nothing but mischief and bad luck ever comes of it, when killers and skalds get together" (36). A primary example of this is the life of the slave Kolbak, taken captive in a raid in Ireland, who tells exactly what glorious Viking activities look like from the victim's side:

Heroes and skalds burned my house. They hewed my father down in the field, and feeble old grandfather got a spear through him. Grandmother was on her knees lauding her guardian spirit[,]… when a man smashed her skull with the bright axehead…. They took my baby brother, unwound his swaddling-clothes, and tossed him naked from spear-point to spear-point. My mother and my little sister they dragged sobbing aboard the ship. (26)

But nothing can convince Thorgeir and Thormod to give up their Viking ideals. Stephen Cowdery notes their burning desire "to re-create the glory of the warriors of old. In the changing world of 11th century Europe they are both out of date and in over their heads" (n.pag.). Thorgeir's first killing is brutal and senseless, not glorious (32). A stupid, stubborn man, he has no more success forcing reality to conform to his ideals when he fights overseas and peasants tell him to his face that men like him are a curse upon peaceful people. Darien Fisher-Duke calls Laxness's retelling "heavy with sarcasm" and "details which portray how ludicrous the heroes' actions are, what misfits they are, and how incapable they are of seeing themselves as others perceive them" (n.pag.). Upon his return to Iceland Thorgeir is even denied a heroic last stand.[61]

It is the nature of Thorgeir that he learns nothing. But the true tragedy of the novel occurs when Thormod desires to avenge him. As the poet who glorified Thorgeir, Thormod feels compelled by his own glorification to live up to the northern heroic ideals. Fisher-Duke explains,

Thormod had found an idyllic life with a loving wife and daughter…. Thormod's wife, Thordis, comes to realize that he will never again be content until he has avenged Thorgeir's death, and has immortalized him in a poem. She knows that he loves her too much to leave her…. She sacrifices herself by committing adultery with their slave [Kolbak], so that Thormod will be free. (n.pag.)

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[61] For an assessment of Laxness's treatment of the saga heritage, see Ástráður Eysteinsson's "Halldor Laxness and the Narrative of the Icelandic Novel" in *Scandinavica* Vol. 42. No 1 (2003).

Laxness shows Thormod's obsession by having him keep his blood-brother's salted head with him, symbolizing the perverse nature of his ideals. Leaving his family behind to take the "honourable" course, he pursues Thorgeir's killers west across the Atlantic. Cowdery explains, "Traveling to the far northern reaches of Greenland, living with the Inuit and enduring much suffering and hardship, he fails in his mission" (n.pag.). As his original rationalization slowly falls apart, Thormod falls prey to despair. In the dark wilderness of Greenland, he glimpses the futility of militaristic ideals in a manner reminiscent of Marlowe's disillusionment in *Heart of Darkness*. The Inuit live hard but peaceful lives, free of the "glory" of mass violence. The business of empire is not heroic; it is brutal, cruel, misguided and idiotic. But it is only when he arrives at the rising imperial power of Norway that his alienation from his fellows becomes clear.

Having failed to avenge Thorgeir in Greenland, Thormod can still seek the king Thorgeir fought for, Olaf of Norway, and recite his praise poem for the fallen Thormod. Indeed, he is trying to fulfill exactly the role that Auden attacked in "Shield of Achilles" (Taylor 224), apologist and propagandist. Thormod finds King Olaf and the experience proves his final disillusionment. Just as with White's Arthur, this revelation of total despair occurs the night before a famous battle in which "everybody was killed" and, like Arthur, Thormod recognizes his doom. Cowdery comments on the significance of Thormod's meeting with King Olaf the night before the Battle of Stiklestad: "Thormod finally comes to the realization that his dreams of heroism and glory have led to only death and destruction" (n.pag.). By ending his story the night before a battle, without even depicting on-page what happened the next day, Laxness also implies a disturbing determinism born of hindsight; both White's Arthur and Gardner's Dragon refer to future catastrophes with similar determinism, as if these horrors were already past: "everybody *was* killed" (674) and "it *has* happened… in the future" (71).

But whereas Arthur hopes that someone will keep alive the "candle in the wind" of his former idealism, Thormod realizes that he is about to die for nothing; in his final moments he recognizes his life not as a tragedy but as a dark farce or black comedy or even a "satire on himself" (as White describes Mordred's nihilism). This would hurt even more, and this whole revelation is symbolized in Thormod's understanding of who and what King Olaf is. When Thormod, the poet who glorified the Viking world, meets King Olaf, he finds an opportunistic, ugly, petty, greedy, repugnant king utterly unworthy of the type of praise-poem that northern poets had always composed. It is almost as if he is seeing his fallen idol, Thorgeir, the way everyone *but* Thormod saw him when he was alive. Asked by King Olaf to recite his poem in praise of Thorgeir, whom he has spent his life glorifying, Thormod finally realizes the awful role he has played in convincing men that it is a glorious thing to kill one another:

> A dear lay I made on the best champion in the North and on you, his king. That lay I purchased with Luck and Sun and my daughters Moon and Star, with beauty and health, hand and foot, hair and tooth, with my Beloved…. Now I have no mind of that lay. (286)

By refusing to recite the praise poem, Thormod repudiates his entire life and basically burns his work. As with *The Once and Future King*, parts of the work are satirical, parts are very comical, but the end is heartbreaking. In its disillusionment, Laxness's finale is every bit as devastating as White's. All of this is a damning judgment on the Viking age; poets, it appears, have no integrity at all. They just glorify the nearest violent madman who offers status and money, just like certain European intellectuals during World War II. The two protagonists' very acceptance of ideals is what makes them so dangerous, blind and foolish: Fisher-Duke writes that Laxness "shows the consequences of pursuing youthful idealism without ever sacrificing it to maturity[,]… the futility of being driven by obsession, the senselessness of war and violence" (n.pag.).

Laxness's finale shows his recognition of the seductive nature of ideology. From World War II, Laxness learned the same lesson that White did: the danger of "isms." Whereas White relied on direct discussion to draw parallels between medieval and modern movements, Laxness uses Viking heroic ideals as a stand-in for ideology in general. Birna Bjarnadóttir writes,

> Rewriting medieval heritage, Laxness does not offer a spare satire of everything medieval and remote. If anything, he seems to aim at the very heart of western narrative tradition and history-making…. [I]n what could be termed Laxness's masterpiece, the saga characters are not held captive by the Northern tradition and do not come across as elements of the *obscure* on the edge of Europe. Instead, while serving their foreign king with the requisite blind devotion, they become full-blown participants on the horrific battlefields of the newly civilized Christian Europe. Laxness's self-inflicted conversion to Catholicism may have served him well in this demanding task, not to mention his close encounter with, and (for a while) admiration of, Stalin's ideology. (49-50)

Laxness's goal was to simulate the archaic Icelandic of the sagas as precisely as possible; similarly, Tolkien composed some works in medieval English. But whereas Laxness's goal was to emulate or channel a literary style, Tolkien believed he could philologically recover a lost culture. Moreover, the two had opposite intentions: Tolkien wished to put a medieval message into a modern novel. Tolkien was perhaps the most *outside* of the English canon of any of the writers discussed in the present volume, to the point that he had his own radically different concept of the canon, which excluded much of post-medieval literature. Laxness, on the other hand, put a modern message into a medieval saga. The impact of this revisionist retelling became clear quite quickly: Laxness was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature within two years, and its influence shows on subsequent saga-inspired novels.

Erik Christian Haugaard's *Hakon of Rogen's Saga* (1963) is an early example, though more meditative than confrontational. This quiet novella, a coming-of-age story set during the Viking Age on a single small island in the North Atlantic, reflects on the heritage of the old north in a subdued, rather than satirical manner. The typical saga scenario of a birthright stolen through the murder of a protagonist's father occurs here: in this case Hakon's uncle Sigurd kills his father. However, few people are killed overall, and most of the story concerns peaceful power shifts. The story is permeated with skepticism of the old heroic Viking world. Like Laxness, Haugaard acknowledges the evil of slavery: "These slaves were not mistreated, yet absence of liberty is in itself mistreatment. Let those who defend slavery try once, themselves, to be slaves" (2). Few legends reflect the true horror of battle, as Hakon notes during a siege: "In all the stories of the ancient times that I had ever heard during the long winter nights, the hero was fearless, he went into battle as lighthearted as if he were attending a feast. Were all these stories lies, or were they just dreams? In a hunchback's dream, no back is crooked" (37). This view of legend as the naïve wish-fulfilment of bored young men coincides with Laxness's view. Hakon, like Thorgeir and Thormod, grows up with the old northern legends (109).

But in Hakon's view, these stories alone did not equip him to understand fear, pain or death (109). Unlike Thormod, he does not require a lifetime of folly to finally understand the misleading nature of heroic idealism. The Viking ideal of bravery in battle, Hakon observes, is mostly a matter of posturing; when an expected battle does not occur, "the young men pretended to be sorry that they would get no chance to prove their courage" (26). Moreover, the villain Rolf is renowned for bravery, "But courage without pity and feeling is mere brutality, and deserves even more contempt than cowardliness does" (36). Finally, even victory is bitter: "The sun broke through the fog and tore it asunder, leaving the mountaintop bare in the noonday sun. For a

moment we stood in silence, then the screams, curses and moans of the wounded began" (38).
Seeing the consequences of war firsthand at a young age does not make him desire vengeance
and glory, as it does with Thorgeir, and he does not idealize powerful men or seek a king to
serve. On the contrary he sees such men as oppressors sowing the seeds of their own destruction:

> The tyrant falls, not because he is too weak, but because he is too strong; each injustice
> that seemingly strengthens his position, actually hastens his downfall…. The tyrant lives
> in fear of poison, the knife in the shadow…. [T]he just know their enemies as well as
> they know their friends. The tyrant can only guess at the fear that lives in the hearts of his
> subjects and, by ever increasing it, hope to escape their vengeance. (93)

In *Gerpla / The Happy Warriors* no amount of self-awareness or rationality can save humanity,
but for Hakon the solution to the sagas' common cycle of vengeance is never to jostle for wealth,
power, status and honour in the first place. While some of the greatest classic saga characters,
male and female, are real trouble-makers, this saga is full of peaceful people who do not wish for
any battles or glory. The old Christian slave Rark, who himself kills Sigurd for Hakon,
nevertheless states, "Never brag of having slain a man, Hakon. Life is holy" (131).

Among Hakon's people, the women work "longer and harder than the men" (103), but do
not encourage their menfolk toward violence: "Women care little for honour and much for their
children, but only a fool would judge them ill for that" (118). This contrasts with *Gerpla / The
Happy Warriors,* in which female characters encourage and direct violence; Laxness notes that
Thorgeir's mother is partly responsible for turning him into such a misguided monster: "She
never set him to work, but taught him that farm labour was for clowns, and fishing for thralls"
(18). When Laxness's Thordis asks Kolbak to commit a killing for her, he refuses and rejects the
entire idea with a comment quite unlike the response of Flosi or Thorir to being goaded: "I have

heard from my kin that when a Northern woman loves a man above all the world, she first woos a manslayer with embraces to kill her beloved by stealth, and then takes the killer in marriage" (28). Like Laxness's Kolbak, Haugaard's hero Hakon refuses violence. He only kills one man, and he regrets it (126). He retakes the island as non-violently as possible, and frees the slaves since freedom "is everyone's birthright… and the gods have only one message to us, that we must live" (132). One could hardly call the Norse gods peaceful, but in Hakon's view they only exist in people's minds anyway. Thus, it is more important to act ethically than to live up to outdated heroic ideals based on old myths. No god is worth dying for.

