Marek Jastrzębski

Fans' Reception of Tolkien: A Mythology for the Contemporary World

Volume I

Cultural Expansion and Psychological Identification

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Wydanie I

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Dedicated to all Tolkien fans –
the inheritors and co-creators of the living myth of Arda.

[O]nce upon a time (my crest has long since fallen) I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story – the larger founded on the lesser in contact with the earth, the lesser drawing splendour from the vast backcloths… I would draw some of the great tales in fullness, and leave many only placed in the scheme, and sketched. The cycles should be linked to a majestic whole, and yet leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama. Absurd.

J. R. R. Tolkien, Letter 131

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

In writing this book, I drew upon knowledge accumulated over many years of study and academic work. Here, I have in mind primarily the expertise in philosophy and religious studies that I acquired while studying at Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, and later by giving lectures at the Non-State Higher School of Pedagogy in Bialystok (now Academy of Podlasie in Białystok) and at the European University in Warsaw; the knowledge of cultural anthropology, which I deepened during courses I taught at Holy Cross University in Kielce; and most importantly, the expertise in literary studies developed during my studies and work at the University of Siedlce. I wish to thank all the individuals who have had a significant influence on my academic development at the aforementioned institutions.

The present work, however, is above all the fruit of my personal fascination with Tolkien's oeuvre, which began at the age of twelve. It was my older brother who introduced me to the world of Arda at that time, by allowing me to read the copy of *The Lord of the Rings* that he had borrowed, and subsequently familiarising me with Tolkien-themed games – for which I thank him most sincerely. That gesture, along with his own fascination at the time with Tolkien's work, encouraged me to make my first foray into the world of Arda, which indeed influenced the course of my subsequent life.

The research project culminating in the publication of this volume lasted five years. A significant component of this project was the delivery of a monographic lecture course "Tolkien and Others. The Worlds of Fantasy in Literature and Their Film Adaptations" at the University of Siedlce, as well as the lecture "Fantasy, Virtual Reality and the Modern World: Inspirations and Opposites" at the European University in Warsaw, where I also addressed issues related to Tolkien. I thank the active participants of those classes – our conversations encouraged me to further explore the topics addressed in the present work. Over the course of those five years, I also benefited from the remarks of many Tolkien fans. I thank them for the exchange of information in conversations and discussions on Tolkien forums and fan groups on Facebook.

Tolkien's Myth in Fan Reception:
Preliminary Remarks

The idea of studying the fan reception of J. R. R. Tolkien's work took shape in my mind in 2019, when I was working on a text analysing the controversies surrounding the interpretation of the eagle characters in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*[1]. I realised then that the way these works are received by readers is just as fascinating as the works of the Oxford professor himself. My first encounter with Tolkien's literature, which left a deep lasting impression, took place almost forty years ago. It was this specific literature that opened the door for me to the enchanted world of fantasy, while at the same time sparking a lively interest in mythology. Both of these areas – fantasy literature and the study of myth – remain at the centre of my interests to this day. However, it was only while working on the aforementioned text that I noticed that the fan reception of Tolkien's works constitutes an extremely interesting research phenomenon in its own right.

While exploring the issue of Tolkien's Eagles in my research, I was struck by the multitude of possible interpretations and the absence of any perspective that might be deemed definitive. A natural solution would have been to refer to the writer's own intentions, but in this case that proved impossible. This impossibility arose because the architect of Middle-earth had changed his mind on this issue multiple times, and the short draft provisionally titled "Of the Ents and the Eagles", which might have been expected to clarify the matter, survives only as a brief manuscript along with its typescript expansion, without offering any real resolution (Tolkien 2015b, 340–341). On the other hand, I could not ignore the fact that, regardless of the author's own intentions and his laconic explanations regarding the limited role of the Great Eagles in *The Lord of the Rings*, fans have continuously been formulating their own reflections on this topic, and they continue to do so. I realised then that readers had,

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[1] The text was published as a chapter in a collective volume: *Ptaki w literaturze, kulturze, języku i mediach* [*Birds in Literature, Culture, Language and Media*] (Jastrzębski 2020, 183–211).

in a sense, taken upon themselves the burden of continuing to weave the myth of Tolkien's world, and therefore it would be worthwhile to include their perspective in the hermeneutic explanation of the question of the Eagles. This hypothesis laid the foundation for my aforementioned text, and subsequently became the starting point for further inquiries into the phenomenon of the fan reception of Tolkien's works.

While proceeding with further research, I concentrated on the following question: what exactly lies behind the statement that "readers continue to spin the Tolkienian myth"? If so, then to what extent can one legitimately claim that the reception of the Oxford professor's literary works contains an element of co-creating that myth? While working on this issue, I came across a statement by Bradley J. Birzer (2021), who in a review of *The Nature of Middle-earth* compared Tolkien's influence on contemporary culture to, among other things, the role that Homer played in the Greek world[2]. It is worth noting that the works of the Bard of Chios were creatively interpreted throughout antiquity, influencing many aspects of the culture of that time and shaping, together with the works of Hesiod, the "mythological sensibility" of the people of that era.

Could the contemporary reception of Tolkien's works be viewed in a similar manner? This is a hypothesis that could shed light on the culture-forming activity of Tolkien's fans. However, one may ask whether it is legitimate to compare traditional myths with contemporary mythopoeic literature in this regard. After all, in so doing one would have to acknowledge that modern fantasy exerts an influence on its audience far beyond the purely literary. This issue, although it raises many doubts, appears to be crucial for understanding the phenomenon of the fan reception of Tolkien's mythopoeic work, and thus it stands at the very centre of the questions I explore in this monograph.

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[2] Birzer is not alone in framing the role of Tolkien's works in contemporary culture in this way. Continuing the researcher's line of thought, Ryszard Derdziński, a Polish Tolkien scholar, stated that in various dimensions of contemporary culture, Tolkien's works have become a myth of the modern world, analogous to the Homeric myth which shaped the imagination of the ancients(T*olkien Polska – Podcast* 2024, 2:18:08–2:18:56). Jacek Borkowicz (2002, 133–137) presents a similar perspective in his text *Tolkien – współczesny Homer*.

Tolkien's Literature as Myth: State of Research

Since Tolkien is counted among the most influential and popular writers of the twentieth century, there exists an extraordinarily rich body of scholarly literature devoted to his work. In addition, researchers have at their disposal an exceptional base of source materials: a large body of key manuscripts and draft versions of the architect of Middle-earth's texts have already been published, along with extensive editorial commentaries. Christopher Tolkien, the author's son, played an enormous role in this regard. He edited and published many of his father's unfinished stories (including *Unfinished Tales* in 1980) and brought out the full twelve-volume edition of *The History of Middle-earth* (1983–1996), which exposes the evolution of the Legendarium through successive stages. J. R. R. Tolkien's most recent notes on the subject have also been made available in *The Nature of Middle-earth* (2021), edited by Carl F. Hostetter. Equally valuable has been the publication of the writer's correspondence: Tolkien's letters, collected and edited by Humphrey Carpenter, reveal ever more fully (especially in the latest expanded edition) Tolkien's own commentary on his works (Tolkien 2023a). Thanks to these materials, scholars and readers can better understand the creative intent behind the literary texts of the Oxford professor, as well as his own interpretations of the symbolism and meanings embedded in the stories of Middle-earth.

In addition to the source publications, there is also a wealth of interpretative scholarship exploring various aspects of the fantasy world created by Tolkien. For the purposes of the present discussion, it is worth focusing primarily on works that approach Tolkien's oeuvre as a contemporary myth. A key work in this regard is Tom Shippey's classic philological-literary monograph *The Road to Middle-earth: How J.R.R. Tolkien Created a New Mythology*, first published in 1982 and subsequently reissued in successively expanded versions (1992; 2003/2005). The scholar examines the historical and linguistic sources of Tolkien's prose, as well as the mechanisms by which the author created his mythology (Shippey 1982 and subsequent editions). Equally important are the literary analyses by Verlyn Flieger, especially *Interrupted Music: The Making of Tolkien's Mythology*, in which she traces the development and evolution of Tolkien's Legendarium and discusses how its mythological structure was shaped and reshaped over time (Flieger 2005). One should also mention the monograph by the aforementioned Birzer, *J.R.R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth: Understanding Middle-earth*. Combining literary analysis

with reflection at the intersection of the history of ideas, myth studies, theology, and philosophy of culture, he argues that Tolkien consciously employed a "sanctifying myth" whose purpose was to restore the world's lost moral and spiritual order (Birzer 2003). Another significant work bridging literary analysis and myth studies is Marjorie Burns's *Perilous Realms: Celtic and Norse in Tolkien's Middle-earth*. This monograph illustrates the influences of Celtic and Norse mythology on Tolkien's work and the manner of their creative adaptation (Burns 2005). Finally, it is worth mentioning the reissued and expanded edition of Jane Chance's book *Tolkien's Art: A Mythology for England*, which discusses in detail the mythological and medieval inspirations in Tolkien's works, from pagan sagas to Christian legends (Chance 2001). The author presents how Tolkien consciously drew from classical and Germanic mythic models in order to realise his own project of a "mythology for England".

In reviewing the scholarly literature devoted to Tolkien as a mythmaker, one cannot overlook the numerous edited collections. Given the scope of this review, I will mention only a few of the key positions. For example, an important collection is *Tolkien's Legendarium: Essays on The History of Middle-earth* (Flieger and Hostetter 2000), which contains essays analysing various mythological, linguistic, and genealogical threads that emerge from the materials published in *The History of Middle-earth* series. Another significant work is *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth: A Reader* (Chance 2004), comprising eighteen essays by various authors – among them Marjorie Burns, Michael D. C. Drout, Verlyn Flieger, David Lyle Jeffrey, Tom Shippey, and Richard C. West – who discuss mythological sources (Greek, Latin, Norse, Celtic, and Finnish) and the manner of their transformation in Tolkien's literature. This collection illustrates how Tolkien incorporated elements of traditional myths into his own stories, thereby constructing a symbolic layer within them. It is also worth pointing to *Tolkien and the Study of His Sources: Critical Essays* (Fisher 2011) – the first systematic monograph devoted to source-study research on Tolkien's work, containing eleven essays prefaced by a methodological introduction by Tom Shippey. This volume presents both theoretical approaches (source criticism) and practical case studies – from analyses of the influences of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* or the Bible to inspirations drawn from writers such as Haggard and Buchan. Many important materials concerning Tolkien's mythopoeia have also been collected in *A Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien* (Lee 2022). Part Three of this extensive compilation brings together essays that explore Tolkien's central

mythic corpus and its successive reworkings, showing among other things how different variants of the legends can be read in relation to one another, thereby contributing to both a sense of coherence and of the sacred within the sub-created world.

In the Polish academic milieu, numerous works have also been devoted to interpreting Tolkien's oeuvre from a mythological perspective. Among these, the most important for the purposes of the present study is Christopher Garbowski's monograph *Recovery and Transcendence for the Contemporary Mythmaker: The Spiritual Dimension in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*. This researcher, combining literary studies with the phenomenology of religion and drawing on Viktor Frankl's logotherapy, interprets Tolkien's categories of "recovery" and "eucatastrophe" as elements of narrative dynamics which – in a phenomenological sense – possess the potential to renew the reader spiritually and to inspire morally oriented life choices (Garbowski 2004). Another significant publication is Andrzej Szyjewski's religious studies monograph *Od Valinoru do Mordoru: świat mitu a religia w dziele Tolkiena* [*From Valinor to Mordor: the World of Myth and Religion in the Work of Tolkien*]. In this work, the author, an expert in myth theory, analyses the mythic and religious structures in *The Silmarillion* and other writings by Tolkien. He demonstrates how the worlds of Elves and Men function in parallel as both myth and history, and how mythic-historical motifs (e.g., the creation of the world, Eru Ilúvatar, the struggle between good and evil) are integrated into a coherent cosmology of Arda (Szyjewski 2004). Another noteworthy contribution is Tadeusz A. Olszański's collection of essays *Zarys teologii Śródziemia i inne szkice tolkienowskie* [*An Outline of the Theology of Middle-earth*], which addresses religious themes in Tolkien's prose. The author attempts, among other things, to sketch a hypothetical "theology of Middle-earth", analysing the metaphysical assumptions and implications of the Legendarium (Olszański 2000). Finally, Piotr Anicet Gruszczyński, in his monograph *Problematyka zła w twórczości J.R.R. Tolkiena. Ocena w świetle teologii katolickiej* [*The Problem of Evil in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*], examines the model of metaphysical evil present in Tolkien's work and evaluates it in light of Catholic theology. He identifies the Christian contexts within Middle-earth's mythology and interprets this issue from the perspective of traditional theology (Gruszczyński 2018).

It is also worth noting works in which the Tolkienian myth figures as one of the main subjects of consideration. One example is Marta Kładź-Kocot's book *Dwa bieguny mitopoetyki. Archetypowe narracje w twórczości*

J.R.R. Tolkiena i Stanisława Lema [*Two Poles of Mythopoiesis. Archetypal Narratives in John Ronald Reuel. Tolkien's and Stanislaw Lem's Writings*]. The author conducts a comparative analysis of the mythopoiesis of both writers, concentrating on the functioning of archetypes, mythological motifs, and narrative structures in their works (Kładź-Kocot 2012). She devotes particular attention to how Tolkien reconstructs and transforms traditional mythological patterns for the needs of his own universe, demonstrating both the creative potential of myth and its existential and culture-forming functions in fantasy literature. Meanwhile, Bogdan Trocha, in his monograph *Degradacja mitu w literaturze fantasy* [*Degradation of Myth* in Fantasy Literature], undertakes a broad examination of the functioning of myth in fantasy literature, with Tolkien's writing constituting one of the subjects of his analysis (Trocha 2009). Trocha describes the processes whereby myth, understood as a structure fundamental to cultural identity and collective imagination, undergoes a peculiar degradation in contemporary fantasy (desacralisation, rationalisation, trivialisation, and infantilisation). At the same time, he observes that fantasy often attempts to restore certain moral and cognitive aspects of traditional myths, adapting them to the needs of modern audiences.

As can be seen, interpretations of Tolkien's works as mythology are incredibly numerous and varied. Above, I have mentioned only the most important of them, focusing on the more extensive monographic studies. Furthermore, dozens of scholarly articles – published in journals such as *Tolkien Studies*, *Mythlore*, and *Journal of Tolkien Research* – address the topic of Middle-earth's myth from a variety of perspectives: literary, mythological, religious studies, psychological, and cultural. Despite this abundance of approaches, it should be noted that none of the existing works to date has focused on the general fandom reception of Tolkien's literature in a manner that would parallel the way traditional myths were lived by pre-modern communities immersed in a mythological worldview. In other words, none of the classic studies on Tolkien's mythopoeia provides a clear answer to the question of whether the culture-forming activity of Tolkien's fans can be interpreted as a continuation of the weaving of the Tolkienian myth. To address this issue, a broader scholarly consideration of the spiritual impact of Tolkien's works on his fans is required.

Studies on the Spirituality of Tolkien Fandom

Certain aspects of the spiritual impact of Tolkien's mythology on contemporary audiences have already received interesting scholarly analyses. Particularly noteworthy are the studies by Markus Altena Davidsen, conducted from the perspective of religious studies and anthropology, which explore the phenomenon known as *Tolkien spirituality* – a community of people using Tolkien's Legendarium as a foundation for real-world spiritual practice. In his doctoral dissertation *The Spiritual Tolkien Milieu: A Study of Fiction-Based Religion* (2014) and subsequent publications (Davidsen 2017; 2019; 2024), Davidsen documented that since the early 1970s the first instances of a "Tolkien religion" had emerged. This phenomenon involved ritually establishing contact with supernatural beings from the world of Middle-earth – its adherents treated the Valar, Maiar, or even Eru Ilúvatar as truly existing spiritual entities with whom one could enter into a relationship through prayer or meditation. Underlying such practice was the conviction that Tolkien's works are not mere literary fiction but rather a visionary revelation of another world. Tolkien himself was portrayed by these devotees almost as a prophet or visionary endowed with esoteric insights, and even as an incarnated fey spirit (Davidsen 2014, 499).

Meanwhile, the so-called "Elven movement" emerged from a neopagan milieu in the early 1970s, when a group of fans began literally to identify themselves as Elves from Middle-earth. Some members of this community eventually came to believe in their own Elven origins or that a true Elvish nature had "awakened" within them (Davidsen 2014, 239–241). Davidsen emphasises that for the vast majority of readers, Tolkien's work indeed remains a domain of fiction and imaginative play, yet for a certain small group it has become the basis of a real spirituality – a kind of "fiction-based religion". In the case of this group of fans, then, one is dealing with a situation in which a literary mythology is taken literally as revealed truth, and Tolkien's texts are elevated to the status of holy scriptures, perceived by these devotees as a source of authentic religious experience.