Two decades later Laxness's influence on saga-inspired literature was still apparent. In 1973 Poul Anderson (1926-2001) wrote *Hrolf Kraki's Saga*. It is an able retelling, though sexism mars it; it is the most sexist work of literature discussed in this dissertation, despite being the last to be published. Yet even Anderson states that it is not his goal to glorify violent men:

> A hazard lies in the very spirit of the saga. Here is no *Lord of the Rings*, work of a civilized, Christian author – Hrolf Kraki lived in the midnight of the Dark Ages. Slaughter, slavery, robbery, rape, torture, heathen rites bloody or obscene, were parts of daily life. Finns in particular will note the brutality and superstition to which the Scandinavians subjected their harmless people. Love, loyalty, honesty beyond the most niggling technicalities, were only for one's kindred, chieftain, and closest friends. The rest of mankind were foemen or prey…. [I]n the Romantic era, [writers] could sentimentalize [saga heroes]. I would not. If nothing else, we today need a reminder that we must never take civilization for granted. (ix)

Controversial as Laxness's satirical saga may have been at first, his critical approach to the northern saga heritage was wise, necessary, and influential both in Iceland and internationally.

IV. "Jargon From Another Dark Age": The Futility of Ideology in Gardner's *Grendel*

Like Laxness and White, John Gardner turned to a traditional epic and anachronistically attempted to "correct the record" by condemning war and imperialism, and providing missing perspectives, such as those of tribal peoples, slaves, and peasants. Gardner, however, took this premise to the extreme by providing the most "missing" perspective of all: that of the monster. And in *Grendel*, the more monstrous one's perspective is, the more *modern* it is; Gardner's Grendel is no skeptical secularist who weighs traditional ideals in terms of their ethical consequences. Instead, as a villain or anti-hero, he represents the dark side of modern thought; he is an alienated existentialist. Like Pound's "modern" version of the Anglo-Saxon "The Seafarer," Gardner's modern-thinking Grendel undermines the worldview of the Danes that he stalks. Yet in undermining their culture, traditions, and ideals, Grendel offers nothing in replacement.

Gardner claimed to be satirizing Sartre's worldview with *Grendel* (Silesky 165); yet his book resembles no predecessor as much as Dunsany's Nietzschean medievalism. In both we find a strange world alienated from all "memory" (mythology, history, tradition, etc.) by the intellectual circumstances of modernity, and an intense but futile search for meaning ending in disillusionment. Grendel is ancient and has no memory of his own origins (or his own learning language) and his mother is silent, so he can receive no answers, traditions or stories from her. She cannot answer his persistent question, "Why are we here?" (28). He and his mother are among the last of an ancient pre-human species; like Morris's dwarves (Andvari, Regin) or Tolkien's dwarves, they are an ancient race; Grendel suspects he might be a thousand years old or more (15). In addition to Grendel's mother, Gardner depicts older, even more demented "companions" or "others" who live in the same system of river-worn caverns. These others have forgotten everything and sit there, silent, like living statues; Grendel notes their empty eyes,

wondering if they are his brothers or uncles (21). After Grendel returns to the caves smelling of humans, they go down deeper into the darkness, away from humanity forever (28). Grendel and his relatives all live underground; he deduces the caverns' great age by observing "The centuries-old drip-drip of seepage building stalagmites, an inch in a hundred years" (156). The caverns contain "pictures half buried in stone," presumably ancient works of art created during the prime of Grendel's race, now covered with the sediments of millennia. Indeed, Grendel's species may be the "long-dead giants" who created an ancient ruin that Grendel is fond of haunting (156).

Gardner combines philology (the tree of languages) with biology (the tree of life) by giving Grendel's ancient species a relationship to *homo sapiens* such that the two can communicate: "they [humans] talked in something akin to my language, which meant that we were, incredibly, related" (36). Like a good philologist, he notes that the difference derives from varying pronunciation (23). He even notes that in religious rituals they use an archaic version of their own language, closer to the parent language: "They sing, an antique language as ragged and strange as their beards, a language closer to mine than to their own" (28). This is in stark contrast to Tolkien's views on philology. In Tolkien's mythopoeia, his immortal and unfallen elves use ancient languages in religious rituals, and this connects them to wisdom handed down to them from divine sources at the dawn of time. The elves *are* connected to tradition, history, legend, myth, the supernatural, and ultimately the divine plan for the world. Tolkien imagines divine qualities percolating down from Ilúvatar to the Valar, to the elves and finally to mere mortals, with gleams of nobility and beauty fading over the long history of the world and leaving only fragments – obscure references in extant sources. For Tolkien, this preservation creates meaning, morality, identity, and beauty. But Tolkien's strongly Romantic views on the nature of philology, imagination and tradition are reactionary even among medievalists of his own generation.

Like Dunsany and White, Gardner is skeptical of the epistemological or ethical value of philological traditions. Appropriately, the "Chain of Transmission" in *Grendel* is entirely unexplained (as discussed below, only the transmission of the misleading poem *Beowulf* is addressed). Indeed, Gardner's Danes *think* their traditions "preserve" divine wisdom and create meaning and beauty, as is clear when Hrothgar's poet, the Shaper, tells a Tolkienian story:

> He said that the greatest of gods made the world, every wonder-bright plain and the turning seas, and set out as signs of his victory the sun and moon, great lamps for light to land-dwellers, kingdom torches, and adorned the fields with all colors and shapes, made limbs and leaves and gave life to every creature that moves on land. (51)[62]

Just as in the Christian story of the Fall of Satan, the Norse story of the exile of the giants, and Tolkien's revolt of Morgoth, during this early age the world was divided into two sides: "He told of an ancient feud between two brothers which split all the world between darkness and light. And I, Grendel, was the dark side… The terrible race God cursed" (51). Grendel's response to the beauty of the Shaper's creation myth astounds even himself: "I believed him" (51). He enters into a sort of doublethink: "I knew what I knew, the mindless mechanical bruteness of things… [yet] the harper's lure drew my mind away to hopeful dreams, the dark of what was and always was" (54). Because of how Grendel was seduced by this, he feels the bitter withdrawal pain of any dream-addicted Romantic, and thus he hates the Shaper:

> It was a cold-blooded lie that a god had lovingly made the world and set out the sun and moon as lights to land-dwellers, that brothers had fought, that one of the races was saved, the other cursed. Yet he, the old Shaper, might make it true, by the sweetness of his harp, his cunning trickery. It came to me with a fierce jolt that I wanted it… Even if I must be the outcast, cursed by the rules of his hideous fable. (55)

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[62] This is a paraphrase of *Beowulf* itself, though Tolkien also draws on *Beowulf* as a source for his creation myth.

We might also detect shades of other "invented sages" in literary medievalism here, particularly Tennyson's Merlin or Dunsany's prophets, who create symbolic order as an aesthetic illusion that imposes moral structure on the world. The more direct source of the passage however is *Beowulf*, in which Grendel is, like giants and other monsters, said to be the offspring of Cain. Again Gardner and Tolkien take opposite views; Tolkien invents the myth of Melkor's revolt as a justification for the existence of the demonic monsters listed in *Beowulf*, but Gardner dismisses the idea of good and evil, angels and demons, as pure fantasy. It is significant that although Grendel has some notions of evolution, the Shaper covers the issue of origins with a creation myth flattering to his own species' vanity. The relation between himself and humanity is not a supernatural moral rivalry of Light and Darkness; it is evolutionary, and it explains much about the limitations of all of them. The crucial difference is that Grendel understands this.

Like White, Gardner portrays multiple narrative frames, each with an increasing level of awareness. The Danes are content to accept the self-flattering narratives of their poets and priests. As Grendel is ancient by the time humans arrive in his part of the world, he watches them subdue the land over the course of generations, and advance in farming, technology, and war. Crucially, he watches them invent their culture, their traditions, the mythology which gives them their sense of understanding, of consolation, and of a connection to the universe. These are merely whimsical illusions, invented by poets thirsty for beauty, propagated by priests hungry for power, and endorsed by kings eager for legitimacy. Grendel deliberately targets the priests and poets who provide their society's motivation with situations designed to test their beliefs and behaviours, and to demonstrate the ignorance, narcissism and hypocrisy of their worldview. He hates them as liars and propagandists.

Grendel watches Hrothgar's Shaper turn futility and farce into the outlines of the story that will become *Beowulf* – a tragedy, but a heroic tragedy. Thomas Ligotti, a nihilist of just the sort Gardner hoped to address with *Grendel*, writes, "*tragedy as entertainment* performs a crucial function – that of coating the spattered nothingness of our lives with a veneer of grandeur and style, qualities of the theatrical world and not the everyday one" (165). Even *tragedy*, that is, is insufficiently pessimistic, and naïvely idealizes human life. Grendel observes the Shaper's response to his own attacks: "Two nights later I went back. I was addicted. The Shaper was singing the glorious deeds of the dead men, praising war. He sang how they'd fought me. It was all lies" (54). Lines from *Beowulf* appear, as Grendel hears the account of his time that will be passed down through the ages, and notices its inaccuracies (42).

In his own narrative, Grendel presents a more enlightened and self-aware view; his ultimate disillusionment is over himself: "Not, of course, that I fool myself with thoughts that I'm more noble. Pointless, ridiculous monster crouched in the shadows, stinking of dead men, murdered children, martyred cows" (6). *Grendel* is the story of conflict between Grendel and the Shaper who composes *Beowulf*; who is the source of the Danes's ideals; heroic ideals which Grendel wishes to expose. Grendel dismisses all the Danes' justifications for killing humans as "Things about their fathers and their fathers' fathers, things about justice and honour and lawful revenge" (35). When he fights them they come up with even grander justifications: "I laughed. It was outrageous: they came, they fell, howling insanity about brothers, fathers, glorious Hrothgar, and God" (81). The only ones who are not cowards, Gardner implies, are "maniacally joyful" madmen (81); this is in great contrast to the notions of honour, duty, courage and sacrifice promoted by Tolkien and Morris, whose Thiodolf upon being fatally wounded thinks to himself, "This is the death of a warrior, and it is exceedingly sweet" (III).

Grendel specifically denies Unferth, who attempts to represent this heroic ideal, a heroic death; Grendel considers it a triumph to throw apples at Unferth in front of other humans, to lure him to a cave and then to refuse to fight him, instead mocking his heroic ideals. In a specific comment on the "Philosophy of Clothes" that many medievalist writers engaged with in one way or another, Grendel rejects the concept in favour of what he sees as the truth of science: Unferth had donned the Shaper's idea of a hero like "a merry mask, seen it torn away, and was now reduced to what he was: a thinking animal stripped naked of former illusions, stubbornly living on, ashamed and meaningless, because killing himself would be, like his life, unheroic" (104).

Growing clever and vain, Grendel relishes his psychological assault on the Danes and views them anthropologically, studying their delusions with contempt. He learns about the Shaper's art by observation; he displays a scholarly awareness of the nature of oral tradition, noting reliance on formulas to generate content and the sculpting of story by audience reception (34). He even calls the aesthetic results of the process automatic, not divinely inspired: "If the ideas of art were beautiful, that was art's fault, not the Shaper's. A blind selector, almost mindless" (48). He views culture in evolutionary terms, and notes the utility of the Shaper in motivating Hrothgar's men to build his empire: "They would seize the oceans, the farthest stars, the deepest secret rivers in Hrothgar's name!" (43). Like Laxness's Thormod, Gardner's Shaper provides the propaganda to glorify his king and fuel his people's wars: "He would sing the glory of Hrothgar's line and gild his wisdom and stir up his men to more daring deeds, for a price" (42). And yet, with all the cynical understanding that Grendel has, the Shaper's art still works on him: "What was he? The man had changed the world, had torn up the past by its thick, gnarled roots and had transmuted it, and they, who knew the truth, remembered it his way – and so did I" (43). He worries that his memory has been rewritten or at least externally influenced: "There was

a Scyld, once, who ruled the Danes; and other men ruled after him, that much was true" (44). And yet, even *he* not only finds his own memory altered, but even his perception itself changes to see the world through the mythic veil the Shaper's words place over it: "The moors their axes had stripped of trees glowed silver in the moonlight, and the yellow lights of the peasant huts were like scattered jewels on the ravendark cloak of a king. I was so filled with sorrow and tenderness I could hardly have found it in my heart to snatch a pig!" (44). Aesthetics, poetry, history – these are the Shaper's weapons, sold to the highest bidder.