Apart from Davidsen, other scholars have also drawn attention to quasi-religious elements in Tolkien fan culture. Tom Emanuel, in his latest article "An Aspirational Cultus? Tolkien Fandom at the Borders of Belief", examines the annual fan ritual known as Enyalië – a ceremony of paying homage to J. R. R. Tolkien at his graveside during the Oxonmoot gathering (Emanuel 2025). Emanuel describes Enyalië as a form of fan liturgy: a communal rite in which Tolkien's work, the community of devoted fans, and the symbolism of religious ritual come together,

blurring the boundaries between the sacred and the profane, between the fictional universe of fantasy literature and reality. During this ceremony, the myth of Middle-earth in a sense "comes to life" in the contemporary world – it carries a palpable emotional and symbolic significance for the participants, comparable to an act of religious faith, although it does not replace religion itself (Emanuel 2025, 28-29, 35-36, 41-43).

Studies on the so-called Tolkien fan pilgrimages have also yielded interesting findings regarding the spiritual aspects of the fandom. In 2021, Mina Lukić and Dejan Vukelić conducted a survey among people visiting the writer's grave and other related sites in England. The results showed that for many fans, such visits have the character of a symbolic journey and a personal ritual of remembrance. Some respondents described their motivation in nearly religious terms – as a need to pay homage to the author who had exerted a profound influence on their lives (Lukić and Vukelić 2022). Lukić and Vukelić analyse Tolkien's grave as a site of memory in terms of cultural anthropology: the gravestone itself, bearing the telling inscription "Beren and Lúthien", creates a bridge between the author's biography and his literary myth. Individual gestures by fans (leaving flowers, letters, and mementos) and the organised Enyalië ceremony add further layers of meaning to this place, transforming an ordinary cemetery into a space of collective memory and a kind of sacralisation.

The phenomena described above – the Tolkien religion, the Enyalië ritual, and fan pilgrimages – show that in certain circumstances, Tolkien's work can be treated in an almost religious manner, and the boundary between fiction and reality becomes blurred. It must be emphasised, however, that strictly cultic forms of expression remain a niche phenomenon within Tolkien fandom, involving a relatively small group of enthusiasts. If, therefore, one seeks to answer whether the culture-forming activity of Tolkien's fans can be regarded as a continuation of the weaving of the mythology he created (analogous to how the myths of Homer and Hesiod functioned in ancient society) one must move beyond empirical studies and the analysis of merely quasi-religious cases. The aforementioned approaches to cultic behaviour in Tolkien fandom have their value in the context of the problem at hand, but it is necessary here to adopt a more comprehensive perspective. Let us then examine what theoretical perspectives on the general mechanisms by which myth operates in today's secularised world can contribute to the question at hand.

Theoretical Perspectives: Myth in Contemporary Culture

In the view of classic scholars of myth and culture such as Joseph Campbell, Mircea Eliade, Carl Gustav Jung, and Northrop Frye, myths – both ancient and contemporary – fulfil a universal function of ordering human experience. In his renowned work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell identified the existence of a common mythological pattern, the so-called monomyth: the archetypal hero's journey present in traditions across the world. He argued that modern narratives repeat this schema, thereby offering audiences a renewed encounter with the archetypal dimension of human spirituality (Campbell 2004). Northrop Frye, in turn, regarded myth as the fundamental structure underlying all literature – in his view, even the realist novel draws on hidden mythic matrices and repeats, in disguise, age-old narrative patterns (Frye 2000). It is worth emphasising that scholars such as Eliade, Jung, Frye, and Campbell unanimously considered myth to be an expression of a certain unity of human experience. Each of them, however, highlighted a different aspect of this unity: Eliade emphasised the unity of religious experience; Jung, the unity of the human psyche; Frye, the unity of literary forms; and Campbell sought to articulate an integrative approach encompassing all these dimensions (Eliade 1963; Jung 1959; Frye 2000; Campbell 2004). Contemporary cultural theorists even speak of a renewed "enchantment" of the secularised world through pop culture – a process of re-enchantment in which mythic and spiritual elements return to social consciousness in the form of popular fantasy narratives (Partridge 2004, 136–141).

Equally significant are literary scholars analysing how contemporary fantasy literature can fulfil a spiritual function similar to that of ancient myths. This applies especially to the so-called mythopoeic variety of the genre – literature that consciously draws upon mythological patterns to impart a deeper, sacred dimension to the work. A leading scholar in this area is Marek Oziewicz, who argues that mythopoeic fantasy is not only a literary convention but also a distinctive cognitive strategy and worldview, presupposing the existence of a supernatural dimension; moreover, authors such as J. R. R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis deliberately created literary texts aimed at sacralising the world (Oziewicz 2008, 19–20, 65–66; Jastrzębski 2024, 288).

Oziewicz also emphasises that, to achieve the effect of "sacralising reality", myth in this type of fantasy operates on various compositional levels: it encompasses archetypes, narrative patterns, characters, events,

and motifs recurring throughout the work. The entire narrative is conducted in a style proper to myths, both in terms of poetics and distinct language. Furthermore, as in archaic myths, mythopoeic fantasy gives new meaning to human existence, participation in axiological reality, and the struggle for values. In short, myth here serves as a fundamental structural component of the fantasy text (Oziewicz 2008, 84; Jastrzębski 2024, 289). As a result, readers can engage with the story on a deeper level and, in a sense, experience the myth within the safe confines of a literarary work.

Oziewicz's perspective is particularly valuable for the present study because, while it remains within the paradigm of textual analysis, it also emphasises the potential existential impact of fantasy literature on its readers. This, in fact, constitutes the starting point of the research project. For this reason, with reference to his reflections, I will now articulate the central thesis of this monograph and then highlight the originality of the chosen topic.

Tolkien's Literature and its Fan Reception as a Phenomenon of Living Mythology

Oziewicz's reflections on the potential spiritual influence of literature on readers appear in the margins of his central thesis, which argues that mythopoeic fantasy forms part of the quest for a new mythology for humanity (2008, 225). He regarded such a mythology as an important element potentially co-shaping the worldview of the contemporary individual, encompassing significant ethical and ecological components. He also articulated specific postulates that this new mythology should fulfil, expecting it to have a tangible impact on how contemporary individuals experience their existence, just as traditional myths once shaped the worldview of pre-modern people[3]. Through selected works (by Ursula

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[3] Oziewicz (2008, 116–117), drawing upon twentieth-century myth scholars, claimed that a new mythology for humanity should include four essential aspects: (1) it should embody equal respect and openness towards all people, treating individuals of different religions, races, and genders equally. Consequently, it will advocate cooperation instead of separatism, mutual respect instead of mere tolerance, and partnership rather than dominance. Its aim will be peaceful coexistence and the unity of humankind while simultaneously preserving diversity. (2) Building the future should incorporate integration of the past, thus the new mythology will include elements from various cultural and religious traditions that have guided the development of civilisation through the centuries and still remain relevant to contemporary people. (3) Another significant aspect is reinforcing humanity's sense of participation in the transcendent and infinite dimension of reality, fulfilling a cosmological function similar

K. Le Guin, Lloyd Alexander, Madeleine L'Engle, and Orson Scott Card), Oziewicz further demonstrated that mythopoeic fantasy possesses precisely those characteristics of the new mythology for humanity he proposed – indeed, enough to regard it as aspiring to influence the readers' way of experiencing their existence in the world.

It should be noted, however, that although the present study also addresses the relationship between mythopoeic fantasy and traditional myths, its aim, research subject, and the structure of the argument differ significantly. The direct object of investigation here is not mythopoeic fantasy literature itself, but above all its active cultural reception. While Oziewicz examined the phenomenon of mythopoeic fantasy as a whole, I will focus exclusively on the works of J. R. R. Tolkien and the active reception of his texts by dedicated fans. Moreover, in Oziewicz's approach, the question of the potential existential impact on readers appears only indirectly, remaining somewhat on the margins of his main considerations. For the purposes of the present study, however, this issue is crucial. The intention here is to show how the reception of Tolkien's works has gone beyond the literary framework of his texts, becoming a source of mythologisation of contemporary forms of cultural and existential engagement of readers.

In light of the above, let us now precisely articulate the aim of the present research. Principally, it sets out to confirm the thesis that the **distinctive nature of Tolkien's literary oeuvre, together with fan engagement in its active cultural reception, jointly create a phenomenon that deserves to be called a contemporary form of living mythology – a mythology that is not merely narrated but genuinely lived.** This is reflected in the title under which I have chosen to publish the results of this study. It consists of two elements. The first refers to the fact that the central focus of the research is the fan reception of Tolkien's works. The second element, for its part, alludes on the one hand to the aforementioned postulate by Oziewicz, and on the other, to the main thesis advanced here. The modern form of living mythology posited in this study can, in fact, aptly be described as a mythology for the contemporary world.

The research project thus formulated approaches the problem of the mythological interpretation of Tolkien's literature in a way that is innovative

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to ancient mythologies, which enabled humans to find their place within the vastness of the cosmos. (4) The final crucial characteristic involves sensitising humanity to the value and sacred character of the natural world by emphasising the ecological interdependence of all forms of life.

in comparison with previous studies. While remaining within the paradigm of textual analysis, it takes into account not only the literary dimension of Tolkien's mythopoeic works, but above all the cultural dimension of their reception by readers – an aspect that has hitherto been overlooked or only marginally addressed in existing scholarship. Previous studies have tended to focus either on the analysis of Tolkien's texts as literary works consciously rooted in the tradition of myth, or (as in the work of Davidsen or Lukić and Vukelić) on empirical investigations of individual quasi-religious phenomena inspired by his Legendarium. In the present monograph, both of these perspectives are brought together and transcended within a single research undertaking, which seeks to demonstrate the continuity between the literary work and the living cultural practice of its audience. This practice is examined here as a set of cultural texts that continue Tolkien's mythopoeic creation. In other words, the analytical approach adopted in this monograph closely links the myth created by the Oxford professor with the ways in which his readers creatively develop it, making it part of their own lives and of contemporary culture.

Adopting the research perspective outlined above makes it possible to show the extent to which the contemporary Tolkien fandom has assumed the role of both the custodian and active sub-creator of the myth of Arda. Such a project makes a meaningful contribution to literary studies on the reception of literary works, particularly in terms of how contemporary fantasy literature can function as a living mythology – one that is truly lived, rather than merely told. In this respect, the present study addresses a currently underexplored area both in Tolkien studies and in the broader field of literary scholarship on contemporary forms of literary reception.

The Problem of the Appropriate Method: Mircea Eliade's Creative Hermeneutics

This monograph is essentially devoted to the reception of a literary work; however, the specific nature of the research subject also requires going beyond the typical tools employed in studies of this kind. Analysing the influence of Tolkien's works on his fans requires supplementing traditional literary studies methods with tools and knowledge drawn from many other fields of the humanities – from myth studies and philosophy to cultural anthropology (especially fan studies) and psychology. It is also necessary to navigate freely across various areas of contemporary culture in which the reception of Tolkien's works is manifest: from rock and metal

music, through film and games, to the diverse phenomena of contemporary pop culture (e.g., cosplay and fan fiction) relevant to the thesis advanced here. As a result, the issue of the appropriate research method arises.

Given the diversity of research approaches outlined above, this study adopts a hermeneutic perspective in the Diltheyian sense, one that enables the integration and shared understanding of cultural and historical phenomena investigated across various fields of the humanities, ultimately serving the interpretation of the meaning of human actions, texts, and cultural artefacts in the broadest sense. Of course, there are many varieties of hermeneutics and ways of applying them to literary studies. In this work, I have adopted a research approach inspired by Mircea Eliade's creative hermeneutics, which can be adapted to the study of Tolkien's mythopoeic literature and the associated fan activities, particularly since both are treated here as contemporary forms of living mythology.

Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) is regarded as one of the founders of modern comparative religious studies along with the history of religions, yet the scope and applications of his method extend far beyond these fields. The scholarly achievements of this renowned Romanian thinker have been described in terms such as creative hermeneutics, interdisciplinary research, the phenomenology of religion, and even as a form of cultural criticism aimed at the renewal of modernity (Bronk 1998, 259–263). Eliade himself defined the range of his research and its possible applications in very broad terms. Referring to his investigations as a "history of religions", he assigned to the word "history" a hermeneutic and phenomenological meaning, understanding it as the reading of the transhistorical meaning of religious phenomena (Eliade 1977, 83). The term "religion", for its part, in Eliade's usage, referred to all forms of experience of the sacred (Eliade 1984, Preface). Such a broad approach to his own discipline enabled the eminent Romanian scholar to make the history of religions into a field that integrates the achievements of many branches of the humanities and undertakes reflection on the essence and sources of the human condition. Moreover, according to Eliade, the historian of religions is capable of grasping the continuity of the existential situation of "being in the world" from archaic times up to the present (Eliade 1984, 9), thus imparting a distinctly transhistorical character to his perspective.

Eliade did not hesitate to assert that the history of religions could become an instrument for transforming consciousness and thus contribute to the renewal of Western culture. He linked the spiritual crisis of the contemporary West with the progressive desacralisation

of human life in that cultural sphere, and as a remedy capable of reversing this pernicious trend, he proposed the rediscovery of the sacred dimension of the cosmos, in which the history of religions could play a key role. Eliade saw the path to this re-sacralisation of life in understanding what the sacred meant to archaic humanity. In this spirit, he described his approach as an interpretative vision of tradition, seeing in the history of religions a "metapsychoanalysis" serving a "new humanism", and in his method a "new maieutics" (Eliade 1984, 1–11; 1961, 34–36). By regaining awareness of the sacred dimension of the cosmos, the existence of Western humanity could once again acquire profound significance, since – as Eliade argued – it is precisely the experience of the sacred that constitutes the source of all meaning and orientation in the world (Eliade 1984, Preface).

Eliade's creative hermeneutics proves particularly useful for the present study due to its integrative nature. As mentioned, explaining the phenomenon of the impact of Tolkien's works on readers requires combining a literary perspective with knowledge from many fields, and Eliade's method makes it possible to move freely through such diverse material. Moreover, its transhistorical, phenomenological nature allows different temporal perspectives to be united within the inquiry: the world depicted in Tolkien's works, which is pre-modern in character; the point of view of the author himself, writing in the realities of the 20th century; and the historically changing context of the development of the fandom. In other words, Eliade's method helps to bind together, at the ontological level, elements seemingly distant in time and nature – the mythological universe of Middle-earth, the experience of the contemporary reader, and the various manifestations of fan reception (from the reconstruction of Elvish languages to internet forums) – revealing their hidden unity at the level of archetypal meanings.

Furthermore, Eliade's perspective is indispensable here, since Tolkien's works and their reception are examined in this study as manifestations of a living myth. The very act of proposing such a hypothesis requires adopting a myth studies perspective, and the famous Romanian scholar of religion devoted a significant portion of his research to the phenomenon of myth, understood as a reality genuinely lived. Applying Eliade's perspective thus allows one to view the fans' reception of Tolkien's mythopoeic texts as a particular form of putting his postulates into practice. In other words, the culturally active endeavours of fans who creatively interpret and continue the literary version of pre-modern

myths (reinterpreted by Tolkien) appear as a kind of "new maieutics" in action – a process of at least partially re-sacralising the radically desacralised life of contemporary humans by means of symbolic stories.

It should also be noted that the motivations behind Eliade's research and Tolkien's literary aspirations display a remarkable convergence. Like the Romanian scholar of religion, the Oxford professor hoped that his works would have a real spiritual effect on their audience. In the essay *On Fairy-Stories* (2008, 66–76), he argued that fairy stories and myths fulfil certain practical functions. Their role is to renew readers' spiritual capacities – to awaken in them the ability to notice the "wonders" of the world anew (recovery, escape, consolation). Garbowski in his monograph (2004) strongly emphasises that although Tolkien did not write religious treatises, his works are permeated by a deep spirituality, a moral and metaphysical depth and a rootedness in myth that give them their power to influence readers. Just as Eliade wished to restore to modern people the original mythical narratives in order to revive their experience of the sacrality of the cosmos, so Tolkien's work offers a modern myth, the deep experience of which also makes possible a kind of spiritual awakening. Importantly, Eliade himself was also a literary author and applied his theories of religion in his own writings, demonstrating how readily they can be applied to the fictional worlds of literature[4].

The approach developed by Eliade has, in fact, been successfully employed on numerous occasions in literary studies of fantasy, including Tolkien's works, as well as in other disciplines concerned with the phenomenon of the "living myth". As early as the 1980s, Elizabeth Harrod (1984), in her analysis of tree symbolism in *The Lord of the Rings*, explicitly drew on Eliade's religious studies perspective to demonstrate that Tolkien's arboreal motifs possess profound mythological significance. Eliadean inspiration is also present in the latest research on fantasy literature. Andrew T. Shamel (2021; 2024)[5], adopting an approach to myth inspired by the work of the Romanian scholar, interprets the phenomenon of the popularity

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[4] It should be noted that although Mircea Eliade read Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, he evaluated it critically, seeing in it only a derivative reworking of pre-modern legends (Eliade 1981, 226). For Eliade, the mythological texts that served as the originals possessed decidedly greater value. Nonetheless, both authors – Eliade and Tolkien – participated in the twentieth-century renaissance of myth, emphasising its vital role in contemporary society and seeking to restore myth to Western humanity as a means of spiritual awakening (Oziewicz 2008, 105–114; Szyjewski 2004, Introduction).

[5] In the present monograph, I make direct use of *A Naturally Mythopoieic Creature* – Andrew T. Shamel's doctoral thesis (2021). On its basis, the author subsequently prepared a book version entitled *Theology and the Mythic Sensibility* (Shamel 2024).

of fantasy in theological terms. He argues that mythopoeic narratives (Tolkien, Pratchett, Rowling) express the same fundamental impulse to participate in the sacred as religion does, and that the mythological turn in popular culture attests to an enduring hunger for the sacred within a secularised society.

Eliadean inspirations in the study of mythopoeic fantasy can also be found among Polish scholars. Bogdan Trocha, in his literary monograph (2009), employed a phenomenology of religion significantly inspired by Eliade's method, pointing to the presence of hidden mythic structures in contemporary fantasy narratives. Meanwhile, Marek Oziewicz, in defining mythopoeic fantasy as an element of a "new mythology" for humanity, puts forward postulates convergent with Eliade's conviction about the indispensable role of myth in shaping the worldview of the modern human being (Oziewicz 2008, 225). It is also worth noting that Weronika Łaszkiewicz explicitly used Eliade's concepts of the sacred and the profane in her analyses of the religious dimensions of secondary worlds in Tolkien, Lewis, Martin and Kay, demonstrating the central role of the sacred in those narratives (Łaszkiewicz 2013; 2014). Psychologist Wanda Zagórska, in turn, examining contemporary forms of fan activity and play while pointing to their quasi-mythical character, invoked Eliade's thesis that living myth never loses its significance but rather takes on hidden forms in modern culture (Zagórska 2004; 2008). Such examples demonstrate that the integrated Eliadean perspective is an exceptionally fruitful analytical tool for both fantasy literature itself and the broad spectrum of fandom phenomena.

In summary, the approach adopted in this monograph combines a literary-critical analysis of reader reception with elements of myth studies, anthropological research on fandom, and philosophical reflection, situating the entirety within the framework of Eliade's creative hermeneutics. The aim of this research perspective is somewhat analogous to Eliade's own intentions, as it seeks to demonstrate the presence of living myth in contemporary culture, a myth that exerts its influence through Tolkien's literature and the creative activity of his fans. Fantasy literature is thereby captured not only as a literary genre, but also as a symbolic space in which the contemporary, seemingly desacralised human being seeks to recover a lost sense of the sacred.

The Question of the Living Myth and the Eliadean Methodological Perspective

Since the central focus of these considerations is the question of the living myth, it is first necessary to clarify how the concepts of myth, mythology, and especially living myth are understood here. In this study, these terms are employed with reference to Mircea Eliade's religious studies theory and his anthropological idea of *homo religiosus*. To specify their meaning in the present research, it is necessary to address these issues briefly.

The term *homo religiosus* appears in Eliade's writings primarily in the context of studies on archaic religions and the specific mode of being in the world characteristic of the people of those times. The eminent Romanian scholar held that every member of pre-modern societies was, by definition, a religious being, and that older forms of religiosity are closer to the original model of religious humanity – in a sense, *homo religiosus* in its primal form. At the same time, according to Eliade, the archaic type of religious sensitivity remains present in our psyche as a "Neolithic *homo religiosus* within the modern human". In other words, human beings by nature require a sacred dimension and cannot effectively orient themselves existentially in a world completely devoid of reference to the spiritual realm (variously conceived). Thus, the "natural" worldview of human beings, if one may put it this way, is to perceive the sphere of the sacred as an integral component of reality[6]. In the modern world, the sacred manifests itself in an imperfect form, concealed beneath the "camouflage" of the profane, but it still exists (Allen 2002, 272–278).

Mircea Eliade furthermore argued that the human being is not only *homo religiosus* but – as a consequence – also *homo symbolicus* and *homo mythicus* (Allen 2014, 91–92; Allen 2002, 111–112). Thus, humans have a need to inscribe their own lives into universal mythological patterns[7].

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[6] There is no single work in which Eliade expounded his conception of *homo religiosus*, but he based and referred to it in most of his writings. A comprehensive monograph on this topic was written by John Saliba (1976). There are also many articles that present this issue in a concise form. Among them, Dorin David's paper (2013) is particularly recommended, as it also considers the presence of this category in Eliade's fictional writings.

[7] From an ontological perspective, Eliade justifies this claim by situating myth within the context of universal structures of the revelation of the sacred. The elementary form of the manifestation of the sacred is the hierophany, whose role is to establish the world – that is, to endow reality with proper structure and meaning. For the religious person, the act of hierophany is essential for functioning in the world, as it determines the absolute point of orientation, the centre of the world around which the cosmic order

Eliade argued that pre-modern humans lived immersed in myth. They functioned in a culture that continually referred back to mythic narratives (a culture rooted in myth), which translated into a natural acceptance of a mythological worldview. For such a person, myth constituted the primary means of understanding oneself and one's place in the world; it gave meaning to life and enabled the interpretation of everyday events in terms of a deeper, sacred significance. In this sense, myths in traditional pre-modern societies were an integral part of life: as sacred stories and as elements of ritual, they were genuinely experienced as an essential component of human presence in the world.

It is in precisely this context that the term "living myth" appears in Eliade's theory (Eliade 1963, 1–20; Eliade 1984, 72–77). This term is also used to distinguish it from the contemporary colloquial understanding of "myth" as an invented story or a false belief that people are prone to accept to their own detriment. Broadly speaking, then, the term "living myth" refers to a situation in which myth functions not only as a narrative told within a given group, but is also genuinely experienced and treated as a truth shaping reality.

A detailed discussion of the process of the gradual demythologisation of culture lies beyond the scope of the present study. It is worth noting, however, that this process began as early as antiquity with the writing down and codification of myths, and accelerated considerably in the modern era, when – as a result of scientific and intellectual transformations – myth came to be widely regarded as literary fiction or superstition. For the purposes of this study, however, it is crucial to determine what is meant here by "living myth" in the context of Eliade's theory. Let us enumerate the most important aspects of this concept.

is organised (Eliade 1959b, 20–24). The role of the religious symbol, in the context of the structures of the revelation of the sacred, is then to extend and expand the action of the hierophany in time and space (Eliade 1958a, 448). Myth, in turn, functions as a narratively elaborated religious symbol (Rega 2001, 96). In other words, the symbol (and thus also the myth) allows the influence of a single hierophany not to be limited to a one-off event – it gives it broader significance and enables its integration with the entirety of worldly experience, identifying the hierophany with the cosmos itself (Eliade 1958a, 448). Consequently, Eliade's theory presupposes the inalienable presence of myth and mythological worldview in every culture. This postulate remains relevant today, even in the context of the apparent disappearance of mythical thinking in the modern, "demythologised" world. Even radically secular societies continue to need symbols and stories that give meaning to existence – a need that is often realised in substitute, hidden, or secularised forms, which confirms the enduring nature of certain universal structures of mythological thinking.

1. Socio-cultural expansion of the living myth. Eliade, describing archaic communities in which myth was alive, emphasised that with every important activity or event there had to be an archetypal reference in a mythic story. The entire culture and social life were saturated with mythology and references to it. Myth permeated language, customs, art, law, and everyday practices. The whole community lived by it on a daily basis, interpreting the challenges of the world in the context of sacred stories. In other words, there was a saturation of the everyday life of the community and of material culture as a whole with references to myth. For this reason, the living myth is fundamentally a collective work, which distinguishes it from a literary myth understood as the individual work of an author. Traditional myths of pre-modern communities generally had no single specified creator; they arose collectively over generations. Although they possessed a relatively unchanging core, they nevertheless existed in many versions and were subject to modifications and adaptations depending on changing cultural needs. Even if particular mythological works were attributed to an author (as in the case of Homer, for example), in fact the "author" was responsible only for the canonical or most widespread version of the tale. As a whole, myth constituted an open collection belonging to a given community, expressed in its culture. It was continually reinterpreted and creatively adapted to different spheres of collective life, while preserving the aforementioned unchanging core.

2. Existential experiencing of myth by the individual. The living myth satisfies an essential psychological need of *homo religiosus*, which can be described as "living in myth" or "living in the context of myth". In a culture grounded in traditional myth, a person engages with myth directly, both by interpreting their own experiences in mythological terms and by participating in rituals that reactualise mythic events. Eliade observed that archaic humans inscribed their lives into universal mythic patterns: for example, key moments of existence (birth, initiation, marriage, death) were understood according to the model of primordial events from mythical times (Eliade 1959b, 167–172). On the other hand, rituals and festivals enabled periodic "ascents" to the world of myth – participants in ceremonies would symbolically, and also affectively, transport themselves into sacred time, re-enacting the actions of gods or ancestors performed *in illo tempore* (Eliade 1959a, 34–36). In this way, the living myth was constantly present in human consciousness and experience – everyday life acquired a deeper (sacred) dimension, while rituals enabled an affectively intense experience of the

truth of myth. Such a way of life fulfilled the spiritual need for meaning and for being rooted in something greater than individual and merely temporal existence.

3. Sacred and world-constituting dimensions of myth. The living myth performs a religious and ontological function – it establishes the order of the world. From the perspective of *homo religiosus*, myth not only explained reality (providing truth about it in the rational-cognitive sense), but actually constituted it. Stories about the deeds of gods, spirits or heroes revealed primordial hierophanies that consecrated particular places, times and actions. Thanks to this, the religious person, in a sense, "made the world their own" – the collection of random, incomprehensible phenomena became a "cosmos" by being linked to mythic events accomplished by sacred beings. As Eliade observes, at archaic levels of culture, that which is real – powerful, meaningful, vital – is equivalent to that which is sacred (Eliade 1959a, 3–5). In short, the living myth sacralises the world – the events recounted in myth serve as paradigms, the repetition of which (in rituals and in daily life) provides a sense of meaning, the order of existence, and connection with that which exists in a supratemporal manner (the sphere of the sacred).

It should be kept in mind that the above elements of the living myth have been delineated solely for analytical purposes. In reality, they are inseparable parts of one phenomenon, remaining in a synergistic relationship – they mutually influence each other, and their interaction generates a worldview effect stronger than the sum of the effects of the individual elements separately. Consequently, the living myth constitutes a mythology fully engaged in life: it is socially and culturally omnipresent, deeply experienced psychologically by the individual, and acknowledged as the objectively true (sacred) foundation of the world's order. Such a mythology shapes both collective and individual identity, determines the direction of actions, and integrates the community around a shared system of values.

In light of the above considerations, a certain difference between Eliade's approach and the perspective adopted here is worth noting. For the Romanian scholar of religion, a myth committed to writing (fixed in script) essentially marks the decline of the living myth. Eliade demonstrates this by referring to the example of ancient Greek tradition, which he also identifies as the source of the modern understanding of myth as a fictional story (Eliade 1984, 72-77). Myth then becomes more an element of culture than a strictly religious factor. In the present analysis, however, we are concerned

precisely with a myth created as literature and then developed within popular culture. The question thus arises: in what sense can a myth that is a conscious artistic creation be "alive" according to Eliade's conception?

In a broad understanding, such a myth *can* perform the above-outlined functions of a living mythology, at least potentially. As mentioned earlier, Eliade refers to two key stages of demythologisation in the history of European culture. One of these is precisely the committing of myth to writing and the onset of a critical approach to mythic tradition in ancient Greece – this was the first "crisis of the living myth". The second breakthrough moment was the broader change in worldview that took place in culture with the adoption of the ideological paradigm of modernity. Eliade often emphasises that individuals of the pre-modern era define themselves through a religious image of the world. Such individuals exist in the world constantly seeking signs of divine presence, symbols referring to the reality of the sacred. For such an individual, myths – even those already written down and partially rationalised in ancient or medieval culture – remain among these signs of the sacred[8].

Considering this problem historically, it must be stressed that the crucial changes leading to the "downfall of the living myth" occurred only in modernity. It was then that the transformations in worldview took place, which Max Weber (2009, 139, 155) described as the disenchantment of the world. As a result, in modern culture, myth was degraded to the status of a purely fictional story and lost its capacity to connect human beings with the sphere of the sacred. It can therefore be stated that – historically – the severing of the bond between myth and real life took place only in modern times. Although the process of demythologisation began in the ancient and medieval epochs, a significant connection with the living myth was still maintained, even if it was gradually being weakened.

Metaphysically, however, a complete break between humans and the living myth never actually occurred, because it could not have occurred. Eliade's understanding of the living myth is founded on an anthropological theory of *homo religiosus*. Within this conception, the human being is regarded as inherently religious; thus – regardless of external cultural or political circumstances, or even professed worldview – they require contact with the sacred, archetypal dimension. Eliade believed that the living myth, as a narratively elaborated religious symbol, possesses the power

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[8] Eliade understands myth as a religious symbol developed in narrative form and emphasises its role within the universal structures of the revelation of the sacred. I discussed this in greater detail in footnote 7.

to connect the human being with that sphere of universal archetypes. In this sense, myth can (at least potentially) fulfil the function of a living mythology in any era – whether in archaic times, antiquity, the Middle Ages, modernity, or even the present day. It is precisely this possibility – the survival of the living myth in the contemporary world – that will be the subject of further analysis in this study.

In other words, in the present monograph, the term "living myth" is understood somewhat more broadly than it is typically defined in Eliade's works. Here, it encompasses any mode in which myth operates that, even if only partially, realises the same aims as it did during the period when humanity was fully immersed in a mythological worldview. Thus, one may speak of a living myth wherever such a narrative – even when created as literature – connects human beings, at least to some degree, with the sphere of archetypes and opens them to experiencing life as *homo religiosus*. The objective of the present research is to explore how Tolkien's mythopoeic texts, along with their creative and participatory reception among fans, contribute to the revival of key functions of the living myth within the cultural landscape of the modern world.

Fundamental Terminological Distinctions Concerning the Term Myth

Let us now briefly present the terminology concerning the issue of myth as used in this dissertation. Three key distinctions regarding the term "myth" are employed here. The first of these is the concept of the "living myth", which refers to a form of myth that not only constitutes a narrative transmitted within a given community, but above all is a way in which individuals experience their presence in the world. A living myth was an integral part of the existence of people in pre-modern cultures – it bestowed meaning upon life, allowed one to discern a profound, timeless sense in everyday experiences, and placed the individual in a sacred and cosmic context. In this view, myth is not merely a story, but an experience of truth that defines the fundamental way of understanding the world and the human being. The issue of the living myth has been discussed in detail in the previous section.

The term "traditional myth" is similar in meaning to "living myth"; however, it places emphasis on a methodological and historical-cultural aspect. It serves primarily to contrast the myth functioning in pre-modern cultures with contemporary mythopoeic creation (that is, the "literary

myth" or "contemporary myth"). A traditional myth thus denotes an original, spontaneously developing cultural narrative, one that was created in order to express the ontological, religious, and existential truth of a given community.

A literary myth, also known as a contemporary myth, is a conscious artistic creation that arises from a reflective engagement with modern knowledge about myths and a deliberate imitation of traditional mythic structures. A literary myth is a deliberate artistic response by a modern creator to the loss of a direct experience of the sacredness of the world, and it draws upon the heritage of traditional mythic narratives to explore contemporary philosophical, existential, or aesthetic problems. Mythopoeic literature in this approach no longer pretends to convey "truth" in the literal or sacred sense, but instead seeks a deeper, symbolic meaning within the framework of a consciously constructed literary fiction.