Grendel believes that he is no worse than the Danes themselves; he is merely less hypocritical. Long before he killed any humans, they killed each other, and yet they listen to the Shaper "as if not a man in all that lot had ever twisted a knife in his neighbor's chest" (48). Above all, he wants to punish the Danes for vanity; for arrogantly believing that "God had vanquished their enemies and filled up their houses with precious treasure… [and that] they were the richest, most powerful people on earth[, and that]…. here and here alone in all the world men were free and heroes were brave and virgins were virgins" (77). Grendel's outrage triumphs, like Loki's outrage against the gods in the Norse poem "Lokasenna," and like his relative Loki (also descended from giants), he decides that the only way forward is to burst into their halls and expose their hypocrisy. When the Shaper inspires Hrothgar to build Heorot, "a glorious meadhall whose light would shine to the ends of the ragged world" (47), it is the last straw.

Grendel sees Heorot as a symbol of humanity's delusional vanity. In a contrast that shows Grendel accepting his evolutionary nature while humans imagine they were lovingly created by God, he bounds away from Heorot on all fours and reaches the highest cliff in the area (45) and issues a scream of rage out into the night: "I sucked in wind and screamed. The sound went out, violent, to the rims of the world, and after a moment it bounced back up at me – harsh

and ungodly against the sigh of the remembered harp – like a thousand tortured rat-squeals crying: *Lost!*" (45). This declaration of war on the Danes resembles Morgoth's scream in Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*, a similarly harsh and ungodly sound, which announces his presence in Middle-earth and the long defeat of its peoples. Moreover, here as elsewhere Gardner uses echoes as an example of how humans misinterpret indifferent nature in anthropomorphic terms. There is no voice of nature, only narratives that we project. In fact, Grendel recognizes the similarity between himself and the Shaper; both are "always transforming the world with words" (49). The Shaper is an illusion-weaver like Tennyson's Merlin, and like Tennyson's disillusioned "Savage Knights," Grendel wants to strip this rat-court of its pretensions and false ideals:

> But when he saw
>
> High up in heaven the hall that Merlin built
>
> Blackening against the dead-green strips of even,
>
> 'Black nest of rats,' he groan'd, 'ye build too high.' (PE)

The Shaper creates illusions like religious faith, noble heroism, and real justice. As in *Gerpla / The Happy Warriors*, only those on the margins of the society question these views. An old Danish peasant is Gardner's equivalent of Laxness's Kolbak; he asks "Why does the bread-thief die and the murdering thane escape by a sleight by the costliest of advocates?" (114). So much for Morrisian freedom and equality in ancient Germanic societies. On the contrary, exploitation goes back to the roots of organized society itself: "Rewards to the people who fit the system best, you know. King's immediate thanes, the thanes' top servants, and so on till you come to the people who don't fit at all. No problem. Drive them to the darkest corners of the kingdom, starve them, throw them in jail or put them out to war" (118). This peasant is more or less the Emmanuel Goldstein of Gardner's novel. Everything about society comes down to force:

"If a few men quit work, the police move in. If the borders are threatened, the army rolls out. Public force is the life and soul of every state: not merely army and police but prisons, judges, tax collectors" (119). He takes an Orwellian view of the Low, the Middle, and the High: "Revolution… is not the substitution of immoral for moral, or of illegitimate for legitimate violence; it is simply the pitting of power against power, where the issue is freedom for the winners and enslavement of the rest" (119). From Nietzsche to Orwell, some of the most advanced thinking on the terror of politics and psychology finds its way into Gardner's novel. Gardner certainly does not pretend to know what the solution is, but he forcefully assesses the problem. As might be expected, a view of this type also makes short work of organized religion.

Grendel sees the Danes' carved gods for what they are: "lifeless sticks" (52), childish wood-carven idols. There is a Dunsanian diversity here: one is a head with four eyes, another "sly old dagger-tooth," there are animal-gods based on a wolf, a bull, and a horse; another is a "happily smiling god with the nose like a pig's" (128). When Grendel wrecks the circle of the gods, the priests first lament over their broken toys (129) and then carve new gods in a manner just as whimsical as Dunsany's "Chu-Bu and Sheemish." He mocks their custom of building funeral pyres "for whatever arms or legs or heads my haste has left behind" (14). They also throw useful objects to the fire, a custom similar to providing grave goods, presumably with the implication that the dead will need them in the afterlife, which Grendel dismisses as a "lunatic theory" (14). He sees through the masquerade of their ritual: "There is no conviction in the old priests' songs; there is only showmanship" (128). Even the oldest and most respected of priests, Ork, is far less powerful than the Shaper; he believes in his own nonsense, so Grendel surprises him at prayers one dark night, among the gloomy circle of idols, for an exclusive interview. Do the "fires of belief burn low" on the stormiest of nights, with a voice coming from the shadows?

Like Joseph K. in the darkness of the cathedral in Kafka's *The Trial*, Ork thinks he understands everything even as his words disappear into a darkness beyond his understanding: "I know all mysteries… I am the only man still living who has thought them all out" (130). Like Kafka's hapless protagonist, Ork's arrogance and ignorance quickly become clear as he tries to lecture a silent interlocutor on his understanding of the world. Grendel has asked about "The King of the Gods," and Ork responds with metaphysics: "The King of the Gods is not concrete, but He is the ground for concrete actuality. No reason can be given for the nature of God, because that nature is the ground of rationality" (131). Gardner satirizes theology as abstract word games and circular reasoning: "The King of the Gods is the actual entity in virtue of which the entire multiplicity of eternal objects obtains its graded relevance to each stage of concrescence. Apart from Him, there can be no relevant novelty" (132). Cloaking Platonic ideas in pretentious language, Ork's speech is among the most devastating satires of theology's thousand-year culture-industry ever devised. The entire time he is pontificating, a tic appears in his speech, reflecting his inner doubt and terror. Ork nearly admits his own willful confusion between subjective hopes and convictions about reality when he states, "He is the *lure for our feeling*" (132). Grendel observes, "Ork is now weeping profusely" (132). Thus, even the chief theologian suspects that the darkness he is speaking into hosts no god, only a monster. All of his sophisticated abstractions are but the wishful projection of a desperate mind: "He is the eternal urge of desire establishing the purpose of all creatures. He is an infinite patience, a tender care that nothing in the universe be vain" (132). He even names the fears he has invented these abstractions in order to combat: "The ultimate evil is that Time is perpetually perishing, and being actual involves elimination… Such is His mystery: that beauty requires contrast" (133).[63]

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[63] The aesthetic logic of theology which Gardner attacks here, is strikingly similar to Tolkien's treatment of the same theme in his creation myth. See discussion of Tolkien's creation myth on page 177-178.

Grendel spares Ork for the same reason he spares Unferth: he is "a satire on himself," like White's Mordred. Even his fellow priests are skeptical, for when he reports that he has talked to an emissary of the gods, one responds "Bosh" (fraud), another "Blasphemy" (theologically unacceptable), and a third suspects Ork's sobriety (134). A business-minded fourth priest contributes, "If a man hankers for visions, he should do it in public, where it does us some good" while another notes that "Lunatic priests are bad business. They give people the willies" (134). But Ork really means it: "I saw him. My life of study and devotion has been rewarded! I told him my opinion of the King of the Gods, and he didn't deny it. I believe I'm approximately right" (134). Meanwhile, Grendel's assessment of the situation is quite different: "Theology … prospers on decline. Only in a world where everything is patently being lost can a priest stir men's hearts as a poet would by maintaining that nothing is in vain" (158). Indeed, every time Grendel attacks the Danes, they bawl that some god is angry and has sent them a punishment (13). In other words, the priests exploit tragedy to cultivate piety.

The climax of *Grendel* is a conversation between two monsters: the titular narrator, and "The Dragon" who is to Grendel what Grendel is to humans – not just in terms of size, intimidation and terror, but in superior age, knowledge, disillusionment, and nihilism. Grendel is terrified upon encountering the dragon, who tells him, "Now you know how *they* feel when they see *you*." To the dragon, Grendel looks like a comical little rabbit. If Grendel is a sort of "dark existentialist" who thinks he is smarter than humans (with their religions and ideologies) and delights in destroying their beliefs, the Dragon does the same to Grendel's own beliefs; he is a cosmic nihilist who dismisses the inferior perspectives of "low creatures," including all of human civilization, with contempt. He explains modern scientific truths about reality with a hilarious and sinister malice; he begins explaining the scale of the cosmos in time and space: "We (and by

we I mean you, not us) are apt to take modes of observable functioning in our own bodies as setting an absolute scale… [yet] it's extremely rash to extend conclusions derived from observation far beyond the scale of magnitude to which observation was confined" (66). Grendel has observed human evolution for centuries, perhaps millennia; his observation of agriculture, population, weapons technology, roads, and political organization is sophisticated enough to arrive at some rudimentary ideas about the nature of arms races. Yet the Dragon describes the history of the cosmos from the big bang to the evolution of life on earth.

The Dragon literally knows *everything*, including the subjective impressions generated by inferior minds: "I know what's in your mind" (61). He is bored to tears, since nothing is unknown to him – not the laws of nature, the past, present or future, nor the thoughts of others. He explains the difference between his omniscience and Grendel's limited understanding thus:

> You now see the past and the present, like other low creatures: no higher faculties than memory and perception. But dragons, my boy, have a whole different kind of mind… We see from the mountain-top: all time, all space. We see in one instant the passionate vision and the blowout. Not that we *cause* things to fail, you understand. (63)

Auden attributes his poem's juxtaposition of ancient and modern ages to divine vision, but like White, Gardner prefers a science fiction justification to explain his sage's awareness of modernity. Although the scope of the Dragon's vision is exponentially greater than that of White's Merlyn, it is explained the same way – he remembers the future:

> My knowledge of the future does not *cause* the future. It merely *sees* it, exactly as creatures at your low level recall things past. And even if, say, I burn up somebody's meadhall, for instance, whether I just feel like it or because some supplicant asked me to – even then I do not change the future, I merely do what I saw from the beginning. (63)

From the Dragon's perspective, any difference between modern and medieval *homo sapiens* does not even qualify as a rounding error: *all* humans are ignorant, delusional and self-justifying. As he tries to explain evolution and cosmology to the confused Grendel, his patience wears thin: "It's damned hard, you understand, confining myself to concepts familiar to a creature of the Dark Ages. Not that one age is darker than another. Technical jargon from another dark age" (67). White also protests the term "Dark Ages," and his address to readers is powerful:

> Do you think that they, with their Battles, Famine, Black Death and Serfdom, were less enlightened than we are, with our Wars, Blockade, Influenza and Conscription? Even if they were foolish enough to believe that the earth was the centre of the universe, do we not ourselves believe that man is the fine flower of creation? If it takes a million years for a fish to become a reptile, has Man, in our few hundred, altered out of recognition? (569)

In other words, for both Gardner and White, the very idea of human progress is just one more ideology that obscures reality behind a *Dream of Order*, as Chandler calls it; thus Grendel assesses human ideologies as "not light for their darkness but flattery, illusion" (48).