Finally, for the sake of completeness, and in conscious reference to the colloquial use of the word "myth" in contemporary culture, it is worth noting that there also exists a popular, journalistic understanding of myth. In this context, a myth is understood as a false story, a mistaken belief, or a widespread illusion that people maintain, often to their own detriment. The present work does not employ this colloquial meaning of "myth"; however, mentioning it is important for clearly distinguishing it from the previous approaches.

The term "mythology" refers to a cohesive, coherent set of myths that together create an overall vision of the world in which *homo religiosus* once functioned. Mythology, therefore, is not a single mythic narrative but an organised system within which individual myths complement one another, forming an integral whole. In the present study, the term "mythology" is sometimes also used in a broader sense, analogously to the concept of "myth", particularly when the aim is to refer to myth in general, without pointing to specific mythic narratives.

In this study, I assume that the works of J. R. R. Tolkien set in the world of Arda constitute an example of a contemporary, literary myth. I further seek to demonstrate that their various adaptations, as well as their active, cultural reception by fans, represent a continuation of the weaving of this myth, so that these phenomena may be regarded as a unified whole. The main thesis of the present work is the conviction that this whole also functions as a living myth. Other terms linking the issue of myth to Tolkien's works are explained as they arise in the main text of the monograph or in footnotes. If, however, I employ other concepts from myth studies or the

study of religion (such as "religious symbol" or "hierophany") that are not explained directly, they should be understood in accordance with their usage in Eliade's theory.

Tolkien's Readers as Fans

To reiterate, the subject of the present research is the reception of Tolkien's works. However, when formulating the main thesis, I referred specifically to his fans that is, a particular category of recipients. It is therefore worth briefly clarifying what exactly is meant by this term. The category of fans has been the subject of numerous studies by specialists in cultural anthropology and cultural studies. A particularly important contribution in this area has been made by Henry Jenkins, who – in his works devoted to convergence culture and the phenomenon of fandom – emphasises the socio-cultural dimension of fan activity. Jenkins (2005) describes fans as active co-creators of culture, who, in their activities, reinterpret source texts, endowing them with new meanings that often diverge significantly from the author's original intentions. In this sense, the actions of fans constitute not merely passive reception, but a dynamic creative process that extends beyond the boundaries of the literary text itself. Other researchers, such as Camille Bacon-Smith (1992) and Matt Hills (2003), additionally draw attention to the importance of the community that fans create, as well as their involvement in the construction of a collective identity based on shared fascination with a particular work or fictional universe.

Referring to the concept of fandom as outlined above, when speaking of Tolkien's fans I mean those recipients who, having become acquainted with the literary reality of Arda, wish to "inhabit" it in their imagination for an extended period. These individuals are willing to read Tolkien's subsequent works and, as they gradually broaden and deepen their knowledge of this fantasy universe, also seek other ways of "participating" in it. This sometimes leads them to create their own texts, artworks, or other materials related to that secondary world. It is precisely such readers – fans of Tolkien's work – who, by adapting Tolkienian mythology to contemporary culture, engaging with it personally, co-creating a community, cultivating a collective memory of the myth, and generating new versions of it, are responsible for the active cultural reception of his works.

Structure and Sequence of the Argument

Given the broad scope of issues addressed, the monograph has been divided into two parts (volumes). Volume I covers the issue of the "cultural expansion" of the Tolkienian myth and the "existential and psychological identification" of fans with this myth, whereas Volume II focuses on the "philosophical and spiritual resonances of the living myth" – that is, on the sacred and ontological-cosmogonic dimension of Tolkien's Legendarium. This arrangement corresponds to the three fundamental aspects of the functioning of myth outlined above: (1) socio-cultural, (2) psychological-existential, and (3) philosophical-spiritual. Thus, the process of demonstrating the central thesis unfolds in three stages: the first two are carried out in Volume I, and the third in Volume II. The structure of the argument therefore leads from external phenomena towards increasingly deeper layers of meaning.

Each volume serves a distinct role in the research. Volume I is primarily descriptive and analytical in character, focusing mainly on the question "how?" – namely, how the Tolkienian myth manifests itself in culture and in the lives of fans. This volume offers an analysis of the diverse ways in which Tolkien's literary myth functions as a living mythology within the practices and creative expressions of his fan community, providing substantial evidence for the thesis advanced. Volume II, on the other hand, is of a more theoretical and interpretative nature, and is primarily centred on the question "why?" – specifically, why Tolkien's works and the manner of their reception fulfil the function of a living myth, and what is uniquely significant in their spiritual and philosophical aspects (that is, why they can constitute to some extent a "mythology for the contemporary world"). In this way, both parts of the monograph complement each other in demonstrating the thesis put forward. While Volume I concludes with a concise summary presenting the main findings and open questions, Volume II closes with a dedicated chapter that synthesises and critically discusses the results of both volumes.

Volume I consists of two chapters. In Chapter 1, I focus on demonstrating that the fan reception of Tolkien's literature involves a socio-cultural expansion analogous to that which characterises the functioning of a living myth. I begin by discussing the phenomenon of the active cultural reception of Tolkien's works, that is, the adaptation of elements of the literary myth of Middle-earth into the lifestyle of the fan community. Thanks to this, the fandom can indirectly experience

this myth through various manifestations of popular culture. I refer to this phenomenon as "creative cultural interpretation", which has been growing in strength year by year and, in some respects, resembles the manner in which the Olympian myths influenced the culture of ancient Greece. This perspective allows the active cultural reception of Tolkien's works by fans to be viewed as a continuation of the weaving of the myth initiated by the author, in a manner analogous to the communal, multi-author co-creation of traditional myths. Of course, in the case of the literary myth of Arda, one is dealing with a single historical "creator-founder", which sets this phenomenon apart from traditional mythologies; nevertheless, the continued weaving of Tolkien's narrative by fans and the various adaptations of his work across different spheres of contemporary culture indeed resemble the way myths functioned in pre-modern societies.

In Chapter 2, I continue the survey of the diverse forms of adaptation of Tolkien's myth in contemporary culture. I examine, among other contexts, its presence in popular games, Tolkienology[9], fan speculations and online discussions, fantasy literature, the activities of Tolkien societies, and the artistic creations of Middle-earth fans. Such a broad overview of the socio-cultural activities of Tolkien's fans provides evidence that this fan culture is indeed living by the myth and references to it, as was the case in traditional mythological cultures. In this chapter, however, attention is focused primarily on the psychological-existential dimension of the phenomenon under discussion. I present how Tolkien's work may affect readers on the level of their personal lives, demonstrating that the various manifestations of the adaptation of his works arise from a psychological and existential need to "live in myth". Indeed, fans yearn to ascend in imagination to the world of Arda in order to dwell in it symbolically and affectively; or conversely, to carry elements of that myth into their everyday existence. I demonstrate that in this way the psychological need to participate in myth is fulfilled: on the one hand by incorporating into everyday life patterns borrowed from mythology, and on the other by periodically, quasi-ritually immersing oneself in the imaginative space of Middle-earth in order to experience the mythic world almost directly.

The analysis conducted in Chapter 2 thus confirms that the fan reception of the Legendarium of Arda fulfils the function of a living myth in the psychological-existential dimension as well. At the end of Volume

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[9] Tolkienology – the term used here as an umbrella term for both academic Tolkien studies and extra-academic practices whenever they share a fan-like attitude aimed at extending immersion in the world of Arda (see subchapter 2.3 and footnote 64).

I, a concise summary presents the main findings to date and highlights key questions that remain open, thereby paving the way for the more in-depth analyses of Volume II. In this way, the first part of the study, devoted to the socio-cultural and psychological aspects of fan reception, is brought to a close.

Volume II takes up the analysis of the third of the identified aspects of the living myth, focusing on the philosophical and spiritual dimension of the phenomenon. Here, the argument addresses both how the internal structure of Tolkien's Legendarium and its subsequent reception make it possible for the myth to function as a living mythology, and why these particular features prove so effective in the context of the spiritual needs of contemporary society. The analysis is thus concerned both with the ontological, structural, and sacred aspects of the mythology of Arda (the "how"), and with the deeper reasons (the "why") for the unique role Tolkien's mythology plays in the re-enchantment of the modern world. To this end, Volume II examines both the texts that make up the Legendarium (as a consciously designed mythology for modern readers) and their cultural reception, understood as a collective response to the need for a living myth. In this way, the investigations presented in the second volume complement the picture that emerges from Volume I, together presenting Tolkien's mythology as a living myth in a complete, three-dimensional perspective, encompassing the socio-cultural, psychological-existential, and philosophical-spiritual dimensions.

The second part of the monograph likewise consists of two principal analytical chapters and concludes with a separate chapter synthesising the findings from both volumes. In the first chapter of Volume II, I examine Tolkien's texts directly from a mythological-literary perspective, seeking the internal features of the Legendarium that made possible its reception as a contemporary mythology. I analyse similarities between the mythology of Arda and traditional myths, noting the consciously mythopoeic nature of Tolkien's work. He made abundant use of mythological and folk motifs, creatively reinterpreting old tales – much as the great mythographers of the past, such as Homer and Hesiod, did; these authors, while preserving the archetypal core of myth, were able to give it new forms. Indeed, Tolkien himself declared an intention to create a mythology dedicated to England, and from the outset conceived of his work in mythological terms. Ultimately, however, the mythology he created went beyond local boundaries, becoming a mythology of global scope.

I also emphasise that the specific way in which the Legendarium was compiled and published after the author's death made it even more similar to traditional mythologies. A significant portion of the stories remained unfinished and existed in multiple, imperfect, sometimes mutually contradictory versions, which were gradually published in successive volumes by editors (with Christopher Tolkien at the forefront). As a result, the modern reader is faced not with a single, rigidly defined narrative, but with a rich collection of myths sharing an internally coherent core yet diverging in their details – a situation reminiscent of genuine mythological traditions. It was in effect the editors who assumed the role of mythographers in organising this polyphonic corpus – foremost among them Christopher Tolkien, who gathered and prepared the most important texts left by his father. All these internal features of Tolkien's Legendarium facilitated its reception as a mythology for the contemporary world.

The second chapter of Volume II, by contrast, focuses on the external (ontological and worldview-related) conditions that enabled Tolkien's mythology to function as a myth for the contemporary world. In the first subsection, I argue that modern culture was, in a sense, "starved for myths". The dominant scientific, rationalised image of reality in the modern era gradually stripped traditional myths of their credibility. However, it did not eliminate the deeply rooted human need for a broader narrative that confers meaning on life. As *homo religiosus*, human beings, even in secularised times, feel the need to integrate their existence into a cosmic story linking them with the world of nature and the sacred. As the scientistic paradigm progressively disenchanted ever more areas of life, various attempts to re-enchant the world began to appear. Some people came to place an almost religious faith in science itself; others turned towards esoteric and occult currents, and fantasy literature also began to serve the purposes of spiritual solace. In the context of this latter strategy, the mythology of Arda proved particularly effective.

In the latter part of the second chapter, I go on to analyse why it was precisely Tolkien's texts that so effectively answered this need for myth. Above all, his fiction avoids direct conflict with the scientific worldview, since it is set within a distinct reality of his own creation. One could say that Tolkien solved the problem of belief in the miraculous in an age of rationalism by creating Middle-earth as a complete secondary world – an autonomous cosmos, intricately constructed at the level of history, languages, theology, metaphysics, geography, and even astronomy. Thanks to this, the reader does not have to suspend their scientific scepticism:

the world of the story is governed from the start by its own laws, in which supernatural elements are a natural part of reality. Moreover, Tolkien adapted traditional mythological motifs to the ethical sensibility of a person shaped by the heritage of Judeo-Christian culture (a set of values which, though Western in origin, has become globally influential in the modern era). Owing to all this, the contemporary reader can psychologically immerse themselves in the created world and experience it in a manner akin to a pre-modern *homo religiosus*. In other words, when engaging with Tolkien's literature, the reader is given the opportunity to temporarily adopt the worldview of *homo mythicus* – experiencing reality in a manner characteristic of a sacred, myth-oriented culture. In this way, that part of human spirituality which demands a sacred story imparting meaning to the world is satisfied. As a result, Tolkien's mythology serves a function analogous to that of the ancient myths, offering individuals a renewed connection of their life with the sacred and the cosmic order – a connection largely absent from the disenchanted vision of modernity.

The concluding chapter of Volume II synthesises the main findings from both parts of the monograph, enabling a final assessment of the central thesis. The analyses undertaken in this study demonstrate that the distinctive nature of Tolkien's literary oeuvre, together with fan engagement in its active cultural reception, gives rise to a phenomenon that merits recognition as a contemporary form of living mythology – a mythology not merely narrated but genuinely lived. On this basis, it is further argued that Tolkien's myth, in both its literary and culturally mediated fan forms, fulfils core functions traditionally ascribed to mythologies of the past. In this respect, it may be aptly described, in line with both Oziewicz's postulate and Tolkien's own original intention of creating a mythology for England, as a mythology for the contemporary world.

The Cauldron of Story has always been boiling, and to it have continually been added new bits...

> J. R. R. Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*

I rarely remember a book about which I have had such violent arguments. Nobody seems to have a moderate opinion: either, like myself, people find it a masterpiece of its genre or they cannot abide it...

> W. H. Auden, *NYT Book Review*, 22 Jan 1956

The Lord of the Rings was kind of the metaphysical statement of the decade.

> David Carradine*, Ringers: Lord of the Fans*

They're making a movie trilogy of J.R.R. Tolkien's literary masterpiece, *Lord of the Rings*, and fanatics download excerpts in unprecedented numbers.

> *Wired*, "Lord of the Download," Apr 12, 2000

Chapter 1.
Cultural Expansion of Tolkien's Works and Fans' Participation in the Myth-making

1.1 Tolkien's Critical Reception and Fans' Enthusiastic Response

Writing about Tolkien's oeuvre today is an exceedingly difficult task. First and foremost, anyone who undertakes it must contend with the enormous volume of material that has already been published on the subject. As early as 1970, West wrote that "(...) so much has been written about the work of John Ronald Reuel Tolkien that a checklist of these critical articles and books should be a useful tool" (West 1970, vii). Year after year, however, more and more works devoted to the author of *The Lord of the Rings* were published, a trend that seems to have continued to the present day.

As Dennis Wilson Wise observes, the twenty-first century is proving to be a golden age for Tolkien studies. Taking into account only publications in English, we have at our disposal two peer-reviewed journals devoted to Tolkien, several journals dedicated to the Inklings, countless pamphlets and bulletins of Tolkien associations, and moreover new books and edited collections about the author of *The Lord of the Rings* are published each year (Wise 2020, 1). As a consequence, more and more scholarly texts concerning the Oxford professor are being produced. Between 2000 and 2020, "(...) the search term 'Tolkien' pulls up nearly 1,200 hits on the MLA International Bibliography" (Wise 2020, 1). If one adds to this the various kinds of online materials not included in these statistics, one is faced with an amount of material impossible for any single individual to assimilate. Consequently, writing about Tolkien's literature is necessarily based on a fairly selective choice of critical sources.

However, in the extensive body of material on the works of the author of *The Lord of the Rings*, one can discern a certain pattern that is worth noting at the outset of any consideration of the reception of his work. Namely, Tolkien scholarship, almost from the very beginning, has

displayed two distinct tendencies. On the one hand, some commentators take an uncompromisingly critical stance towards Tolkien, analysing both the fictional world and the narratives themselves in order to expose their flaws and potential dangers; on the other hand, others focus on refuting these accusations, pointing to the uniqueness and enduring value of Tolkien's work[10].

Although *The Hobbit* received a relatively warm reception from critics, the prevailing view was that it was above all a children's book – a genre that at the time did not enjoy significant esteem in literary circles. In this sense, "serious" criticism of the literary value of Tolkien's works only began with the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* as a work explicitly addressed to adult readers (Curry 2022, 356), and from the outset it was heavily coloured by emotion.

In the 1950s, directly after the publication of the final volume of *The Lord of the Rings*, one critic wrote in his review:

> I rarely remember a book about which I have had such violent arguments. Nobody seems to have a moderate opinion: either, like myself, people find it a masterpiece of its genre or they cannot abide it, and among the hostile there are some, I must confess, for whose judgement I have great respect (Auden [1956] 1995, 47).

This kind of polarisation has remained typical of the reception of Tolkien's literary work to this day. Admittedly, *The Lord of the Rings* met with a positive reception from some critics[11]; nevertheless, it was chiefly ordinary readers – rather than professional reviewers – who immediately recognised the value of Tolkien's works upon their publication.