The Dragon is so far beyond humans that their ideas cannot tempt him: "They rush across chasms on spiderwebs, and sometimes they make it, and that, they think, settles that!" (64). With no candle in the dark, we humans foolishly imagine ourselves safe and beloved in the cosmos:

> [Sometimes they] have uneasy feelings that all they live by is nonsense… That's where the Shaper saves them. Provides an illusion of reality… Mere tripe, believe me. Mere sleight-of-wits. He knows no more than they do about total reality – less, if anything: works with the same old clutter of atoms, the givens of his time and place and tongue. But he spins it all together with harp runs and hoots, and they think what they think is alive, think Heaven loves them. It keeps them going – for what that's worth. (64-65)

Grendel, desperately clinging to the last shreds of his illusions, resorts to quoting the Shaper's creation myth but before he can even finish, the Dragon interrupts with a single word: "Ridiculous" (74). He has little respect for humanity's anthropomorphic, vitalistic beliefs about the world, attacking the religious concept that humans *must* have been specially created because *they* are so smart: "Ah, man's cunning mind!... Merely a new complexity, a new event… The Devonian fish, the juxtaposed thumb, the fontanel, technology" (71-72). The fontanel is a particularly good example, since it is one of the major physical adaptations that made "greater intelligence" possible. The Dragon even describes religion itself as an inevitable product of evolution: "A swirl in the stream of time. A temporary gathering of bits, a few random dust specks, so to speak – pure metaphor, you understand – then by chance a vast floating cloud of dustspecks, an expanding universe… Complexities: green dust as well as the regular kind. Purple dust. Gold. Additional refinements: sensitive dust, copulating dust, *worshipful* dust!" (70-71).

At this point it is necessarily to return to the work of E. R. Eddison one more time, before concluding discussion of Gardner. This is because Eddison places Fiorinda on a similar level of consciousness of the cosmos to Gardner's Dragon, with the one and very important difference that she is *specifying*, rather than merely *describing*, the characteristics of our universe. In *A Fish Dinner in Memison*, Fiorinda creates the specifications that will later perplex our species. First, she explains that our universe will be deterministic: "at each succeeding Moment of its existence the sum and totality of my world, and all that in it is, shall be determined reasonably and inevitably by that which was the Moment before" (268). Evolution will eventually produce humans or human-like beings in her image: "even out of such contemptible slime as this is, shall be engendered all myriads of living creatures after their kind …Run through all the lewd forms of them: fishes, birds, beasts even to human kind" (267). Yet since humans are animals like any

other type of animal, they will have no control over the laws of their world. There will be no free will and no miracles: "No chanceableness. Nor no meddling finger of God neither, to ruffle the serenity of my world's unfolding" (268). Despite this fact, desperate humans will believe in such things – and thus *we* will become her metafictional puppets: "I will tease them a little with my laws. They shall seem indeed to themselves to have freedom; yet we, who look on, know 'tis no such matter" (268-9). Indeed, in *our* universe, organic life-forms will have no more freedom than inorganic matter: "all must be predetermined… like clock-work" (268). The gears are grinding in our clock-work universe: "And the second law of thermodynamics to assure us that in time, a few million or billion years… the whole thing will have come to an end… The end laid down by the great law of entropy" (302). Eddison thus presents a very similar vision of modern physics and cosmology to that of Gardner in *Grendel*. But unlike mythopoeic deities such as Dunsany's Mana Yood Sushai, Eddison's Lady Fiorinda, or Tolkien's Eru Ilúvatar, Gardner's Dragon does not envision, create, or specify; he merely *describes*. Eddison places agency above nature, though it is Fiorinda's agency and not humanity's, but Gardner's Dragon's description of Nature is more or less one colossal announcement that humans are deluded little primates.

This Dragon's speech shows how naturalistic explanations discredit any ideology humans might dream up: "Things come and go… That's the gist of it. In a billion billion billion years, everything will have come and gone several times, in various forms. Even I will be gone. A certain man will absurdly kill me. A terrible pity – loss of a remarkable form of life. Conservationists will howl" (70). Grendel protests: "Something will come of all this." "Nothing," replies the Dragon. "Pick an apocalypse, any apocalypse" (71). Sounding more and more like the naïve humans he has previously terrified, Grendel is incredulous that this could happen. "It has happened," replies the Dragon. "In the future" (71).

For Gardner, as for White, the very premise of knowing the future requires an intellectual justification of determinism. Determinism reflects both a modern projection of hindsight onto a story (Arthur's, Sigurd's, Beowulf's, etc.) whose outline and ending every reader already knows, and a carefully considered philosophical view (in both cases, scientifically informed). White's Merlyn, for example, explains: "I am due to fall in love with a girl called Nimue in a short time, and then she learns my spells and locks me up in a cave for several centuries. It is one of those things which are going to happen" (228). Steinbeck's Merlin has a similar conversation with Arthur: "my death is to be shameful and ugly and ridiculous," adding that there is no avoiding it, "It is there as surely as if it had already happened" (42). Gardner's Dragon even distinguishes crude, mechanical determinism from the twentieth-century physics, in which events occur by probabilities: "The laws of nature are large average effects which reign impersonally" (68).

Grendel still fails to grasp the implications of this for his own desire to understand *why*: "Why? Ridiculous question. Why anything?" The Dragon explains that Grendel's question presupposes an anthropomorphic answer in tune with his tiny, limited sense of how things *ought* to work. It is in some sense the intellectual equivalent of the anthropic principle: conditions in this universe are such that you *exist*, granted, but conditions are not such that you can understand much. Finally Grendel achieves acceptance, both of his own instinct-driven nature and of the cosmos' indifference to all life. Where Tennyson hoped that "Life shall live forevermore, / Else earth is darkness at the core, / And dust and ashes all that is," Gardner's Dragon concludes "Ashes to ashes, slime to slime, amen" (73). This is the lecture that Carlyle, Ruskin and Tennyson had resisted so mightily: a biological account of human behaviour which results in disbelief in the divine, disillusionment with human nature, and the discarding of honour.

Yet Gardner is not only attacking Romantic or religious ideologies; the Dragon completes his evisceration of ideology by attacking utilitarian humanism, telling Grendel if he prefers not to kill humans then "Do something else, by all means! Alter the future! Make the world a better place in which to live! Help the poor! Feed the hungry! Be kind to idiots! What a challenge!" (73). Tennyson (and his Arthurian knights) had hoped to believe not just in theism but in a particular theism (an English interpretation of Christianity) with specific attendant metaphysical claims. In *Grendel*, however, the protagonist is a shaggy apelike monster whose philosophical claims have been reduced to the barest whimpers of teleology and vitalism.

Accepting the force of the Dragon's description of the universe (science) and the whimsical nature of ideas, ideals and ideologies, the "theoretical, unreal" nature of "all order" (the humanities), Grendel becomes a metafictional author figure and finally gains an identity, defined in opposition to Heorot and all such lies: "I had hung between possibilities before, between the cold truths I knew and the heart-sucking conjuring tricks of the Shaper; now that was passed: I was Grendel, Ruiner of Meadhalls, Wrecker of Kings!" (80). Thus, Grendel becomes the Anti-Shaper. After twelve years of war, the Shaper's apprentice "knows no art but tragedy – a moving singer. The credit is wholly mine" (47). Grendel's aesthetic justification for evil is reminiscent of the work of Tolkien, who justifies the actions of Melkor by claiming that these actions contribute to a higher benevolence and beauty, presumably involving the nobility and tragedy that result from his war against all the Children of Ilúvatar. Grendel is not *actually* the offspring of Cain, but he accepts the role and argues that he represents awful truths and provokes human creativity since he forces humans to imaginatively invent explanations for him:

This nobility of his [Hrothgar's], this dignity: are they not *my* work? What was he before?

Nothing! A swollen-headed raider, full of boasts and stupid jokes and mead… I made

him what he is. Have I not a right to test my own creation? Enough! Who says I have to

defend myself? I'm a machine, like you. Like all of you. Blood-lust and rage are my

character. Why does the lion not wisely settle down and be a horse? (123)

The reference to Nietzsche's analogy of eagles and lambs is not even the most striking part of

this passage;[64] it is Grendel's assertion that he, and all of us, are machines, an assertion

characteristic of the "hard" philosophical view of evolution which is anathema to Romanticism

and might just be the most taboo import from science into literary medievalism of them all.

The final style of ideology to be discussed in Gardner's Grendel is, as the above passage

implies, Nietzscheanism. Whatever one thinks of him, Nietzsche has been one of the most

influential of modern philosophers, and his influence on medievalism has been profound. As

Grendel has finally claimed his identity as a nihilist, the arrival of Beowulf, whom Gardner

portrays as a fanatical Nietzschean overman, threatens everything. First, of course, as with the

historical Nietzsche, the overman threatens the calcified traditions of religion by revealing them

as a crutch for the weak-minded, exploited by the corrupt. Grendel reports, "The priests weren't

happy either. They'd be saying for years that the ghostly Destroyer would take care of things in

time. Now here were these foreigner upstarts unmasking religion!" (159). Then, as one might

interpret Nietzsche's philosophy, after attacking the most obvious target, it threatens all else.

Gardner's Beowulf is the first human who is not afraid of Grendel or of anything Grendel

has to say. Gardner describes Beowulf in animalistic terms: with a horse's shoulders and a

snake's eyes, he reminds Grendel of a shark (154-155), even before he tells his story of battling

sea-monsters. Although Grendel, overhearing this story, considers it "preposterous" (161), the

laughter from inside the hall is soon silenced: "Now the Danes weren't laughing. The stranger

said it all so calmly, so softly, that it was impossible to laugh. He believed every word he said. I

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[64] This passage resembles E. R. Eddison's response to the same ideas, discussed on page 166, but Eddison is serious.

understood at last the look in his eyes. He was insane" (162). And yet, however unhinged Grendel thinks Beowulf is, there is something peculiar, perhaps even supernatural, about him. Grendel hallucinates as he fights Beowulf, seeing flames in his mouth and wings on his shoulders (170). This is a reference to the Dragon, that embodiment of dark truths unfit for the consumption of weak-minded primates like humans and Grendel. And yet Beowulf quite clearly views himself as a hero, an ideal so flimsy that Grendel himself thoroughly debunks it in the person of Unferth. What explains Beowulf's overlapping of primitive and advanced ideas?

Gardner's Beowulf invents, creates and asserts himself: he *makes* reality mythical. As the overman, he represents the final stage in Nietzsche's philosophy. He is a meaning-making being whose will-to-power overrides any existential despair or escapist ideology. Having progressed from belief in primitive myths (Gardner's Danes), to Romantic disillusionment (Grendel), to Nihilism (the Dragon), and beyond, Beowulf returns to a conscious and creative re-assertion of these myths held simultaneously with an awareness of nihilism and indeed in spite of it.[65] We might criticize this the same way as Nietzsche's Zarathustra; that this is merely an atheist's attempt to become religious, to somehow un-do "the hideous dropping off of the veil," so to speak, and all that gazing into the abyss. And the veil is not merely an element of clothing which the wearer might use to identify with a particular culture or tradition; it also modifies how its wearer *sees* the world. Perhaps Beowulf is a megalomaniac. But unlike the cosmically indifferent Dragon, he is motivated; like Eddison's Lords of Demonland, he has gazed into the void and returned with life-affirmation. This is where Gardner, despite his innovation and iconoclasm, is closest in spirit to his medievalist predecessors. From Tennyson (particularly as interpreted by William R. Brashear) to Dunsany, Eddison, and T. H. White, the medievalist tradition presents a philosophical journey, one over-arcing attempt to overcome nihilism.

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[65] See Eddison's interpretation of the Nietzschean overman, who moves beyond skepticism, on page 164.

For the first time since the Dragon, Grendel is legitimately intimidated: "He smiled as he spoke, but it was as if the gentle voice, the childlike yet faintly ironic smile were holding something back, some magician-power that could blast stone cliffs to ashes as lightning blasts trees" (154). As Beowulf twists Grendel's arm (the decisive attack both here and in the original poem), he whispers that Grendel's species will be destroyed and that a new age will come. Perhaps, like Nietzsche's madman, he has come too early; maybe he *is* mad. Beowulf's final words to Grendel seem to imply a radical assertion of consciousness *over* the material world, an assertion Beowulf makes by smashing Grendel's head into the nearest wall in a passage reminiscent of Dostoevsky's *Notes From Underground.* Dostoevsky compares the laws of physics to a wall against which he will smash his head, noting that people will never accept that they are deterministic piano-keys; they will deliberately go mad in order to gain this point. Unlike Dostoevsky's narrator, Gardner's Beowulf does not lack the strength by which to assert his solipsism and makes this clear to Grendel. And to this Grendel, sarcastic to the end, quips, "you're a fucking lunatic" (171). For Grendel, Nietzscheanism too is just another apocalyptic, Romantic, millenarian ideology; with its epistemological relativism and focus on the individual will, it encourages megalomaniacs to pursue their dreams with total fanaticism. An ideology that denies what it is, is perhaps the most dangerous one of all.