From virtually the outset, Tolkien's works were dismissed by the majority of influential reviewers. Shippey (2001, 305) goes so far as to

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[10] Dirk Vanderbeke (2011) even asserts that Tolkien studies are dominated by Tolkien enthusiasts who take on the role of apologists in their scholarly work. It seems, however, that this claim is too strong. In that article, he himself provides examples of works decidedly critical of Tolkien, also stating that apologetic Tolkien criticism is the result of a trauma associated with the long-standing underappreciation of the works of the author of *The Lord of the Rings*. In his publication, Vanderbeke accurately captures the emotional tone of the rivalry between the two sides of the critics' dispute regarding Tolkien's works. In this sense, one can say that the academic debate on Tolkien's works resembles a rhetorical trial between the accusers and the defenders of the Oxford professor's literature.

[11] Among the first positive critical responses to *The Lord of the Rings* are those of W. H. Auden, as well as Richard Hughes, Naomi Mitchison, and Tolkien's friend C. S. Lewis (Curry 2022, 356).

assert that they met with widespread, vehement hostility from critics – including those who, by their own admission, had dedicated themselves to expanding the literary canon – yet refused to admit Tolkien's work into the ranks of English literature. In his view, the intention was not even to point out any lapses on the part of the author of *The Lord of the Rings*, but rather to reject the value of Tolkien's literature entirely. In the reviews one finds an undisguised hostility whose causes were not explicitly articulated, but conveyed only through hints or mockery. Critics expressed their anger by calling Tolkien childish, and his readers developmentally backward.

In 1954, Alfred Duggan stated that *The Lord of the Rings* is not a book that most adult readers would read more than once[12]. A year later, Edwin Muir perceived in this work above all immaturity, since the characters here are mainly "boys masquerading as adult heroes" (Tolkien 2023a, Letter 177, 333). The following year, a review by Edmund Wilson appeared ([1956] 1995, 55–63), in which the tone of scorn and contempt for Tolkien's literature was by then completely undisguised, finding expression both in the very title of the review ("Oo, Those Awful Orcs!") and in its concluding description of *The Lord of the Rings* as "juvenile trash". As Patrick Curry notes (2022, 357), this tone of contempt and general dislike towards Tolkien's literary work is also evident among critics over the subsequent fifty years.

Tolkien has been criticised, among other things, for alleged nationalism, bourgeois attitudes, and even racism and latent fascism in his works. His writings have also been accused of escapism, sentimentalism, nostalgia, conservatism, and numerous other supposed "offences" concerning socio-political matters[13]. Recurrent criticism additionally targets the portrayal of women in his works, ranging from assertions of insufficient representation of female characters in the narrative, through the reinforcement of patriarchal worldviews, to outright sexism (Roberts 2022, 448–459). At times, almost all of these accusations have been combined in an attempt

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[12] This opinion was expressed by Duggan in an anonymously published review in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1954 as reported by Shippey (2001, 306). Shippey also refers to a similar statement by Philip Toynbee from 1961, who claimed that the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* had already waned and that the work was sinking into "merciful oblivion" (Shippey 2001, 306). In both cases, the critics were not so much predicting a decline in the popularity of Tolkien's work as expressing their hope that this would be the case, thereby manifesting their aversion towards the author and his work.

[13] The aforementioned accusations, as well as many others, are critically discussed by Curry in his book *Defending Middle-Earth: Tolkien, Myth and Modernity* (1997, 35–58).

to entirely discredit Tolkien as a writer. A prominent example is Walter Schepp's catalogue, where the architect of Middle-earth is accused of being "paternalistic, reactionary, anti-intellectual, racist, fascistic and, perhaps worst of all in contemporary terms, irrelevant" (quoted in Curry 2005, 78). It is also worth noting another striking critical response to Tolkien's literature: silence. Some contemporary literary scholars, dissatisfied with the popularity of Tolkien's works, chose simply not to discuss them in their academic compendia[14].

It is worth noting that all the above-mentioned strategies aimed at discrediting Tolkien's work ultimately proved unsuccessful, primarily due to the enthusiastic response of readers. Despite the unfavourable stance of eminent critics, the fantasy stories created by Tolkien enjoyed great popularity from the very beginning, both in the author's homeland and soon afterwards in the United States, and subsequently throughout the world. It seems that his works fulfilled some deep need of their audience, for the aforementioned enthusiasm is truly telling in this respect. It is as if the literary myths created by Tolkien were performing a function beyond that of mere literature. One of the first manifestations of this phenomenon was that, relatively soon after the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* and its wide dissemination, readers began to band together into an organised movement of Middle-earth fans and devotees of its history.

Although fandom, understood as an organised movement of genre fans (initially sciencefiction), already existed in the 1930s (Jenkins 2005, 47)[15], the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* in the 1950s was, as Cait Coker notes (2022, 525), a breakthrough event from the perspective of the fan reception of fantasy literature. This is because Tolkien, among other things, paved the way for fantasy to enter the literary mainstream.

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[14] Curry gives a few examples of such an attitude (2005, 78): "Margaret Drabble's *Oxford Companion to English Literature* (1985) gives Tolkien exactly thirteen lines out of 1154 pages; Drabble and Stringer's *Oxford Concise Companion to English Literature* (1996; more than 650 pages) has twelve lines; in Saunders's *Short Oxford History of English Literature* (1994; 678 pages) there is no mention at all."

[15] The present work concentrates exclusively on Tolkien fandom, although the phenomenon of organised fandom encompassing fantasy and science fiction works is considerably broader. Studies on fandom today constitute a distinct field of research within cultural studies, sociology, and media studies, encompassing both classic analyses and the latest theoretical approaches. Among the crucial works devoted to this subject are, *inter alia*, Henry Jenkins's *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (2013), Camille Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (1992), Matt Hills's *Fan Cultures* (2003), and Paul Booth's *Digital Fandom: New Media Studies* (2010).

The author of *The Lord of the Rings* himself, in a letter to the fanzine *Triode*, spoke very approvingly of the fan movement surrounding fantasy literature, even identifying himself as one of its members (Tolkien 1960, 27). However, Tolkien very quickly acquired a fandom of his own. Many fanzines (fan magazines) adopted names inspired by his work, and fans began using these venues to discuss issues related to the interpretation of his writings (Coker 2022, 526). Over time, those fan interpretations of the Oxford professor's literary works established a distinct tradition of reading them[16].

Tolkien's work quickly became a culturally formative phenomenon among its admirers. As early as 1958, during a contest at Worldcon, fans appeared in costumes they had made themselves to reflect the manner of dress in Middle-earth (Coker 2022, 526). This phenomenon of transferring elements of Tolkien's fictional world into reality – and thus effecting its cultural "creative interpretation" – would continue to develop and expand year by year, eventually evolving into an activity that, following Birzer (2021), can be compared to how Olympian myths influenced ancient Greek culture.

As the above outline of the early reception of Tolkien's work shows, the axis of the dispute over the literary value of his works is largely defined by the tension between unfavourable criticism from professionals and the enthusiastic reaction of readers. The latter – who soon gained the designation of the first "fans" – seized the initiative, creating fanzines, discussion clubs, and the earliest forms of adaptation that carried elements of Middle-earth into the realm of everyday cultural practices. Thanks to this grassroots energy, the reception of Tolkien's works gradually grew into a dynamic fan movement, whose momentum the authoritative voices of critics were unable to diminish.

Since the creative activity of fans proves crucial for understanding the phenomenon of the reception of Tolkien's work, the subsequent parts of this volume will concentrate on its specific manifestations. In the following sections of the first and second chapters, various examples of this activity will be presented as illustrations of the distinctive expansion of the Tolkienian myth in popular culture. These examples illustrate the phenomenon of an active and culturally creative reading of the works of Tolkien, which – as I shall endeavour to demonstrate – can be regarded as a mythopoeic sub-creation of the myth of Arda, a kind

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[16] For further discussion on the distinctive ways fans interpret Tolkien's literary works, see section 2.4.

of continuation of its weaving[17].

The first significant example of such expansion, both social and cultural, was the distinctive reception of Tolkien's texts that took place within the hippie movement. The next subsection will show how the counterculture generation interpreted *The Lord of the Rings* as a text of rebellion against militarism and materialism, and how the symbolism of Middle-earth penetrated into the language of values, aesthetics, and the everyday practices of the young people of that era. Describing this phenomenon will make it possible to grasp better the mechanisms of "creative cultural interpretation", which – already initiated at the stage of the formation of the fandom – drive the further expansion of the Tolkienian myth in contemporary culture.

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[17] The term "mythopoeic sub-creation of Arda" alludes to formulations used by Bradford Lee Eden, who described the phenomenon of "sub-creational music based on Tolkien's works" in relation to music inspired by Middle-earth (Eden 2022, 485–496), and by Péter Kristóf Makai, who analysed "sub-creation in computer games" using the example of computer games set in Tolkien's world (Makai 2022, 511–524). Both researchers note that fan creativity is a secondary, imaginative expansion of the original myth created by Tolkien – and thus constitutes a form of sub-creation. In the present work, however, this term is used more broadly: it refers to all forms of fan activity, such as literary reinterpretations (*fan fiction*), music, visual arts, films, games, or fan theories. These diverse activities share a common feature: their creators do not limit themselves to the passive reception of Tolkien's works, but actively and creatively continue to develop the world of Arda and its mythological motifs and narratives. This underscores both the mythopoeic (myth-making) and secondary (sub-creational) nature of these initiatives. "Mythopoeic sub-creation" understood in this way is – in the spirit of Tolkien's essay "On Fairy-Stories" (2008) – a kind of extension of the creative act initiated by the author and continued by generations of readers. With regard to terminology, it is also worth noting that in the present monograph, in some contexts, the terms Arda and Middle-earth are used interchangeably. Of course, both terms, when referring to Tolkien's literary world, differ in meaning. The latter is the continent in that universe, located on the planet called by the former term. However, since Middle-earth is the main continent on which the events described in the Oxford professor's works take place, the two terms are often used synonymously when referring to Tolkien's storyworld. Christopher Tolkien, for instance, in documenting the entirety of the mythology of the universe created by his father, used the title *The History of Middle-earth*, even though the material covered not only what pertains to Middle-earth as a continent. In the present monograph, the same principle has been adopted: when making a general reference to Tolkien's world, the terms Arda and Middle-earth are used synonymously.

1.2 Hippie "Creative" Reception of Tolkien's Works

A very significant influence of Tolkien on socio-cultural forms emerged in the 1960s with the explosion of the flower children counterculture. It is not by accident that David Carradine, a well-known actor, director, and film producer, stated years later that "*The Lord of the Rings* was kind of the metaphysical statement of the decade" (Cordova 2005, 0:25:58). Indeed, the influence of this work can be found in the diverse cultural practices of the generation that was coming of age at that time. *The Lord of the Rings* became for the hippies a symbol of opposition to materialism, militarism, and the soulless exploitation of nature by industrial society. In the characters of the Hobbits, they perceived the ideal of a simple, harmonious life in accord with nature, which corresponded to their own aspirations to form alternative communities. As Mónica Sanz-Rodríguez rightly observes (2022, 4), Tolkien's Fellowship of the Ring, composed of representatives of different races and cultures cooperating in the name of a common goal, provided a model of harmonious coexistence, cooperation, and acceptance that inspired hippies to establish communes such as the British "Gandalf's Garden".

Examining this community, one can notice how multidimensional an influence Tolkien's works had on the young counterculture generation. Within it, a shop (of the same name) was run and a magazine was published, on the front cover of most issues of which a kind of generational manifesto by Muz Murray (one of the co-founders of the community and its magazine) was featured. Referring to the character of Tolkien's Gandalf (Murray 1968), this manifesto carries a message to young people on matters of culture, spirituality, and mysticism. It is worth briefly discussing this manifesto here, especially with regard to the way in which a creative cultural interpretation of Tolkien's myth is carried out within it.

In the manifesto, discontent is voiced toward the socio-cultural situation in which the new generation had to come of age. This is expressed in a protest against "mistrustful and aggressive society (…) which judges worth by wealth and appearance and not by what a person IS" (Murray 1968). Gandalf is invoked here as a kind of symbol of hope for changing this state of affairs. His role in Middle-earth as a mediator and spiritual guide, uniting diverse races in the face of a common threat, is emphasised. In this way, precisely within Gandalf's Garden and its influence on the hippie generation, for the first time so clearly, the literary fiction of Tolkien's myth becomes a culturally formative element.

Murray's manifesto (1968) also contains a kind of mystical-religious message. It calls upon people to a kind of *metanoia*, which ultimately would result in the transformation of the entire external world. Gandalf's Garden, as a community, is intended to serve as a centre for forming a network of mutual relationships among hippies, which was meant to counteract their alienation in the society of that time. The magazine and the activities associated with it were to function not only as a communication medium, but also as a catalyst for artistic, spiritual, and mystical movements. This is indeed a programme for the mystical transformation of society, patronised by the figure of the wizard from Tolkien's myth, since Murray regarded the literary character of Gandalf as the archetype of a spiritual master, a "mythological hero of the age" (Murray 1968). This corresponded to his own work as a teacher and guide specialising in yoga and meditation techniques (Murray n.d.).

Within the hippie movement, Tolkien's literature also began to function as a symbolic context for real spiritual and religious practices. In the Gandalf's Garden community, there was a café whose name alluded to the character of Gandalf: "Ye Old Gandalfian Hand & Headcraft Tea Shoppe And Emporium Of Goodly Things" (Gandalf's Garden 1969, 4, quoted in Lachman 2012, 364). As Lachman notes (2012, 364), it was a space where visitors could not only drink tea or eat a vegetarian meal, but also engage in a range of spiritual and religious activities. They could, for example, participate in yoga classes, meditate, or delve into the teachings of Zen, Buddhism, and Sufism. There were also books devoted to magic and mysticism, incense, handmade candles, ceramics, as well as space for discussions on spiritual topics. It is no coincidence that many of these elements, characteristic of "Gandalf's Garden", later became an integral part of modern New Age centres (Lachman 2012, 364). In a broader context, it is also mentioned that reading *The Lord of the Rings* sometimes served hippies as an aid in psychedelic journeys in search of "cosmic consciousness" by means of hallucinogens (Ciabattari 2014; Davidsen 2017, 16; 2019, 33)[18]. In all this, one can thus discern how Tolkien's mythopoeic work begins to live a life of its own and, in the real world, takes the shape of a kind of natural mysticism. On this basis, there later arose religious forms and rituals that in one way or another refer to the mythology of Arda (Davidsen 2014).

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[18] It should be noted, however, that within the Gandalf's Garden community, such means of achieving altered states of consciousness were not accepted (Fallone 1971, 14).

Countercultural practices of the 1960s inspired by Tolkien's literature often involved creative references to Middle-earth in a variety of forms. Young people organised wedding ceremonies modelled on the content of *The Lord of the Rings* (Davidsen 2014, 499), and held Hobbit-themed parties during which they ate mushrooms, drank cider, and called one another by Hobbit names (Lachman 2012, 77). Certain "Tolkienian" socio-political slogans also became very popular in the public sphere – for example, in the form of graffiti: GANDALF FOR PRESIDENT and COME TO MIDDLE EARTH (quoted in Lachman 2012, 78).

In all the examples discussed here, one is dealing with an active cultural reception of Tolkien's works, that is, the adaptation of elements of the literary myth of Middle-earth into customs practised by fans in their real lives. In this way, within the hippie community, a kind of creative cultural interpretation of the Oxford professor's mythopoeic work is carried out. Through this, the audience can, as it were, experience it second-hand through various manifestations of popular culture, and thus one witnesses a kind of cultural expansion of the original literary myth. At the same time, Tolkien's literature here begins to exert a real influence on the way fans experience their lives in the world. Evidently, then, the myth of Middle-earth transcends a purely literary dimension, and the fans cease to be merely its passive recipients. Readers assume to some extent the role of creators and, in a way, continue the weaving of the myth created by Tolkien. In this manner, the Arda myth itself, in a sense, "comes to life" and begins to perform a function similar to that which myths fulfilled in pre-modern societies.

Tolkien's Reaction to the Hippie Reception of His Works

In view of all the influences of Tolkien on the hippie counterculture mentioned above, it is also worth considering how the architect of Middle-earth himself regarded the creative interpretation of his works that was taking place within this movement. Although he had left the mythology of Arda open to creative interpretation (Tolkien 2023a, Letter 131, 203–204), one cannot say that he endorsed the use of his stories in the way the hippies did. Not coincidentally, he referred to the enthusiastic young devotees of his works as "my deplorable cultus" (Carpenter 2002, 307).

To understand Tolkien's reaction better, one should consider a broader context. First of all, the creator of the myth of Middle-earth valued the peace of his private life up to that point, and the rapidly growing popularity meant

that he would no longer experience it. Enthusiasts of his work were seeking contact with him more and more often. As Carpenter notes in the biography of the author of *The Lord of the Rings*:

> Callers began to arrive without appointment, asking him to autograph books or to give them money. Usually they were polite, occasionally mad or threatening. The telephone would ring in the middle of the night: an unknown American was on the line, wishing to speak to Tolkien in person, and quite unaware of the time difference. Worst of all, people began to take photographs through the windows (Carpenter 2002, 313).

In the light of such behaviour, it seems a reasonable conclusion that Tolkien was somewhat reserved toward the hippies who held his writings in reverential awe, due to the problems this caused in his personal life. Aside from the disturbances to his privacy, the creator of the Arda myth also felt uncomfortable with the fact that his works had become a kind of oracle in the matters of those young people's lives. As he stated:

> Being a cult figure in one's own lifetime I am afraid is not at all pleasant. However I do not find that it tends to puff one up; in my case at any rate it makes me feel extremely small and inadequate (Carpenter 2002, 309).

However, it appears that Tolkien's objections run deeper as well. Referring to the extraordinary interest in his books among young Americans, he observed that they interpret his works in a way with which he cannot identify:

> Art moves them and they don't know what they've been moved by and they get quite drunk on it. Many young Americans are involved in the stories in a way that I'm not (Carpenter 2002, 307).

Two reasons for Tolkien's reaction should be indicated here. First, the hippies were using his stories regardless of the author's will and intentions. Meanwhile, he himself had always wanted to have control over how his work was used. In cases where people asked him for permission to name a house, an animal, or a child with a name taken from his works, he usually agreed, but he could also become angry when this was done without his permission (Carpenter 2002, 319–320). Secondly, the creator of *The Lord of the Rings* was, in the 1960s, an elderly conservative Catholic,

and the linking of his works with Buddhism and Sufism in the form of some eclectic natural mysticism, or with calls for a hippie social revolution, could not meet with his approval.

In Tolkien's reaction to the adaptation of elements of his works into customs practised by hippies in their real lives, one can observe something that differentiates the reception of a literary myth from the way traditional myths functioned. The latter had no notion of individual authorship or intellectual property, and functioned over generations in a form that gradually changed. They were, in a sense, the property of the community, which used them to establish contact with the sphere of the sacred. In the case of a literary myth, by contrast, the writer regards his mythopoeic creation as intellectual property and seeks to control – at least to some extent – the manner of its use, so that it accords with the message he wished to convey in it.

When, therefore, one speaks of references to Tolkien's works in various socially and culturally creative acts as a kind of fan "continuation of the weaving of the myth of Arda", one must be aware that in all likelihood the author of *The Lord of the Rings* would have opposed this phenomenon, at least in some cases. This does not, however, exclude acknowledging those references as fan sub-creations of that myth, in the sense of phenomena objectively existing in popular culture.

Indeed, in the practices of fans of the myth of Arda, even those not fully accepted by its creator, one can see certain features of a living myth in terms of its socio-cultural expansion. Similarly to the case of Homer's tales, the creator here becomes a "legendary bard" responsible for the canonical version of the story, the unchanging core of the "sacred myth". The fan community, meanwhile, continually reinterprets it and creatively adapts it to different areas of their lives, depending on changing cultural needs (usually while simultaneously maintaining a reverent respect for Tolkien's canonical stories). In this respect, just as in the case of the traditional, pre-modern manifestations of a living myth, the Tolkienian mythical stories possess a dimension of collective co-creation, with fans freely drawing on it so that it may fulfil various dimensions of their functioning in the world. This is most clearly seen if one examines the diverse ways of adapting Tolkien's mythopoeic work present in popular culture.

1.3 To Hear Arda: Tolkien's Myth in Popular Music

Contemporary culture abounds in an immense wealth of references to Tolkien's works, many of which take the form of numerous and diverse adaptations of the Arda myth. In the subsequent sections of this volume, selected manifestations of these adaptations will be analysed. However, discussing these examples necessarily involves striking a balance between the number of culturally influential adaptations of the Tolkienian myth that can be mentioned and the depth of interpretation required by the main aims of the present monograph.

In the previous subsection, using the example of the hippie community, it was established that in certain respects fans continually reinterpret and creatively adapt Tolkien's myth to various aspects of their lives in the world. This suggests a certain freedom and diversity in the ways of referencing that myth, and at times even independence from the writer's own intentions. This phenomenon is even more clearly visible in the ways in which various musicians adapt and develop Tolkienian motifs, incorporating them into their own artistic narratives. Although the Oxford professor's literary oeuvre influenced many musical genres (Burdge and Burke 2007b, 538–540), the aspect most interesting from the perspective of the present study is how rock and metal bands drew upon mythical tales from Middle-earth, thereby creating an epic-fantasy chapter in the development of these genres of popular music.

Pink Floyd is not known for making explicit references to Tolkien, but it can be regarded as one of the earliest examples of a rock band drawing inspiration from the myth of Arda. It is known, for instance, that Syd Barrett became familiar with the Oxford professor's literary works as a child, and the song "The Gnome" on the album *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn* (1967), which tells the story of a gnome named Grimble Grumble embarking on the adventure of his life, was modelled in part on the character of Bilbo (Palacios 2016, 21, 129; Jakubowski 2018, 180). Although the reference is subtle, it remains a trace of inspiration from an imaginative world in which the members of Pink Floyd, somewhat like Tolkien, sought ways to transcend the down-to-earth paradigm of the modernist worldview. Their music, full of psychedelic elements and oneiric references, although far removed in its message from Tolkien's works, can be perceived as incorporating inspiration from literary Middle-earth into a personal artistic vision imbued with a fantasy atmosphere.

Led Zeppelin, a legendary band of the hippie era, also exemplifies early inspiration drawn from the mythology of Middle-earth and illustrates how Tolkien's works contributed to an epic-fantasy chapter in the development of rock music. Songs such as "Ramble On" (*Led Zeppelin II*, 1969) and "The Battle of Evermore" (*Led Zeppelin IV*, 1971) do not straightforwardly retell complete stories from the Legendarium, but they do make direct reference to Tolkien's works. In the first of these songs, Mordor, Gollum and "the evil one" (presumably Sauron) are mentioned. In the second, Ringwraiths, dragons, and the Dark Lord appear, and the entire piece is sometimes interpreted as a reference to the Battle of the Pelennor Fields (Jakubowski 2018, 179).

Led Zeppelin often avoided explicitly tying their songs to specific literary sources, which was consistent with their artistic approach to music-making. Nevertheless, Robert Plant's open fascination with Tolkien was significant enough that listeners could discern references to Middle-earth in other songs by the band as well. For example, one can detect allusions to Tolkien's world in "Misty Mountain Hop" from the album *Led Zeppelin IV* (1971). The Misty Mountains are among the key locations in the journey of Bilbo and the Dwarves. Although this song is directly about a demonstration fighting for the legalisation of marijuana (Jakubowski 2018, 179–180), it is also sometimes interpreted allegorically as a reference to the story told in *The Hobbit* (Sammis 2004). Another track from this album, "Stairway to Heaven", which is full of symbols and allegories and thus open to varied interpretations, is also sometimes described as "Tolkienian" (Jakubowski 2018, 180). Overall, the Tolkien traces in Led Zeppelin's work align with the atmosphere of mystery, spiritual transformation, and archetypal themes of journey and the struggle against evil that their music creates. Some Tolkien fans may regard this as a musical journey to some version of Middle-earth, whereas others will see it as merely a loose reference to the myth of Arda.

The iconic heavy metal band Black Sabbath also acknowledged drawing inspiration from Tolkien. The song "The Wizard" from their debut album (*Black Sabbath*, 1970) is a direct reference to Gandalf. According to Geezer Butler, the band's bassist, the lyrics were written under the strong influence of *The Lord of the Rings* (Lusty 2013, 129). "The Wizard" tells of a powerful wizard who fights against evil powers, much like in Tolkien's works. Black Sabbath's music primarily explores the dark aspects of human nature, but it sometimes also incorporates fantasy elements, including Tolkienian allusions. While the inspiration from Tolkien in the example

cited is evident, the imaginative world into which these pioneers of heavy metal invite the listener is more a variation on the atmosphere of literary Arda than a faithful musical adaptation of it.

The Canadian band Rush approached Tolkienian motifs from a somewhat different angle. The album *Fly by Night* (1975a) features a track titled "Rivendell", which references the Elven refuge hidden in a valley among mountains, both musically and lyrically. The composition is characterised by a tranquil, almost meditative mood that corresponds to Tolkien's descriptions of the atmosphere of Rivendell as a place of harmony, peace, and spiritual renewal. Their next album, *Caress of Steel* (1975b), includes a track called "The Necromancer", which tells the story of an archetypal dark sorcerer inspired by the character of Sauron (Cunningham 2010, 221–222). These pieces can be regarded as a more direct musical adaptation of Tolkien's work than the Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath songs discussed above. Listeners are presented here with two distinct creative interpretations of Tolkien's myth: one contemplative and full of beauty, the other dark and filled with dread.

Another well-known rock band inspired by Tolkien's world is the British group Marillion. Initially, the band adopted the name "Silmarillion", but for legal reasons they decided to shorten it to the current form (Jakubowski 2018, 181). Although their work contains no overt references to the Legendarium, the very name of the band attests to an inspiration drawn from Tolkien's mythology. The reference to Tolkien here becomes a kind of "artistic credo", a sign linking their own musical output with the mythopoeic literature of the Oxford professor. This can be seen as a signal aimed at both their own fans and admirers of Tolkien's literature. Over time, referencing the Legendarium in naming a band has become very popular among musicians wishing to openly declare a connection between their music and the stories from the world of Arda[19].

Terms drawn in one way or another from Tolkien's works are very often used in various subgenres of heavy metal. Here one finds "Tolkienesque" band names, albums, lyrics, and even musician pseudonyms (Kuusela 2015, 89–90). Heavy metal adaptations of Tolkien's stories – for example, as performed by bands such as Blind Guardian or Summoning – explore both the epic and the darker aspects of the mythology created by the Oxford professor. Blind Guardian, in the album *Nightfall in Middle-Earth* (1998), creates a structurally elaborate musical narrative that illustrates

[19] *The Tolkien Music List* (Seeman n.d.) provides the most comprehensive list of such instances.

individual events from *The Silmarillion*, as can be seen in the titles of the tracks, their lyrics, and even the album cover design. Summoning, in turn, interweaves fragments of Tolkien's texts into its compositions, producing music intended to convey the atmosphere of Middle-earth through epic melodies and majestic arrangements (Cunningham 2010, 237–238).

It is worth noting that even in the extremely brutal and dark offshoots of music, such as death metal and black metal, Tolkien serves as a point of reference. The dark and conflict-filled nature of these genres harmonises perfectly with themes depicting spiritual downfall or the struggle of powerful evil forces against the Valar in Tolkien's mythology. Characters such as Morgoth or Sauron become universal symbols of the fight between light and darkness, transcending their original literary context.

In a similar spirit, one should view the Tolkienesque references in the narratives of songs, or even in the personae of musicians specialising in the aforementioned extreme varieties of metal music (Cunningham 2010, 234–235, 238). Although it is difficult to discern the Christian spirit of the Oxford professor's literature in the tracks of the death-metal band Morgoth, or still less in those of the black-metal ones like Gorgoroth or Burzum[20], the inspiration from Tolkien is undeniable here, and it can be found in both the symbolic layer and the atmosphere created by the music (Cunningham 2010, 237–238). However, as in the case of the hippie-inspired evocations of Middle-earth, the question of the limits of treating references to Tolkien's work as a fan "continuation of the weaving of the myth of Arda" remains a matter of debate. Certainly, the openly declared or presumed Satanism of many black metal artists is impossible to reconcile with the Christian dimension of Tolkien's mythopoeic writing.

It is worth emphasising at this point that there are also musical references to the Oxford professor's work that are Christian in spirit. A good example here is provided by the bands Armia and Luxtorpeda from the Polish rock scene. Their leaders, Tomasz Budzyński and Robert "Litza" Friedrich, openly admit to drawing inspiration from Tolkien in their work (Jakubowski 2018, 182–183), while at the same time publicly professing to be Christians. Both are also co-founders of the band 2Tm2,3, which plays rock music with a Christian message. The name

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[20] This issue seems particularly controversial in light of claims that the founder of the band Gorgoroth supposedly made a pact with the devil. Regardless of the credibility of such statements, the band is known for incorporating anti-Christian elements in its work (Chaplinsky 2013). Even greater infamy has surrounded Burzum, largely a project of Varg Vikernes, who in 1994 was sentenced to 21 years in prison for murder and the arson of several churches (Cunningham 2010, 216; Podlewski 2017, 108).

of this band alludes to the Bible and denotes the 3rd verse of the 2nd chapter of the Second Epistle of St. Paul to Timothy, in which we read: "Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus"[21]. The references to the Oxford professor's mythopoeic literature thus function in this case within a strictly Christian context, one that is ideologically very different from the examples discussed previously.

The influence of Tolkien's work on popular music is extremely broad and encompasses a variety of styles[22]. This subsection has examined only a few examples, namely rock and heavy metal ones – sufficient, however, to confirm the important role of the Oxford professor's literature in creating an epic-fantasy chapter in the development of these genres of popular music, one of the many dimensions of the cultural expansion of the Arda myth. Tolkien's mythopoeic literature found its reflection in popular music relatively soon after the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* and the birth of its fandom; the freedom with which artists draw upon it is considerable, and consequently the extent of its influence varies from case to case. From subtle references in the style of Pink Floyd, through direct allusions as in the case of Led Zeppelin, to epic reinterpretations by Blind Guardian and Summoning – Tolkien's mythopoeic narrative continues and develops in the musical realm. In this sense, these musical references should be treated as a form of reception of Tolkien's literature: they carry the myth of Arda into another sphere of cultural practice, adapting its imagery and affective tone to their own modes of expression.

For artists, the mythopoeic tales of Arda become a model myth (indeed, even an archetypal image), a reference to which makes it possible to evoke

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[21] Interestingly, both artists reject the terms *Christian rock* or *Christian metal*, claiming that no such thing exists (Janas 2011).

[22] The most comprehensive list of music inspired by Tolkien's mythology can be found on *The Tolkien Music List* (Seeman n.d.), which currently includes over 2000 performers. According to this list, apart from rock and heavy metal (the genres most abundantly represented in that source), the types of contemporary popular music in which one can find Tolkien-inspired works include, among others: various subgenres of electronic music (ambient, psychedelic trance, techno, new age, industrial, dark ambient, noise, drum and bass); folk (Celtic folk, acoustic folk, alternative folk, progressive folk, comedy folk, psychedelic folk, world music, neoclassical fusion); jazz (including acid jazz, jazz fusion, jazz funk, jazz piano ensemble, jazz percussion ensemble, orchestral jazz, improvisational jazz, big band jazz/swing, jazz/new age, world jazz fusion); classical and instrumental music (instrumental, classical, orchestral, choral, piano music); pop (including Christian pop, cinematic pop); as well as hardcore, punk, reggae, ska, hip-hop and rap. A concise overview of the influence of Tolkien's work on various genres of contemporary popular music can be found in the *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia* (Anthony Burdge and Jessica Burke 2007b, 538–540).

in the audience a series of associations that create a mood of enchantment with a magical fantasy realm, and when appropriately reinforced by the music and lyrics of the songs, this mood begins to be experienced in various ways. In the case of Led Zeppelin, this means cultivating an atmosphere of mystery, spiritual transformation, and archetypal themes of journey and the struggle against evil. The band Rush invites the listener into a musical version of Rivendell, but in the background of this Elven realm lurks the figure of an evil sorcerer (*The Necromancer*). In the case of metal bands, Tolkien references help to build a sense of the presence of superhuman forces of evil, which are also explored in the darker aspects of the mythology created by the Oxford professor. The common denominator here remains the spirit of sub-creation. Musicians who are themselves fans, starting from the world of Middle-earth, lend it new sounds and interpretations, until ultimately they create their own stories in which the spirit of Tolkien's fantasy myth still resonates, though it is often significantly transformed.