Grendel undergoes a constant, repetive cycle of belief and disillusionment; he is an excellent representative of the literary tradition of medievalism itself. From Keats through Tennyson and Dunsany, medievalist writers personified the beauty of myth in potentially supernatural female characters. Grendel mocks Unferth's ideal of masculine self-sacrificing heroism, yet another illusionary ideal arrives and asserts its power over not just Unferth, but Grendel himself: the illusionary ideal of feminine self-sacrificing martyrdom. Gardner's Queen

Wealtheow has a very strong effect even on disillusioned characters. In his rage Unferth is a violent drunk, but Wealtheow proves capable of calming him with a touch and a word, in a manner that makes even Grendel think her magical: "I hung balanced, a creature of two minds; and one of them said – unreasonable, stubborn as the mountains – that she was beautiful" (110). After this incident, Grendel himself becomes "tortured by the red of her hair and the set of her chin and the white of her shoulders – teased toward disbelief in the dragon's truths" (108).

Grendel ultimately chooses the Dragon's scientific perspective, discarding humanity's belief systems as "their bubble of stupidity" (77). He realizes that he too has only invented an appealing ideal once more: "How many times must a creature be dragged down the same ridiculous road! The Shaper's lies, the hero's self-delusion, now this: the idea of a queen!" (108). From the gods in the imagination of priests, to the heroes in the imagination of poets, to the idea of a queen, Grendel's statement here is Gardner's metafictional reflection on the history of medievalism: *all* its ideals are illusions. Heroism, nationalism, religion, socialism, martyrdom, nobility, love, Romanticism, Nietzscheanism; for every ideal spun by some Shaper's harp there is an inevitable crash and burn. The conflict between believers (beginning with Blake) and skeptics (beginning with Keats) in the medievalist tradition here receives a strong assertion in favour of the latter, relegating the former to aesthetics alone, and assessing it as naïve and dangerous even there.[66] In a condemnation of the "Philosophy of Clothes," and the validity of any of its ideals, Gardner's Grendel observes: "All order, I've come to understand, is theoretical, unreal – [a] smiling mask men slide between the two great, dark realities, the self and the world" (157). This displays a skepticism as strong as that of Dunsany, and similarly expressed through satire, yet Gardner's humour is less whimsical or playful and far more bitter or polemical.

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[66] Whereas Eddison uses epigraphs from Keats and others in support of his own ideas, Gardner's use of an epigraph from Blake at the very start of *Grendel* seems more in opposition to Blake's religious perspective.

V. Whacking and Whonking, Satire and Schism

As modern responses to premodern myths, medievalist literary works inherently concern the difference between the worldview of the source material and modern scientific knowledge. The Shaper is a poet; the Dragon is defined by his scientific awareness. Tennyson had asked "Are God and Nature then at strife?" Many medievalist writers have thought so, and have taken sides based on that view. Tolkien remarks that in his view the creative desire "seems to have no biological function, and to be apart from the satisfaction of plain ordinary biological life, with which, in our world, it is indeed usually at strife" (1999, 4). This vitalist view of art at strife with biology has a Tennysonian echo, especially as Tolkien describes the hostility of nature as a result of the "Discord of Melkor" (1999, 4). But for Gardner, art simply creates illusions – illusions which can be politically dangerous.

Tolkien and Gardner had two very different responses to *Beowulf*. Tolkien empathized deeply with the *Beowulf*-poet's desire to recover the past, to the point of envisioning an entire linguistic and literary tradition behind *Beowulf* which eventually crossed the line into becoming its own world. Of course, this raises the issue of how much medieval authors themselves were imagining the past, and this is where the believer-skeptic dichotomy divides medievalism once again. Gardner portrays the *Beowulf*-poet's original source, "The Shaper," as a contemporary of Grendel, so the events are based on something. However, this imaginative propagandist has a silver tongue, an appetite for status, and just enough talent to believe in his own warmongering delusions. This poet is the opposite of the reverent preservers of tradition and divine wisdom in Tolkien's mythopoeia, whose main enemies are fragmentation and doubt, not corruption and delusion. Gardner's Grendel hates the Shaper for producing painfully beautiful illusions, while in Tolkien's mythopoeia satire is associated with the powers of darkness, with loss of faith in the

world order and with nihilism (though Gardner does not necessarily deny this). Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* summarizes lore created in response to *Beowulf*, and it begins with a creation myth that combines Christian and Germanic Pagan myths in a tale of intelligent design and malicious sabotage. Over the ages, the gods are forgotten. Gardner's *Grendel* takes the opposite approach: a firsthand witness of evolution sees humans invent the gods over ages.

Although Grendel finds himself psychologically overpowered by the Shaper's poetry, when he personally observes the wars it glorifies, the experience of battle which sounded so noble and tragic actually has no dignity at all: "spears flying, swords whonking, arrows raining from the windows and doors of the meadhall and the edge of the woods" (36). This passage is important because in "On Translating *Beowulf*," Tolkien specifically warned that

> You will misrepresent the first and most salient characteristic of the style and flavour of the author, if in translating *Beowulf*, you deliberately eschew the traditional literary and poetic diction… in favour of the current and trivial. In any case a self-conscious, and often silly, laughter comes too easily to us to be tempted in this way. The things we are here dealing with are serious… We are being at once wisely aware of our own frivolity and just to the solemn temper of the original, if we avoid *hitting* and *whacking* and prefer 'striking' and 'smiting.' (2006 55)

To Gardner, all of this is simply the literary seduction of the mind; satire of battle-glorification is the wiser approach. The Shaper's role as propagandist closely resembles that of Thormod. But unlike Thormod, whose last words repudiate his work, the Shaper dies still prophesizing future glory. As he watches the Shaper die of old age, Grendel asks: "Where are all his fine phrases now?" (143). It is a question shortly to be discussed in this study's conclusion.

All of the retellings in this chapter employ a significant element of satire, although White manages to walk the line between Tolkienian sincerity and the sharp satire of his contemporaries. This chapter began with Auden's concept of anachronism and authorial responsibility, aiming to show its application to mid-century works of medievalism. Auden himself is recognized as a great writer; Laxness is arriving there; White has been forgotten by the critical establishment, who only wish they could forget Gardner. Tolkien has been by far the most influential of twentieth-century medievalist writers, but the satirical approach tracks the shock of World War II more closely than any of his works.

For White, Laxness, and Gardner, it was no longer possible to escape modernity into a time of greater nobility; the cataclysms of modernity followed them there. Horrible suspicions about human nature and destiny borne of the "Midnight of the Twentieth century" haunted them, and despite all the wicked humour of their medievalist works, it is a dark and desperate humour unlike the cheerful disdain of Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, the only real anticipation of their anti-medievalist medievalism. Whereas Tennyson, Dunsany and Tolkien ended their works with a Romantic sense of disenchantment and loss, these writers ended their works with a nihilistic sense of disillusionment and devastation. The result was one of the most poignant moments not just in literary medievalism, but in twentieth-century literature as a whole.

Conclusion

I. "Wrecked Among Heathen Dreams": The Failure of the Vision?

Many prophets shall arise claiming discovery of that old knowledge. Then thou shalt find that seeking knowledge is vain, as the chase is vain, as making merry is vain, as all things are vain.

-Lord Dunsany, "The Journey of the King" (1906)

I have learned nothing except the vanity of wisdom, the impotence of magic,

the nullity of love, and the delusiveness of memory.

-Clark Ashton Smith, "The Last Incantation" (1929)

John Keats and Lord Dunsany wrote their best work in their twenties. Keats lived no longer, but Dunsany and W. B. Yeats, like their contemporary H. G. Wells, enjoyed long literary careers in which they slowly abandoned Romanticism in favour of realism, however nostalgic that realism might be. But for some writers – Alfred, Lord Tennyson, William Morris, J. R. R. Tolkien, E. R. Eddison – literary medievalism was a lifelong creative commitment, challenge, and vision. In *A Dream of Order*, Chandler concludes her account of medievalism in the early twentieth century with "The Failure of the Vision." This project has sought to add a voice to a chorus which has been growing for decades for the critical rehabilitation of literary medievalism as a single continuous neo-Romantic tradition, whose continuation has only been temporarily obscured by modernism. The question is, more or less, can Romanticism be justified after 1900? The answer is, more or less, could it be justified in 1800? Can it be justified to be apprehensive about existence, even under such a glorious standard of living as that offered by modernity? Perhaps it cannot. But if one finds that tradition, particularly mythology, has an important voice in the modern age, and if one believes in further developing traditional aesthetics as opposed to discarding it for either elitist or commercial reasons, then one is in some sense Romantic.

And yet even if few would now argue that medievalism somehow ended in the year 1900, the idea of the "Failure of the Vision" is important because medievalism has always been motivated by a vision; even the most skeptical and sarcastic among these writers sometimes register a wistful lament or a bitter rejection motivated by having once believed. Even Gardner's *Grendel*, a very disillusioned and unpleasant character, is "torn apart by poetry" (44), constantly tempted to believe in various ideals he knows he will later give up on. When, if ever, do literary medievalists give up? Does a sort of deep admiration of the past, or at least wishful thinking about the past, necessarily inform medievalism?

Even skeptics like Dunsany were under a sort of youthful spell when they strayed into Elfland. Youth is the time during which one first confronts death. Old age is the time during which one confronts death for certain. T. H. White proposed that the "sixth-sense" of humanity was self-deception: how to delude all other senses into support for an action or attitude necessary to continue surviving. According to him, this is the only sense which becomes stronger as one ages. So is Romanticism just a lament for what Tolkien called "The Long Defeat"? What do Romantics think of themselves, their readers, and their species, at the point where it is undeniable that "Age Fell Upon The World"? What is the value of any fantastic "Vision" for one whose mind and body are nearly used up, with only the certainty of death? In his reflection on art and science, *Unweaving the Rainbow*, Richard Dawkins reflects on these issues:

> I am almost reluctant to admit that my favourite of all poets is that confused Irish mystic William Butler Yeats. In old age Yeats sought a theme…finally returning, in desperation, to enumerate old themes… How sad to give up, wrecked among heathen dreams, marooned amid the faeries and fey Irishry of his affected youth when, an hour's drive from Yeats's tower, Ireland housed the largest astronomical telescope then built. (26)

Should Yeats have drawn inspiration from science, rather than returning to his Romantic roots? Are the two incompatible, and can those writers most seduced by the "Vision" ever be expected to acknowledge themselves in the mirror that science provides – ephemeral individual organisms of a fragile species, the playthings of nature? Was the mature Yeats, in seeking the same source of inspiration as he had found in youth, really "wrecked among heathen dreams"? Can those in the humanities in this modern age acknowledge the overwhelming truths of modern science – or will they retreat into intellectual provincialism? As Gardner noted half a century ago, ideology cannot ever unite humanity; all it can do is divide. The only thing that can unite humanity is ethical universalism and epistemological acknowledgement of *reality*. Even the young Yeats displays more self-awareness than might be expected, or at the very least an internal debate. For example, Yeats tells a tale in which the Irish folk singer Red Hanrahan is about to die, and a destitute and delusional old woman tells him that she is his elf-spirit:

> I am one of the lasting people, of the lasting unwearied Voices, that make my dwelling in the broken and the dying, and those that have lost their wits; and I came looking for you, and you are mine until the whole world is burned out like a candle that is spent…. [T]he wisps that are for our wedding are lighted. (1998 260)

Is she merely suffering from dementia? Is Hanrahan himself? Throughout his folk-tales Yeats blurs the boundaries between reality and hallucination; surely he understands the wish-fulfilment here. The old woman informs all present that she has indeed returned to a dream of her youth: "I am beautiful… You and the whole race of men, and the race of the beasts, and the race of the fish, and the winged race, are dropping like a candle that is nearly burned out. But I laugh aloud, because I am in my youth" (261). Every bit of sad delusion that Dawkins might attribute to the older Yeats is here, and moreover in the context of a pseudo-evolutionary description of life.

Perhaps, "broken and dying," having "lost his wits," Yeats hoped more than ever that the hidden people and spirits he had envisioned were real.[67] Among other medievalists, both more orthodox religious believers (Tennyson, Tolkien) and secular idealists (above all Morris) spent their lives chasing phantoms, and when one loses the energy to continue chasing, the distance visibly lengthens and the phantoms fade – or perhaps they were never there. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries offered an unprecedented wealth of anthropological knowledge, so that the mythical beliefs of a wide variety of cultures on the subject of death were available to be understood as never before. At the same time, the intellectual vanguard of western civilization began viewing humanity in naturalistic terms. The idea that consciousness comes from a supernatural spirit, which at the body's death "goes home" or migrates into a different plane of existence, was now held in serious doubt by scientists. What do medievalists – the believers and the skeptics – have to say upon the undeniable and unromantic brink of existence?

When Tolkien's mortal hero Aragorn dies of old age, he consoles his wife, the elf Arwen who gave up her immortality for him: "In sorrow we must go, but not in despair. Behold! We are not bound for ever to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory" (qtd. in Shippey 2001 177). Shippey notes that despite Aragorn's hope for reunion in the afterlife, she is not comforted: "She dies under the 'fading trees' of a Lórien gone 'silent', and the end of her tale is oblivion, 'and elanor and niphredil bloom no more east of the Sea'" (2003 229). Tolkien connects the loss of magic and the fading of the elves (in Rivendell and Lothlórien) to a theme of environmental loss (these plants never grow again after her death). Like the ancient heroine Lúthien, so beautiful that grass and flowers grow where she walked (1999 x), Arwen seems to have preserved the spirit of the land. Thus, although in a rather environmentalist way grounded in Romantic anti-industrialism, Tolkien emphasizes the common medievalist theme of entropy.

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[67] See discussion of religious beliefs in connection with Yeats's *Mythologies* in the introduction, page 47-49.

The inevitability of loss is a primary theme of medievalism, from Keats to Tennyson and Dunsany. Shippey explains how Tolkien's personal experience informs this theme: "There is no difficulty in seeing why Tolkien, from 1916 on, was preoccupied with the theme of death, and escape from it. By the end of World War I… his closest friends were dead. He had been an orphan since his mother died when he was twelve, and had never really known his father, who died when he was four" (2001 248). Like Tennyson, Tolkien held on to hope for religion in the face of all the loss and trauma of human life; Aragorn's hope of "more than memory" beyond "the circles of the world" seems a proto-Christian hope for an afterlife in a higher reality. But as with Tennyson, doubt haunts even the most hopeful of believers: "Frodo doubted his own salvation…. Tolkien was doubtful too: not of salvation, but of the legitimacy of his own mental wanerings" (Shippey 2003, 324). For Morris, disillusionment actually led to inspiration, but for Tolkien loss of belief sapped it. Shippey writes that for the later Tolkien, "The longing for a Paradise on Earth, a paradise of natural beauty, was compelling…. But in the last poems the murmuring wind has ceased, and the sense of a barrier is much stronger" (Shippey 2003 326).

In a way, all one can do is plant one's flag, like Yeats's Oisin in the conclusion of *The Wanderings of Oisin*. After spending centuries in the Celtic otherworld, Oisin wants to return to Ireland to see his comrades, so his supernatural lover Niam lends him her horse. She warns him not to get off the horse and touch the ground, or he will never return. In Ireland, Oisin finds his companions dead and paganism displaced by St. Patrick's Christianity. He then sees men struggling to carry a sack of sand; he bends over to help them carry it, but falls off his horse. Instantly his mortal-years hit him so that he is no longer young, but over three hundred years old. Patrick tells him that the Fenians are in hell, that they belonged to a "godless and passionate age" characterized by "demon love of its youth," but Oisin remains defiant even as he crumbles:

> When in life my body has ceased
>
> I will go to Caolte, and Conan, and Bran, Sgeolan, Lomair,
>
> And dwell in the house of the Fenians, be they in flames or at feast. (142)

Yeats, like many Romantics before him, laments the passing of an age, as his protagonist feels only alienation and despair on the edge of death, left with a haunting vision of a lost time. Dunsany's "In the Land of Time" presents an even more striking version of the same concept, where a personified Time defeats humanity's siege, hurling down decades from his castle.

> As the feet of the foremost touched the edge of the hill Time hurled five years against them, and the years passed over their heads and the army still came on, an army of older men. But the slope seemed steeper to the King and to every man in his army, and they breathed more heavily…. [T]he knees of the army stiffened, and their beards grew and turned grey…. [T]he years rushed on and swept the youth of that army clear away till they came face to face under the walls of the castle of Time with a mass of howling years, and found the top of the slope too steep for aged men. (1906 79)

Similarly, the conclusion of *The Lord of the Rings* emphasizes the inevitable loss of magic and divinity, as the destruction of the One Ring ends the power of all the others, including those which give Galadriel, Elrond and Gandalf their power; thus the elven realms must fade. Galadriel explains, "If you succeed, then our power is diminished, and Lothlórien will fade, and the tides of Time will sweep it away. We must depart into the West, or dwindle to a rustic folk of dell and cave, slowly to forget and be forgotten" (I 380). This notion of diminishing magic is Celtic in its inspiration; the elves fade from a glorious people who reshaped the ancient world and wielded power hardly less than that of gods, to small creatures of folklore, just as in Irish myth leprechauns have as their ancestry the Celtic smith-god Lugh of the Long Hand (Ellis 7).

Shippey notes that at Tolkien's conclusion, all his non-human speaking races depart: "Along with them will go the ents and the dwarves, indeed the whole of Middle-earth, to be replaced by modernity and the dominion of men; all the characters and their story will shrink to misunderstood words in poems here and there, lists of names with their meaning forgotten" (2001 149). Tolkien explains the fragments of medieval lore about both benevolent creatures and monsters; for example, the last orcs and dragons will trouble humanity but eventually be slain by men, as is told of in *Beowulf* (1986 40). Basney writes, "At the trilogy's end, therefore, we are in some sense in the present-day world. We are, at least, out of the world of faërie," in the sense that the opportunity for contact with other beings has been lost (191). Tolkien even describes a conversation between an elf (in some ways immortal) and a dwarf (very-long lived), about the long-term fate of their peoples among the quickly reproducing generations of "short-lived folk," as Morris's dwarf Regin calls humans. They reflect that one day only humans will remain, and *they* will fade from the world to the point where they are thought fictional: "The deeds of Men will outlast us, Gimli" (qtd. in Shippey 2003 249). In other words, the logical, inevitable result of the fading and fragmentation of folklore and myth is admittedly doubt.

In *The Fall of Arthur*, Tolkien treats the titular event in the same way: as the disenchantment of the end of a noble age. In Tennyson's "The Passing of Arthur," Bedivere preserves Arthur's memory "In the white winter of his years," and in *The Fall of Arthur* Tolkien echoes this phrasing near the end of his poem, at the last gathering of Arthur's court:

Here free unfaded is the flower of time

That men shall remember through the mist of years

As a golden summer in the grey winter. (195)

Doubt clouds the fate of Tolkien's Arthur in another Tennysonian touch (139); he is taken onto a ship and out to sea toward a distant divine realm. Like Tennyson, Tolkien closes his story with a sense of loss. George P. Landow writes that "The Passing of Arthur" prepares readers to return to

> A later, a lesser time… the great deeds of Arthur's realm recede into the obscuring reaches of time long past… Tennyson convinces us not only that his characters, like those in all epic and heroic verse, stand larger than life, but also that their passing from the earth should occasion in us a piercing sense of loss. In conveying this conviction that something great, something irreplaceable, has vanished from the world, *The Idylls of the King* sounds that note of bitter yearning for what cannot return with a power that had not appeared in English poetry since the Anglo-Saxon bards. (qtd. in Buckler 234)

With Arthur's death, the "Gleam" passes from the world. There is a parallel here to the ending of *The Lord of the Rings*, with its Romantic lament for the loss of magic, as Shippey explains:

> The story is not a quest, about finding something, it is an anti-quest, about throwing it away. The price of throwing it away is extinction. The elves will disappear. So will the ents, and the hobbits. Frodo, the hero, is incurably wounded. He is taken away across the sea, but only to die. The dominating word of the last page of the story is 'grey,' as the other characters ride back unspeaking on 'the long grey road' from the 'grey firth,' and the 'grey sea,' and the 'grey rain-curtains,' and the Grey Havens. Something has gone out of the world, and it will not come back. (2003 373)

There is clear thematic repetition from Tennyson to Tolkien: the theme of disenchantment. In Tolkien's Arthuriana, and in Tolkien's mythopoeia, the ultimate destiny of mortals is unclear. Shippey writes, "The wisest characters in Middle-earth… have some idea of this future resurrection… Théoden, like Thorin in *The Hobbit*, has some sense of ancestor-worship, in

which the dead go to their fathers, but this is felt only by the most aristocratic characters: Théoden may mean only that he will be buried alongside his predecessors in the row of barrows by Edoras" (2001 178-179). Tolkien's image of a heavenly afterlife is "White shores, and beyond," which might be a reference to long-lost shores of Valinor, the land of the gods.

Yet the Valar, the "Powers of the West," are conspicuously absent throughout *The Lord of the Rings* and even *The Silmarillion*, despite the overwhelming presence in Middle-earth of their supernatural adversaries, Sauron in the former and Morgoth in the latter. In the latter, the world is sabotaged by Melkor and the elves disobey the gods, who thus withhold their help, but their lack of assistance in the former is without explanation, if they are indeed real. Shippey notes that at times the gods appear to intervene, as in Mordor when Frodo and Sam are dying of thirst and a shift in the wind unearths a trickle of water, as if in answer to prayer "at that moment seemingly a message from the world outside, beyond the Shadow" (2003 262). He explains, "If this went too far, of course, the sense of supernatural assistance would destroy one's awareness of the companions' courage… None of us can expect assistance from a Vala; nevertheless in any kind of Mordor it is one's duty to go on" (2003 262). Although the gods seem neglectful or untrustworthy in *The Lord of the Rings* as in *Sigurd the Volsung*, Tolkien's myth that water holds the strongest echo of the divine music of the Ainur covertly informs *The Lord of the Rings*: The Nazgûl cannot cross running water except over a bridge, Morgoth never builds ships, and the ocean god Ulmo is the one most likely to provide help for humans (or at least there are some "lucky" incidents involving water). Like the *Idylls of the King*, *The Lord of the Rings* is a work prompted by a vision, yet plagued by doubt.

For much of his career Tolkien did not think himself as projecting but as reconstructing or recovering a lost reality. Yet even he suffered a "failure of the vision," as Shippey explains:

For many years he had held to his theory of 'sub-creation', which declared that since the human imagination came from God, then its products must come from God, too, must be fragments of some genuinely if other-worldly truth, guaranteed by their own 'inner consistency' and no more the artist's own property than the star from Elfland was Smith's. But by the 1960s he was not so sure. It is hard not to think that by then he saw himself… [as] a mortal deserted by the immortals and barred from their company. He no longer imagined himself rejoining his own creations after death. (2003 324)

At the time of his death, Tolkien left *The Silmarillion* – arguably his most important work, and on which he had worked for his entire adult life – unfinished. Like Blake's *The Four Zoas*, Keats's *Hyperion* poems, even like posthumously published corpuses of Kafka and Nietzsche, medievalism is often suitably unfinished, presenting a vision that always remains fragmentary, no matter how passionately one pursues it. There are medievalist books about scholars carefully collecting manuscripts only to watch them burn; Laxness's *Iceland's Bell* and Eco's *The Name of the Rose* come to mind. Indeed, many medieval works themselves are formed of fragments stitched together, and others, such as Chaucer's "House of Fame," treat knowledge as fragmentary as a matter of principle. The common theme of fragmentation in the above works, whether "Romantic" or "Medievalist," surely reflects an intellectual connection. Indeed, immediately after Bjarnadóttir describes the core of Romanticism as "*the production of literature as its own theory*," she asks "And in what genre is this production expressed? The fragment" (30). In other words, the fragmentation characteristic of Kafka and Nietzsche is just as Romantic as it is modern. Perhaps the secret to the connection between Romanticism, mythology, and modernity is fragmentation: fragmentation encourages the modern intellectual perspective of skepticism, yet it also not only allows for but encourages the Romantic art of interpretation.