The content into which this myth is woven – whether in terms of the musical, lyrical or ideological elements adopted by the bands inspired by Tolkien's literature – is so diverse that it is sometimes difficult to find any common ground between the examples, apart from the very fact of referencing the Legendarium in some way. On the other hand, the very fact of inspiration by Tolkien's mythological stories is beyond doubt in each of the cases discussed. This leads to the conclusion that when discussing the myth of Arda and the fan ways of continuing its weaving, Tolkien's own works should be treated differently from their fan-created cultural adaptations. The texts of the creator of Middle-earth's mythology function here as a kind of mythological metanarrative, finding embodiment in cultural forms that are often vastly different from one another. That ontological distinctness of Tolkien's "source myth" from its cultural sub-creations becomes even more evident when one turns to the film adaptations – a topic that will be addressed in the next subchapter.

1.4 To See Arda: Film Adaptations of Tolkien's World

Examining the phenomenon of the socio-cultural expansion of Tolkien's myth, one should note the gradually increasing number of media through which it reaches fans. Just as Tolkien-inspired music enables them to experience Arda through sound, so film adaptations offer a chance

for a visual encounter with Middle-earth, thus psychologically extending its influence beyond the time spent with the book.

Film as such had a significant cultural impact in the era of the rise and development of Tolkien's fandom; therefore, the film adaptations of Middle-earth's mythology deserve to be examined here in as much detail as possible. Indeed, one may expect that the screen representations of the myth of Arda have had a significant influence both on its cultural expansion and on the fandom itself. On the other hand, it is worth noting that making a film is an expensive and complex undertaking, usually beyond the reach of typical fan creative endeavours. In the context of analysing the phenomenon of adaptations of Tolkien's stories, the film medium is thus a special case. One can expect that the technical quality of the visualisation of Tolkien's works would greatly affect their reception among fans. For this reason, the following discussion also addresses technical issues of Tolkien's film adaptations, particularly where they directly influence the fandom's perception of them.

The most important aspect of the inquiry below, however, is how Tolkien's screen adaptations are received by fans. This pertains both to the fan response to the high-budget, professional film versions of the literary works, and to the culturally active reception in the form of amateur Tolkien films in all their variety. A particularly important issue here is how the relationship of film adaptations to the literary original is perceived, with the latter understood as a kind of mythological metanarrative. This subchapter also traces fan influences at the level of film project development, screenwriting, and within the production crew. Phenomena at the intersection of the film industry, show business, popular culture, and Tolkien fandom are also analysed, to the extent that they aid in understanding the phenomenon of the cultural expansion of the Arda myth.

In this way, film adaptations are understood in the present discussion not only as independent works in their own right, but also as key nodes of reception: they create images and narrative schemes that reinforce and guide further forms of fan activity – from games and transmedia projects to cosplay. The analysis of Tolkien's film or quasi-film adaptations is organised chronologically to demonstrate the evolution of this phenomenon, thus enabling a better understanding of the cultural expansion of the Tolkienian myth (in terms of its visual representations) as it historically unfolded.

From Illustration to Film: The Evolution of Visual Representations of Middle-earth

In considering the visual adaptations of the world of Arda, it is worth first drawing attention to Tolkien himself, who produced illustrations for his own works, as well as maps, sketches, and symbols intended to enhance the coherence of his narrative. This manner of visualising the universe of Middle-earth served not only the author, but also contributed to readers' immersion, helping them to understand and indeed even to "feel" that world. The maps appended to *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* were an integral part of the narrative, creating a kind of geographical underpinning for the story. Thanks to this, the visualisation of Arda in readers' imaginations took on increasingly concrete shapes[23]. This authorial iconography provides the starting point for visual approaches in reception: as the myth of Arda passes through successive media, it acquires new representational conventions.

Tolkien was clearly aware of the power that visual stimuli exert on the imagination of his audience, as evidenced for example by his critical remarks regarding the covers of the first American editions of *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien 2023a, Letter 277). He believed that inappropriate illustrations could distort the meaning of the work and deform its message (Hammond and Scull 1995, 187), and he was indeed generally very sceptical about the possibility of adequately translating his story into the poetics of film (Sherwood 2021, "Introduction"). Nevertheless, Tolkien's decisions regarding the choice of illustrators and artists for his book editions, as well as the comments he made on those occasions[24], later provided guidance for those who nonetheless undertook the film adaptation of his works.

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[23] An important role in this matter was played by Christopher Tolkien, who co-created them, as well as those published in *The Silmarillion* (Crowe 2020). In 1979 he also prepared the book *Pictures by J.R.R. Tolkien* (Tolkien 1979), which contained his father's illustrations. In the context of influential early visual elaborations of Tolkien's Arda, it is also worth mentioning Karen Wynn Fonstad's *The Atlas of Middle-earth* (1991), as well as the Tolkien calendars, especially those appearing in the 1970s. Detailed information on the latter can be found in *The Compleat Gyde to Tolkien Calendars* (n.d.).

[24] For instance, Tolkien's negative opinions about portraying his world in the Disney style are well known (Hammond and Scull 1995, 104), whereas, on the other hand, he very positively received the illustrations of his works by Pauline Baynes (Tolkien 2023a, Letter 235).

1.4.1 Early Film Adaptations of Tolkien's Works

The first attempts to bring Middle-earth to the screen appeared almost directly after the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*. As early as 1957, Tolkien received a proposal for a film adaptation based on a screenplay by Morton Grady Zimmerman. The producers planned to use a mixture of animation, miniatures and live action in the project (Croft 2007b, 12). After reviewing the proposal, however, Tolkien expressed deep dissatisfaction with the anticipated radical changes to his story – for example, an eagle was introduced already in the Shire and was given the name "Radagast", while lembas was turned into a kind of food concentrate. What is worse, the screenplay also ignored the matter of adequately presenting the very core of the original book – the journey of the Ring-bearers – to the extent that its final and most crucial part was simply "murdered", as the Oxford professor put it (Tolkien 2023a, Letter 210, 390). The problem of a film adaptation's lack of fidelity to Tolkien's mythopoeic literature was thus articulated by the author himself, and the project never came to fruition. In the case of the subsequent adaptations that were actually made, it would be his fans who protested in a similar vein.

The first completed animated adaptation was a 12-minute film *The Hobbit* from 1967 directed by Gene Deitch, which, however, was created solely to extend the adaptation rights[25]. In 1977 Rankin/Bass produced a feature-length animation *The Hobbit*, which – although it essentially preserved the plot faithfully – significantly simplified the story of the literary original. Among fans, it is worth noting, this film received mixed reactions, mainly because of those simplifications (Thompson 2022, 504). In 1978, Ralph Bakshi undertook an animated version of *The Lord of the Rings* using rotoscoping. Despite its artistic boldness, the film likewise met with a mixed reception. It was criticised for the very use of rotoscoping (Thompson 2022, 503), for the film's overly low budget – which lowered the quality of the animation – and for an unfinished storyline encompassing only *The Fellowship of the Ring* and part of *The Two Towers* (Cordova 2005, 00:42:19–00:42:26). On the other hand, Bakshi had been a long-time admirer of Tolkien's works[26] and earned considerable respect

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[25] For many years this adaptation remained unknown. It was only on 10 January 2012 that Deitch recounted the history of the project on his blog. He indicated that the film was made in early 1966; however, documents added later suggest that the actual year of production was 1967. The film was preserved by the producer's son, who made it available on YouTube along with Deitch's text (Thompson 2022, 501).

[26] Ralph Bakshi's film had its source in a long-standing fascination with Tolkien's

with his film – both within fandom and outside it (Cordova 2005, 00:42:26; 00:42:30–00:42:36). Among those who appreciated the film was Peter Jackson, who thanks to it was inspired to read Tolkien's books (Langford 2007, 49; Sibley 2006, 47–48). In 1980 another adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* appeared, this time produced by Rankin/Bass. It is sometimes regarded as a completion of Bakshi's story, because it depicts the part of the Ring-bearers' journey that was not covered by his 1978 film[27]. This version too made a number of changes to the original, and above all greatly simplified many storylines, which caused controversy in its reception among fans[28].

In parallel, other, lesser-known adaptation attempts were also emerging. One of the most surprising was a proposal by the Beatles, who in the 1960s planned a film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* under the direction of Stanley Kubrick. In the leading roles were to appear Paul McCartney as Frodo, Ringo Starr as Sam, George Harrison as Gandalf and John Lennon as Gollum. Ultimately, however, Kubrick deemed the material impossible to realise satisfactorily, and Tolkien opposed the collaboration, which ended the project at the stage of early conception (Paterson 2021). Boorman, later the creator of *Excalibur* (1981), also proposed his own approach to Tolkien's work. His project was purported to offer freshness while at the same time being faithful to spirit of the novel(s). Despite such declarations, Boorman's screenplay in fact diverged even further from Tolkien's original than Zimmerman's project, and for that reason it was simply not acceptable[29].

The Lord of the Rings. Since the 1950s he had expressed interest in bringing Tolkien's works to the screen (Thompson 2022, 503). As he himself states: "As far as realistic adult fantasy, Tolkien certainly was the best I'd ever read" (Weiner 2018). He speaks in detail about his fascination with the Oxford professor's literary work in *The Tolkien Experience Podcast* (2021).

[27] It is worth noting that these productions were created independently of one another and were not originally planned as a cohesive whole. *The Return of the King* (1980) was made as a continuation of the earlier 1977 Rankin/Bass adaptation of *The Hobbit* (Thompson 2022, 504).

[A] A list of the most important changes in this adaptation compared to Tolkien's work is succinctly discussed by Croft (2007a).

[A] Croft comments on this as follows: "To put it bluntly, Boorman's script has only the vaguest connection to Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Considering Tolkien's appalled reaction to the much lesser liberties taken by Zimmerman, it is unlikely he would have appreciated Boorman's script at all. Characters, events, locations, themes are changed freely with no regard for the author's original intent. Situations are sexualised or plumbed for psychological kinks that simply do not exist in the book. (…) Pipeweed seems equivalent to marijuana in its effects, and the hobbits'

Interesting, though often criticised for their deviations, are also the adaptations that were created outside the circles of Western film producers. In 1985 in the Soviet Union, a television version of *The Hobbit* was aired, titled *Сказочное путешествие мистера Бильбо Беггинса, Хоббита, через дикий край, чёрный лес, за туманные горы. Туда и обратно* (Latyshev 1985). The production, made in the spirit of Soviet television theatre, was characterised by a low budget, a stage-like style, and – by necessity – a great number of alterations (Thompson 2022, 505). In 1993, in turn, a Finnish miniseries *Hobitit* was produced by the Finnish public television station YLE (Torikka 1993). It was a 9-episode adaptation of both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, based on an earlier theatrical version. Here too, significant changes were introduced, focusing above all on the fate of the Hobbits (Thompson 2022, 505).

The early film adaptation attempts listed here demonstrate a variety of creative approaches and the challenges associated with transferring the rich world of the Arda myth to the screen. Each of these productions introduced a relatively large number of changes in relation to the book original. On the one hand, this was often a source of criticism; on the other hand, these projects brought their own interpretation into the Tolkien world, influencing the way in which subsequent generations of fans perceived Tolkien's Arda, and to some extent shaping later, more technologically advanced screen adaptations such as Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

1.4.2 Tolkien Films in the Twenty-first Century: Rapprochement Between Creators and Fans

A groundbreaking moment in the history of film adaptations of Tolkien's works was the creation of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy directed by Peter Jackson[30]. This work may be regarded as exceptional from the perspective of the cultural expansion of the Arda myth, both on account of its critical acclaim and its mass popularity among audiences worldwide. The former aspect is evident when one considers the number of awards bestowed upon the said Jackson adaptations. For instance, all three parts of the trilogy

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beloved mushrooms are hallucinogenic" (Croft 2007b, 10-11).

[30] This trilogy comprised films titled after the volumes of Tolkien's work: *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (Jackson 2001), *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (Jackson 2002b), and *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (Jackson 2003b).

received a total of thirty Academy Award nominations, and ultimately won 17 awards. *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, together with *Titanic* and *Ben-Hur*, garnered the highest number of Academy Awards in cinema history – as many as 11. As for audience reach, based solely on ticket sales it is estimated that over 400 million people around the world have seen Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* (Wikipedia 2025a). It may thus be concluded that, thanks to the film adaptations in question, the myth of Middle-earth has become widely known.

Equally important from the perspective of the present study is the fact that never before had Tolkien fandom and the team producing adaptations of his work been so closely intertwined. Jackson read Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* at the age of 17 and, being impressed by the story, he claims that even then he thought he would like to see it fully adapted to film (Sibley 2006, 48). The director does acknowledge that he only reread *The Lord of the Rings* when preparing for its motion picture adaptation, yet in the documentary *Ringers – Lord of the Fans* he is tellingly referred to as "the biggest fan of all" (Cordova 2005, 1:18:22). It may thus be considered that Jackson approached the book material as a devotee of Tolkien, striving, out of respect, to faithfully capture the spirit of the novel and the authenticity of the world of Arda depicted (Timmons 2007, 304).

Indeed, Jackson's crew included other Tolkien fans as well. The most prominent of these was probably Christopher Lee, the actor portraying Saruman. In 1945, he read *The Hobbit* (Tolkien Gateway, "Christopher Lee," n.d.), and he read *The Lord of the Rings* as soon as it was published in the 1950s. Thereafter, he claimed to have reread the latter work every year (Gunner 2015). He was the only one who met Tolkien in person, and as he recalls, the encounter stirred such powerful emotions in him that he was unable to speak coherently at the time (Tolkien Gateway, "Christopher Lee," n.d.). Christopher Lee regarded *The Lord of the Rings* as one of the greatest works of literature of all time, and he always dreamed that someone would make a film adaptation of it and that he would play a part in it (Sibley 2001, 51).

The narrowing of the gap between Tolkien's literary fans and the makers of the film adaptations has yet another very important dimension. Specifically, the team responsible for Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* became very actively engaged in interactions with the fandom. This was the time when the technological revolution enabled Tolkien fans to congregate around internet portals. One such portal was TheOneRing.

net, which was created by enthusiasts who were apprehensive about a new film adaptation of Arda, fearing that it might distort Tolkien's original vision. Over time, however, this site ceased to be merely the voice of critical viewers and became a tool for connecting the fan community with the film crew. An example of this transformation is the situation when, at the beginning of production, one of the TORn founders was removed from the film set, yet soon afterward was "graciously invited back" by Peter Jackson, which symbolised an openness and willingness to dialogue with the devoted Tolkien community (TheOneRing.net, "About," n.d Parke 2015, 19–20).

Jackson's crew did not restrict itself to working only with the owners of fan websites. Representatives of the fandom were regularly invited onto the film set, allowing fans to observe behind-the-scenes production processes and participate in interviews with actors and crew members. Such actions made it possible to share numerous insider materials – photos, recordings, reports from the set – which later made their way to TheOneRing.net and other fan platforms. As a result, fans not only obtained information, but also felt that they were an integral part of the creative process (Parke 2015, 20–21).

In parallel with online activity, publications began to appear in print that commented on and analysed Jackson's adaptation. On the TORn portal, as well as in book publications such as *The People's Guide to J.R.R. Tolkien* (Challis 2003)[31], fans had the opportunity to reflect more deeply on the creative decisions behind the films and to discuss their alignment with the spirit of the literary original. This two-way communication not only enriched the fan community's knowledge, but also strengthened the relationships between viewers and creators.

Given all that has been said so far about Jackson's adaptations, it is no surprise that they exerted an enormous influence on the fandom itself. The success of the films meant that fans had to take a stance regarding the new way of experiencing Tolkien's works. As a result, new categories of audience members emerged. On one hand, a group of so-called "Purists" arose, who accepted only Tolkien's literary legacy; on the other, "Ringers" appeared, that is, fans capable of combining a love for the original texts with an appreciation for Jackson's film interpretations.

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[31] The book had a sequel in the form of *More People's Guide to J.R.R. Tolkien* (McNew 2004). Both works have been a unique form of fan involvement, given their quasi-academic character combined with elements typical of online fan discussions. An example of this is the use of internet pseudonyms (fantasy-inspired pseudonyms) instead of the authors' names.

This dichotomy became one of the key aspects of contemporary fandom, influencing not only the nature of discussions about the world of Arda, but also the question of how the canonicity of individual adaptations is perceived[32].

One cannot overlook, too, the fact that Jackson's films contributed to a rise in the popularity of Tolkien's books. Many new readers, captivated by the epic vision of Middle-earth on the screen, turned to the literature, discovering the richness and depth of the original work. As a result, Jackson's adaptations not only achieved the status of a cult phenomenon within the Tolkien fandom, but also contributed to the emergence of a new generation of readers who discovered Tolkien's world only after watching the screen versions[33].