Medievalism offers layers upon layers of fragmentation; from the gathering and documenting of medieval cultural materials, to their transcription and scholarly interpretation, the very idea of a "mythology" reflects an incomplete and at least partly inaccurate reconstruction. From translation to retellings and literary responses such as satires, simulated sagas or romances and whole invented mythopoeic traditions, the increasingly subjective and imaginative nature of medievalist literary production has proved not a weakness borne of Romantic idealism, but a strength borne of increasingly sophisticated and self-aware discussions of Romantic aesthetic and psychological impulses. Medievalism's aesthetic and intellectual development through metafiction produced further fragmentation, and not just the "genuine" fragmentation of certain posthumously published works of Morris, Eddison and Tolkien, who were at least in theory reaching out for some coherent whole that one lifetime could never be enough to embrace. Among the most impressive treatments of medievalism are those which are "deliberately" or perhaps "artificially" fragmentated, such as those of Dunsany. Indeed, in his foreward to Bjarnadóttir's *A Book of Fragments* (2010), George Toles reflects that fragmentation must necessarily seem profound as our "Dreams of Order," to use Chandler's term, always fade:

> The conditions to which fragments most intimately speak include the sense of arbitrariness overrunning our fantasies of order, the peeling away of memory, the reduction even of our completed projects to the status of inconsequential mental scraps, and, of course, the accumulating losses (of loved ones, of creative energy, of health, of time) which bedim our faith in decisive paths to meaningful goals. (xi)

We may wish that dissolution was a less profound theme than it in fact is, but even intellectual nihilism and the love of aesthetics have never been strangers to one another. As Marshal McLuhan commented, "Only the traditionalist can be radical" (qtd. in Kuhns n.pag).

II. The Vision From the Tower: Inspiration and Legacy

However diverse our fundamental beliefs may be, the reaction of most of us to all that occult is, I fancy, the same: How on earth, we wonder, could a man of Yeats's gifts take such nonsense seriously? ...mediums, spells, the Mysterious Orient – *how* embarrassing…. [Yet] the poetry he wrote involving it is very good. What we should consider, then, is firstly, why Celtic mythology in his earlier phases, and occult symbolism in his later, should have attracted Yeats when they fail to attract us; secondly, what are the comparable kinds of beliefs to which we are drawn and why; thirdly, what is the relation between myth, belief, and poetry?
-W. H. Auden, "Yeats as an Example" (1961)

Dunsany, Eddison, and Tolkien all invented their own creator-deities: MANA-YOOD-SUSHAI, Lady Fiorinda, and Eru Ilúvatar. What can these invented creation myths tell us about their authors' philosophies regarding creativity and belief, imagination and epistemology? Perhaps the clearest affinity between the three is that all obviously – indeed, vehemently – belong in the literary tradition of Romanticism. All also comment on the nature of life. The first job of any religion is to explain death; this central fact of human existence cannot be ignored. In Tolkien's mythopoeia, death is the gift of Ilúvatar (the High God) to mortals. In Dunsany's mythopoeia the god Slid sends death as a reward, for he "will not forget to send thee Death when most thou needest it" (1906 n.pag.). Yet there is a difference: Dunsany's mortals see death as a relief from suffering and a return to nothingness, whereas Tolkien's mortals hope for an afterlife.

For Tolkien, any true mythology must necessarily have the *eucatastrophe* (Ryan 117). This concept is the opposite of a catastrophe: a sudden and overwhelming shift in circumstances, except in a positive direction. Tolkien's view of evil is inspired by Christianity; for him, evil is always a temporary rebellion against a permanent and invincible power, even if that power lets

evil run amok in order to allow humans to test their moral virtues. Thus, religious belief solves the "Problem of Evil": evil is ultimately not "real" or philosophically "legitimate."

For Dunsany, however, there is no solution and the idea that there should be is a symptom of human vanity. Instead, the ultimate figure of Time must conquer all, even all gods:

> For a while, O King, the gods had sought to solve the riddles of Time… They made him Their slave, and Time smiled and obeyed his masters… for a while. He that hath spared nothing hath not spared the gods, nor yet shall he spare thee. (1906 n.pag.)

And yet, this most malicious of Dunsany's supernatural figures is merely a hyperbolic metaphor for the way things actually are. Dunsany's mythopoeia is above all a *lament*, a sorrowful assessment of the ephemeral nature of all things. Time is a problem in Tolkien's mythopoeia, but only as a background theme, rather than as a foreground villain. In *The Hobbit*, the twisted Tithonus Gollum (the most troubling of Tolkien's characters) presents the protagonist Bilbo with a riddle to solve, exactly one of the "Riddles of Time" Dunsany wrote of:

> This thing all things devours:
>
> Birds, beasts, trees, flowers;
>
> Gnaws iron, bites steel;
>
> Grinds hard stones to meal;
>
> Slays king, ruins town,
>
> And beats high mountain down. (91)

Tolkien acknowledges the dominance of decay in our world, yet still hopes for a salvation stemming from another reality. Dunsany, however, quite abruptly interjects modernity into the ancient act of prayer by describing how prayers float from the lips of the faithful – to the edge of the atmosphere. Here, they still lack the energy which would be needed to escape orbit:

> Between Pegāna and the Earth flutter ten thousand thousand prayers that beat their wings against the face of Death, and never for one of them hath the hand of the Striker been stayed, nor yet have tarried the feet of the Relentless One…. Utter thy prayer! It may accomplish where failed ten thousand thousand. (1905 n.pag.)

Millions of prayers orbit the earth, each one equally futile; thus Dunsany presents a comical but also strikingly beautiful symbol of the vanity of human hopes. For Dunsany there is no hidden unity to be sought behind the fragmentary myths, as Tolkien thought, nor do half-memories have any ultimate significance, no matter how vivid, beautiful or meaningful they may seem.

Even Tolkien never truly achieved the internal coherence he hoped for, though his efforts were mighty. To pursue a "Key to All Mythologies," to categorize and explain away all the material according to one scheme, misunderstands – just as Causaubon himself misunderstands in his misguided magnum opus – a key truth about Romanticism and its obsession with mythology: its entire motivating force is a glimpse or vision that disappears upon systematization. If that means it is illusion, subjective projection, self-conversation and soul-searching, then so be it; these can still be beautiful and profound. As many medievalists have recognized, magic is not a force in the world; magic is an aesthetic effect. Perhaps Yeats's problem was that he mistook dreams for reality;[68] but for Dunsany even reality is only a dream.

In 1877, William Morris was involved in founding *The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings*. He wanted to preserve the past, but eventually his dialogue with the past for the sake of the present and the future expanded in ambition and even became mythopoeic. The same might be said for Yeats. Phillip Henderson wrote of Morris, "His greatness lies not so

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[68] Auden comments, "Yeats's generation grew up in a world where the great conflict was between the Religion of Reason and the Religion of Imagination, objective truth and subjective truth, the Universal and the Individual. Further, Reason, Science, in general, seemed to be winning and Imagination, Art and the individual on the defensive" (1961 309-310).

much in any one activity: his greatness is in his vision and in what he was" (qtd. in Ugolnik 40).

This is one of the best single-sentence summations of Morris's legacy, because it recognizes both

the diversity of his contributions and their common source in a "vision" of a better life, even if

some of his hopes were disappointed and his interpretations of that vision changed. One might

use Morris's Red House as a model for his creative engagement with the past; Yeats similarly

had Thoor Ballylee Castle, a Norman tower, restored and then lived there. Indeed, the title of

Yeats's collection of poems *The Tower* (1928) comes from this castle – and he had already

written the first edition of his occult / metaphysical treatise *The Vision* three years earlier (1925,

2nd edition 1937). The two – the reflections on mythology prompted by medieval architecture,

and the hope for a spirit world in some sense inspired by that mythology, are two sides of the

same attempt to anchor an aesthetic vision of a more meaningful existence in our world.

Dunsany's skeptical attitude toward medieval heritage is perfectly encapsulated by the

fact one of his ancestors had built an artificial ruin on the family estate. L. Sprague de Camp, a

friend of the Dunsany family, observed the estate in 1971: "At the entrance I saw what looked

like a half-ruined square Norman guard tower…. The structure was one of those synthetic

medieval ruins that landowners put up in the early nineteenth century to express the spirit of the

Romantic era" (Schweitzer xi). With *artificial* ruins standing on his own property, it is no

wonder that Dunsany was skeptical of the Romantic understanding of the past. In "*Beowulf*: The

Monsters and the Critics," Tolkien provides a similar analogy:

> A man inherited a field in which was an accumulation of old stone, part of an older hall.
>
> Of the old stone some had already been used in building the house in which he actually
>
> lived, not far from the old house of his fathers. Of the rest he took some and built a tower.
>
> But his friends coming perceived at once (without troubling to climb the steps) that these

stones had formerly belonged to a more ancient building. So they pushed the tower over, with no little labour, and in order to look for hidden carvings and inscriptions, or to discover whence the man's distant forefathers had obtained their building material. Some suspecting a deposit of coal under the soil began to dig for it, and forgot even the stones. They all said: 'This tower is most interesting.' But they also said (after pushing it over): 'What a muddle it is in!' And even the man's own descendants, who might have been expected to consider what he had been about, were heard to murmur: 'He is such an odd fellow! Imagine using these old stones just to build a nonsensical tower! Why did not he restore the old house? He had no sense of proportion.' But from the top of that tower the man had been able to look out upon the sea. (2006 7-8)[69]

Such a vision occurs, either ideally or necessarily, from a tower. And in order to build a tower, one must use pre-existing materials. The history of each stone can be contested in numerous ways. But humans need a place to live. Tolkien's aim was to build a new tower from old materials. Indeed, as Shippey notes, Tolkien's goal was to "save the evidence" by projecting stories which would create consistency between the various extant fragments of medieval literature (2003 230). Dunsany, however, did the opposite; he sabotaged rather than saved the sources by disdaining their accuracy. His is an absurd world of fake ruins that makes an important point about the construction of past, particularly in a context aware of contemporary human follies and the ongoing use of narratives of the past to blindside people to the present.

Whether one is discussing the works of believers like Blake, believers with doubts like Tennyson, Tolkien and Yeats, skeptics like Keats, or even nihilists like Dunsany, the question of the source or nature of the vision is important: what one believes oneself to be seeing, perceiving, hallucinating or projecting, and why. This is why medievalism is necessarily

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[69] Tolkien associates the ocean with the divine, from his creation myth to the Havens at Valinor. See page 177.

concerned with the nature of art and the artist's role; why it is relentlessly metafictional. Here we return to "The Flickering Boundary Between Religion and Aesthetics." Lessingham entitles his masterpiece painting of his deceased wife "A Vision of Zimiamvia," implying that he worships her to such an extent as to suspect that she comes from a better world. In his letter published as an introduction to *A Fish Dinner in Memison* (1941), Eddison explains his view on the tapestry of world mythologies in similar terms:

> Churches, creeds, schools of thought, are expedient, useful or harmful, as the case may fall out. But the ultimate Vision – the 'flesh and blood' actuality behind these symbols and formulas – is to them as the living body is to apparel which conceals, disguises, suggests, or adorns, that body's perfections. (xxv)

The "Vision of Zimiamvia" that Lessingham has, of the world of which ours and all others are an inferior imitation, occurs in a dream in a room that recurs throughout Eddison's mythopoeic works. "The Lotus Room" is full of medieval furniture, outdoor supplies, and books – *Njal's Saga*, *Wuthering Heights*, and other classics of western literature. It is suitable that the wallpaper is by Morris, for it is just the sort of room he would have designed (1968 31).

Tolkien left his mythopoeic foundational work *The Silmarillion* unfinished, to be published posthumously, along with many other works inspired by medieval literature. White left *The Book of Merlyn* to be published posthumously; Eddison left *The Mezentian Gate,* his final statement on his mythology, life, and death. There have been some real believers among the ranks of fantasy writers; Morris and Tolkien come to mind. Yet the interplay of beauty and belief on the one hand, and doubt and reflection on the other, is what has driven medievalism since Keats at least, and still drives it. To return full-circle, maybe the medievalist author in his old age is every bit as sad, melancholic and morbid as Eliot's Casaubon, his decades of mythmaking

ultimately futile. Yet the posthumous publication of Morris's *The Sundering Flood*, White's *The Book of Merlyn*, Eddison's *The Mezentian Gate*, Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* and many others, shows that such mythmaking has a future and a legacy.

Since the Romantic era, certain commentators and would-be taste-makers have seen medievalism as an archaic and awkward ghost or revenant, wishing it would just go away if scorned and ignored enough. In fact, medievalism itself is an argument for literary canonicity, for the relevance of tradition. Some of the greatest modern writers have continued to conjure up its mesmerizing shade, generation after generation. Morris's defiant queen in "The Defence of Guinevere" threatens to haunt her accusers if they execute her, and she stands as a symbol for medievalism itself: the beautiful ghost that just won't go away even though we "know" she is not there. And how do we come across in the dialogue between living and dead, real and fictional, anyway? In 1937, perhaps inspired by Morris's Guinevere and saga translations, Louis MacNeice wrote of a conversation between a modern man and the ghost of the saga hero Grettir the Strong, who asks the news and hears of about the imminent collapse of western civilization.

We modern persons are haunted by the medieval; from across an unbridgeable abyss, through a looking-glass of distortion, the shade of the medieval stares back at *us*. Through literary medievalism we learn history and legend, timeless beauty and inevitable tragedy, but we also discover who we are. Medievalism argues that myths matter for our age; that perhaps they mean more to us now than ever. And how we interpret them in light of our age also matters. Medievalism offers a unique opportunity to discuss evolution, human nature, history, and civilization. It considers whether humans can contact higher powers, or live up to higher ideals. As a result of its metafictional nature, medievalism meditates on the nature of art and beauty, tradition and reform, truth and illusion, satire and propaganda.

Romanticism, broadly construed, remains one of the most diverse and influential of literary traditions; medievalism is only one part of the Romantic legacy. In medievalism, conflicting forces in broader Romantic discourse created development or progression in aesthetic forms and intellectual themes, particularly through metafiction. This study has attempted to document debates within literary medievalism, and to demonstrate the tradition's intellectual viability even, perhaps especially, at its most skeptical and despairing. Like the older Tennyson, who feared his beliefs false and his life a waste, one can still seek beauty or "Follow the Gleam." Even Lovecraft, among the most nihilistic of modern writers, agrees to this. Despite his nihilism, Lovecraft was a significant thinker on Romanticism and mythology. In his autobiographical fragment "Azathoth" (1922) he writes:

> When age fell upon the world, and wonder went out of the minds of men; when grey cities reared to smoky skies tall towers grim and ugly, in whose shadow none might dream of the sun or of spring's flowering meads; when learning stripped earth of her mantle of beauty, and poets sang no more save of twisted phantoms seen with bleared and inward-looking eyes; when these things had come to pass, and childish hopes had gone away forever, there was a man who travelled out of life on a quest into the spaces whither the world's dreams had fled. (1995 3)

Medievalism engages with the many of the characteristic problems of modern life: the fear of nihilism, the search for meaning, the interpretation of scientific knowledge, the place of tradition, the danger of ideology, the nature of art, the use of history, and the tragedy of time. It addresses the big questions of existence such as human nature and perception, destiny and determinism, and the problem of evil. In its intellectual profundity, its creative vitality, and its aesthetic adaptability, medievalism is at the forefront of modern literature. Follow the Gleam.

Appendix
I. Context on Major Authors

Although many nineteenth- and twentieth-century cultural commentators, writers, scientists and philosopher are mentioned in this dissertation, it focuses on the idea of a literary "canon" of northwestern medievalism, according to the traditional canonical criteria of aesthetics and relevance defined historically, timelessly, and contemporarily. Information on the "major" authors (who produced multiple important works) is provided here. This section may provide some context with which to interpret such terms as "Tennysonian" or "Dunsanian."

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892). England. Poet Laureate from 1850 to 1892. Tennyson's dominant theme was the past – both the cultural past of mythology and tradition, and the scientifically discovered past of paleontology and evolution. Tennyson's high status during his lifetime led to some backlash in the early twentieth century. Many of Tennyson's medievalist works reflect on the place of mythology and tradition in a changing intellectual landscape. William Buckler's *Man and his Myths: Tennyson's Idylls of the King in Critical Context* (1984) provides a summary of a century's worth of criticism on Tennyson's masterpiece. Although the *Idylls* have received less attention in recent decades, studies like Clinton Machann's *Masculinity in Four Victorian Epics: A Darwinist Reading* (2010) continue to build on the critical tradition.

William Morris (1834-1896). England. The pre-eminent medievalist of his day, Morris was a culture hero whose diverse and energetic activities brought medievalism to the public. In literature, he produced translations, poems, prose romances, essays, lectures, and travelogues. He contributed significantly to the popularization of Icelandic literature in England, and was a foundational figure in English medievalist mythopoeia. Sheila Latham and David Latham's *An*

Annotated Critical Bibliography of William Morris (1991) and Peter Faulkner's *William Morris: The Critical Heritage* (1973), along with the online archives of *The Journal of the William Morris Society*, provide a comprehensive overview of the legacy of a writer and cultural figure second to none in the diversity of cultural activity and critical interest he inspires.

William Butler (W. B.) Yeats (1865-1939). Ireland. Influenced by the Pre-Raphaelites and Romanticism, Yeats produced poems, tales, and plays inspired by Celtic traditions. The influence of two other Williams – Morris and Blake – is clear with Yeats's hope to use myths to inspire a political awakening. Yet this Romanticism led critics to condemn his early work. Yeats won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1923; his relationship to modern literature has been debated, although his canonical status was made clear by books like *The Permanence of Yeats* (1961). See *Mythologies* (1998), which collects *The Celtic Twilight*, *The Secret Rose*, and *Stories of Red Hanrahan,* as well as occult pieces according to Yeats's own instructions, as well as Oxford World's Classics *W. B. Yeats: The Major Works* (1997, 2001 and 2008, Ed. Edward Larrissy).

Edward John Moreton Drax Plunkett, 18th Baron of Dunsany (Lord Dunsany) (1878-1957). Ireland. One of the most radically creative and intellectually important medievalists to ever put pen to paper, Dunsany dispensed with all historical claims and invented his own myths and legends. Neglected after his death, Dunsany's work was edited by Lin Carter for Ballantine Books in volumes such as *Over the Hills and Far Away* (1974). The foundational criticism on Dunsany is by S. T. Joshi (*Lord Dunsany: Master of the Anglo-Irish Imagination*) and Darrell Schweitzer (*Pathways to Elfland: The Writings of Lord Dunsany*). See also Joshi and Schweitzer's *Lord Dunsany: A Comprehensive Bibliography* (2013) and Joshi's anthology *Critical Essays on Lord Dunsany* (2013).

Eric Rücker (E. R.) Eddison (1882-1945). England. A novelist, translator, and expert on European literature, Eddison wrote novels which rival the works of Dunsany or Tolkien for their combination of disparate literary influences merged in the act of mythopoeic creation. A unique visionary, even his admirers admit he is a "lonely writer" due to his work's metaphysical and literary eccentricity. The online resource *E. R. Eddison: Civil Servant, Norse Scholar and Author of Heroic Fantasy* contains a biography of Eddison, along with information on editions of his works, and resources including a bibliography of scholarship on his works.

John Ronald Reuel (J. R. R.) Tolkien (1892-1973). England. Arguably the most important medievalist writer of his time, Tolkien's lifelong work – his invented mythology – has gradually become a cultural powerhouse. The foundations of his work can be found in the myths and legends of many languages (see Shippey's *Roots and Branches*, 2007), but he was particularly motivated to construct a mythology for England. He is among the most influential of writers in terms of the spread of Romantic ideas. Like Yeats, Dunsany, and Eddison, the relation of Tolkien to modern literature is subject to dispute. T. A. Shippey's books *The Road to Middle-earth* (1983, 2nd ed. 1993, 3rd ed. 2003) and *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (2001) are the foundational criticism on Tolkien; other important studies are listed in the bibliography.

Halldór Kiljan Laxness (1902-1998). Iceland. Laxness worked in a variety of genres over a long and successful career, and won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1955. Over the course of his life he pursued diverse ideological directions – a similar search to those undergone by Auden or Yeats. Although he has been called the most important Icelandic writer since Snorri Sturluson, in his work he vacillated in his attitude toward Iceland and its cultural heritage.

Terence Hanbury (T. H.) White (1906-1964). England. White is yet another eccentric figure in the medievalist tradition. During and after World War II White wrote arguably the single best twentieth-century treatment of Arthurian legend. This was only one part of a productive literary career and further works such as *The Book of Merlyn* were published posthumously, with critical interest reflected in works like *Critical Essays on T. H. White* (2008).

John Gardner (1933-1982). United States of America. Gardner was an important writer and teacher of writers, as well as a professor of Anglo-Saxon literature. His career displays a fascinating mixture of tradition and modernity. Many of his works are still neglected, but he was known for attacking contemporary intellectual trends.

II. Other Resources

Because medievalism has been the subject of critical confusion, there are few anthologies focused on literary medievalism specifically, although an abundance of eligible material certainly exists. As a result of Tolkien's popularity, medievalism has been seen through the prism of fantasy by both publishers and readers. Nevertheless, the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series (1969-1974) attempted to bring works from authors prior to Tolkien back into print; editor Lin Carter's work was important here and is discussed in his book *Imaginary Worlds* (1973). The Newcastle Forgotten Fantasy Library (1973-1980) saw works by Morris and Haggard back in print. Other anthologies include Douglas Menville and Reginald Roberts's *Dreamers of Dreams: An Anthology of Fantasy* (1978), Douglas A. Anderson's *Tales Before Tolkien: The Roots of Modern Fantasy* (2003), and T. A. Shippey's *The Oxford Book of Fantasy Stories* (2003).

In addition to the resources mentioned above, several tradition-specific studies contain lists of both major and minor works in a given tradition. Foremost among these Andrew Wawn's *The Vikings and the Victorians: Inventing the Old North in 19th-Century Britain* (2000), Stephanie Barczewski's *Myth and Identity in Nineteenth Century Britain: The Legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood* (2000), Kim Moreland's *The Medievalist Impulse in American Literature: Twain, Adams, Fitzgerald and Hemingway* (1996), and Marion Gibson's *Imagining the Pagan Past: Gods and Goddesses in Literature and History since the Dark Ages* (2013). Scholarly anthologies such as David Clark and Nicholas Perkins's *Anglo-Saxon Culture and the Modern Imagination* (2010), Andrew Wawn's *Northern Antiquity: The Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga* (1994) and David Clark and Carl Phelpstead's *Old Norse Made New: Essays on the Post-Medieval Reception of Old Norse Literature and Culture* (2007) also contain descriptions and discussions of under-recognized medievalist literary works.

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