It should also be emphasised that Jackson's adaptations exerted a powerful influence on the sensory imaginings of Middle-earth. The visual style developed by the New Zealand filmmaker became a new iconographic standard, influencing subsequent film productions, video games, as well as theatrical performances devoted to the stories of Middle-earth (Sergeant 2015, 10–17). This was achieved through exceptional attention to the visual aspect of representing the world of Arda, so that the audience felt as if, for the duration of the viewing experience, they were truly transported into Tolkien's universe. In order to achieve this effect, the creators drew inspiration from the rich visual legacy of acclaimed Tolkien illustrators, above all Alan Lee and John Howe, who were part of Jackson's film adaptation team[34]. It was primarily their works that provided the basis

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[32] Apart from staunch supporters of Jackson's adaptations and their opponents, there are also fans who do not like the changes made in the films but are willing to excuse them and conditionally accept them as the result of adjusting to the specific nature of the cinematic medium. As far as the typology of Tolkien fans and the terminology used in this regard is concerned, the matter is even more complicated. More detailed information on this topic is available on Tolkien Gateway ("Fandom," n.d.).

[33] Such consequences of Jackson's adaptations for the reception of Tolkien's works had already been foreseen by Shippey in *Another Road to Middle-earth: Jackson's Movie Trilogy* (2004, 254). Fifteen years later, in her extensive study, Lukić examined the changes within the fandom brought about by Jackson's films, focusing primarily on the transformation of the collective memory concerning Tolkien's literary works (Lukić 2021, section "Fandom and Memory").

[34] See Garbowski (2005, 42–43) for a discussion of how Tolkien illustrators – especially Alan Lee and John Howe – helped shape the visual authenticity and imaginative spirit of Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* films. Ted Nasmith was also invited to collaborate in creating the adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*, but due to personal reasons he could not take part in the project (Tolkien Gateway, "Ted Nasmith," n.d.).

for the set designs and props[35]. The quality of Middle-earth's visual representation was also enhanced by the creative use of special effects and computer animation techniques, such as the digital creation of Gollum or the battle scenes involving armies[36]. Although Jackson's adaptation of *The Hobbit* diverged somewhat more from its literary source in terms of plot, it essentially continued the visual approach to Middle-earth established by the earlier trilogy[37].

Despite many voices of admiration, Jackson's adaptations also sparked numerous controversies among Tolkien fans and scholars[38]. Some viewers considered them to be visual masterpieces and excellent examples of modern adaptations of literature, whereas others criticised the plot and tonal changes. For instance, there was debate over character modifications: the expansion of Arwen's role (effectively taking on the function of Glorfindel from the literary original), or the reinterpretation of Faramir, depicted as initially inclined to use the Ring – something that, according to some, undermined his moral integrity (Coker and Viars 2015, 77; Radaghast 2021). The introduction of the Elf character Tauriel, created for the purposes of *The Hobbit* trilogy, was judged even more harshly. Jackson and his co-screenwriters argued that her presence was necessary to introduce a strong female character and to expand the Elves' perspective on the events related to Thorin and his company's quest. For some viewers, Tauriel was seen as a positive addition to the world, but others criticised her role and her romance with Kili, considering it a breach of the original tone of the story (Coker and Viars 2015, 80). Despite these controversies, both of Jackson's trilogies went on to define the contemporary conception of Middle-earth, contributing to the extraordinary cultural expansion of the Arda myth, the development

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[35] This process is presented in detail in the "Designing Middle-earth" documentary included on the third disc of the extended edition of the first part of Jackson's trilogy (2002a).

[36] It can reasonably be argued that the special effects used in the film adaptation of Tolkien's story revolutionised the way fantasy is presented in cinema (Motamayor 2021).

[37] In the film version, many new plot threads were added, with the consequence that *The Hobbit* – a book significantly shorter than *The Lord of the Rings* – likewise ended up being divided into three parts: *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* (Jackson 2012), *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug* (Jackson 2013), *The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies* (Jackson 2014). One can learn about the technical details of the visualisation of Middle-earth from the extended editions of Jackson's *Hobbit* trilogy (2012–2014).

[38] Noteworthy in this context is the extremely harsh review of Jackson's *The Hobbit* by Oziewicz (2016).

of the fandom, and the inspiration of subsequent generations of creators and artists dealing with Tolkien-related themes.

In recent years, fan discussions around Tolkien film adaptations have intensified with the premiere of the series *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*, produced by Amazon (Payne and McKay 2022–). This production, with a budget of one billion dollars, elicited mixed opinions. Despite enormous interest, many fans criticised the loose approach to adapting the source material (Sewell 2022; PaulCrafting n.d.), and some even called for a boycott of the series (middle-earth-mythopoeia 2022). The latest Tolkien adaptation, in turn, is *The Lord of the Rings: The War of the Rohirrim* (Kamiyama 2024), which employs an anime style to recount a story briefly mentioned in the appendices to Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (2001b, 1040-1041). Additionally, a team closely associated with the creators of Jackson's films has announced an adaptation entitled *The Hunt for Gollum*, which according to reports is slated to hit cinemas in 2027 (IMDb n.d.). Clearly, there remains a great and undiminished interest in Tolkien film adaptations.

1.4.3 Fan Engagement, Controversies and Creative Visual Interpretations

In the context of Tolkien's film adaptations, it is worth emphasising not only the enormous interest they have generated, but also the intensity and emotional nature of the debates surrounding them, which is reminiscent of the fervour of the discussions accompanying the original book release of *The Lord of the Rings*, as Auden observed. This suggests that the myth of Arda is not perceived as a work of fiction serving only as entertainment, but as a narrative bearing universal truths about life, with which many in the audience identify on a very deep emotional level. Such was the case with Tolkien's books, and the same happened with Jackson's films. In this sense, the mythopoeic stories set in the Arda universe function in the same way as myths did for pre-modern people, for whom they were an important component of their worldview.

Even unsuccessful projects point to the emotional potential associated with the film versions of Arda. Tolkien himself, despite criticising Zimmerman's screenplay and rejecting the Beatles' project, remained consistently interested in the possibility of a film based on his books, an interest that ultimately led to the sale of the film rights in 1969 (Thompson

2022, 501). Fans, for their part, with each new motion picture adaptation, debated both the fidelity of these films to the literary original and the visual interpretation of Middle-earth – Jackson's included. In response to these controversies, even fan-edited versions of the films were created. The editors often sought to bring the adaptations closer to the literary originals, but in reality, these fan versions presented their own diverse interpretations of Tolkien's mythology (Wille 2015, 32).

The aforementioned diversity of visual versions of Middle-earth demonstrates the creative nature of Tolkienian inspiration in film. Fans, both through re-edits of existing adaptations and in other forms of audiovisual creativity, engage in weaving Tolkien's myth, presenting their personal visions of the world of Arda and the stories told within it. This issue is well illustrated by low-budget fan films such as *The Hunt for Gollum* (Bouchard 2009) and *Born of Hope* (Madison 2009), which have garnered a wide audience, thereby underlining the role of fans in the visual reinterpretation of Tolkien's myth[39]. Technological advances have enabled amateurs to create increasingly sophisticated visual content, so that – alongside the live-action films discussed above – more and more fan visualisations of Middle-earth are appearing today. On YouTube, countless audiovisual materials devoted to the works of the Oxford professor are available. Among these, it is worth highlighting especially those that explain the intricacies of the Arda universe and the stories set within it, that is, the so-called "Tolkien Lore"[40]. For example, one can find materials that present the history of Middle-earth (The Lorebrarians 2024; Invicta 2022), delve into the histories of individual characters[41], or inquire into the economic system of Tolkien's world (Wizards and Warriors 2022). This category also includes fan productions engaging in "what if" type speculations about how the course of history in the world of Arda might have unfolded differently than described in the Oxford professor's writings – for instance, if Sauron had regained the One Ring (Nerd of the Rings 2022).

[A] It should be noted here that in their creative visualisations of the world of Arda, fan productions usually draw heavily not only on Tolkien's work for inspiration, but also on the aesthetic of Jackson's films (Pérez-Gómez 2015).

[40] "Tolkien Lore" is a term referring to the entire body of knowledge, mythology, history, and details of the world created by J. R. R. Tolkien. It encompasses both Tolkien's canonical texts and the interpretations, analyses, and studies of his work. Fans of Tolkien sometimes delineate the scope of the concept differently (Chrysophylax Dives 2022), but evidently, the explanation of elements of Tolkien's narratives and the world of Arda itself is integral to what the term denotes.

[41] An example here is the complete history of the character Gandalf in Tolkien's world, reconstructed by The Broken Sword (2021).

Audiovisual materials about Tolkien's world published on YouTube vary greatly in technical and visual terms. Some of the materials cited in the previous paragraph are essentially illustrated presentations in which additional effects have been used to add dynamism to the static illustrations they employ (The Lorebrarians 2024; Nerd of the Rings 2022). They make use of maps and illustrations of the Arda universe, which are "brought to life" by changes in framing, occasional brightening or darkening, or the addition of a depth effect. The Gandalf story material (The Broken Sword 2021), using similar image-editing techniques, also incorporates the depiction of the wizard from Peter Jackson's films. The videos by Invicta (2022) and Wizards and Warriors (2022) already employ fully fledged 2D animation techniques. The creators have prepared a series of shots in which graphical elements move independently: characters march, swords fall upon enemies, flames flicker. Maps are also animated here; for example, the camera glides over a map, location markers appear, and arrows indicate journeys or directions of attacks. The aforementioned audiovisual materials also employ additional lighting effects. Nonetheless, they continue to be dominated by simplified animations of moving backgrounds and silhouettes, typical of documentary films that incorporate illustrations.

Among the fan-created visualisations of Arda on YouTube, one can also find productions that deserve to be called fully fledged animated films. Examples include short animations dedicated to Tolkien's mythology. Some of these focus on recreating the plots of the Oxford professor's works – for example, an adaptation created by Eddie Sharam Animation (2022) – while others concentrate on portraying the world itself, a trend led by the films of Willow Productions (2015; 2016). The latest trend among fans, however, is the use of artificial intelligence tools to create short films telling stories from *The Silmarillion*, such as *The Music of the Ainur* (Echoes of Eä 2024) or *The Oath of Fëanor* (The Cottage of Lost Play 2024), as well as longer productions, such as *The Silmarillion. The Movie* (Echoes of Eä 2025). Thanks to modern technology, fans are increasingly becoming active participants in the process of interpreting and adapting Tolkien's myth[42].

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[42] It should be pointed out that film adaptations of Arda created using AI tools are a subject of controversy among Tolkien's fans (Sirielle 2024; Ricardo 2025). It is well known that the creator of Middle-earth was highly critical of how, in his time, technological advances were transforming the world, and here technology goes much further – it is beginning to supplant the human role in creativity. Of course, it is not the case that AI alone is making fan adaptations of *The Silmarillion*; however, in such visualisations of Tolkien's world, the creators are no longer in control of the

1.4.4 Film Adaptations and Their Role in the Socio-Cultural Expansion of the Myth of Arda

It is evident from the investigations conducted that the film adaptations of Tolkien's works have been playing a key role in the socio-cultural expansion of the myth of Arda. This is linked to the important function that the sense of sight plays in representing the world, and consequently to the cultural power of film as a medium during the emergence and development of Tolkien's fandom. Successive motion picture adaptations of stories from Middle-earth gradually expanded the circle of the Tolkienian myth's audience, while simultaneously increasing the size of its fandom. A key breakthrough moment was the release of Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, which made this myth known to audiences around the world.

This popularity consequently encouraged creators to adapt the mythological stories from the world of Arda through other media as well. To a large extent, it was precisely thanks to the film adaptations that the Tolkienian myth gradually transformed into a truly transmedial narrative, exerting a mass influence on contemporary culture by means of diverse channels of communication: from cinema, through computer games, to fan forms of expression such as fan fiction or cosplay. An example of this is the explosion of references to the myth of Arda across various media in the wake of Jackson's film adaptations.

The films allowed fans not only to see the world of Tolkien's stories with their own eyes, but also enabled the creative development of the myth created by the Oxford professor. From the earliest adaptation attempts, through the animations of Bakshi and Rankin/Bass, to Jackson's spectacular films and amateur productions – each of these approaches sought to bring a new perspective to Middle-earth while remaining rooted in the original stories told by Tolkien. In this sense, they can aptly be described as a continuation of the weaving of Tolkien's myth, or as a mythopoeic sub-creation of Arda.

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tools they use to the extent that they could be considered the sole authors. Adaptations of *The Silmarillion* using AI can also be regarded as controversial due to copyright issues. As is known, the rights to film adaptations of this work have never been sold by Tolkien or his heirs. Although fan-made short visualisations of stories from *The Silmarillion* from before the AI revolution were generally tolerated, some adaptations of Tolkien's mythology using this new technology have already been removed from YouTube due to copyright infringements. For example, the above-mentioned *The Silmarillion. The Movie* (Echoes of Eä 2025) was no longer available on YouTube as of 20 March – less than a month after its release. Perhaps further such materials will meet the same fate.

At the same time, the diverse visual representations of Tolkien's mythology can be regarded as a modern equivalent of the collective weaving of a living myth by pre-modern communities. As noted in the introductory section of the monograph (*Tolkien's Myth in Fan Reception: Preliminary Remarks*), mythopoeic stories about gods and humankind were in those times continually reinterpreted. Their essential core was usually preserved, but individual elements of the myth were continuously adapted in creative ways to different spheres of communal life. The same mechanism is evident in the film adaptations of Tolkien's works as well. While striving to maintain fidelity to the original literary vision, the filmmakers simultaneously endeavoured to refashion the myth of Arda so that it would suit the sensibilities of audiences of successive generations.

Many film adaptation projects can be credited with significant fan involvement, but they were also often the object of controversy within the fandom. The disputes surrounding the adaptations highlight how crucial it is for fans that the visual interpretation of Middle-earth correspond to their personal experience of reading the works of the Oxford professor. Just as was the case with musical adaptations, so in fan reception here too a distinction is drawn between the "source" ontological status of the Arda myth in Tolkien's version and its various cultural sub-creations. In the case of film adaptations, however, this issue is somewhat different. Any deviations are treated very critically by a large part of the fandom, almost as a "betrayal of the original", even leading to calls for a boycott. Two important conclusions follow from this observation.

First, although visual adaptations of Tolkien's works are by nature interpretations of them, in the view of fans they should not be variations that freely diverge from the source material, but rather interpretations that preserve as much fidelity to the spirit of the original as possible. This reveals a tension between Tolkien's works – perceived by fans as a "mythological metanarrative" or even the "source truth" about the world of Arda – and their various contemporary adaptations, seen as variations on that myth. The significant diversity of musical references to the Arda myth did not provoke controversy, probably because these were regarded as an "extension" of the source myth's vision beyond the scope its creator had originally intended for it. Film adaptations, by contrast, were meant to visually represent the myth itself in its original version, as is indicated for instance by the film titles drawn from Tolkien's books. For this reason, any changes were deemed a distortion of the vision of the literary original.

Second, the intensity of the emotions accompanying those disputes over the film adaptations of Tolkien's works also indirectly confirms that the Arda myth functions today as a living myth. Neither the intensity of the debates surrounding Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* – which Auden noted immediately after its publication – nor the similar emotions of audiences that accompanied the appearance of each new film adaptation of the Arda myth were the result of chance. Just as traditional myths were part of the real experience of living in the world for pre-modern people, so too the mythology of Middle-earth for fans becomes simply an element of the existential experience of reality, and therefore altering it through a film adaptation tends to be received on a heightened emotional level. This existential and psychological aspect is a very important dimension of the fans' active cultural reception of Tolkien's mythopoeic work, and it is on this aspect that the investigations in the next chapter will be focused.

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The analysis carried out in this chapter has shown that the fan reception of Tolkien's works finds expression in a variety of adaptations and reinterpretations of his myth of Arda, which have contributed to its socio-cultural expansion. In many respects, this resembles the mechanisms of a living myth known from pre-modern cultures. Similarly, one finds here a process of saturating the life of the community with references to the myth and integrating its elements into everyday practices. Although up to now the socio-cultural aspect of the reception of Tolkien's mythopoeic works has been the primary focus, many of the manifestations of this phenomenon that have been described also possess a significant existential and psychological dimension. It is precisely this dimension that, as the next stage in substantiating the thesis of the fan reception of Tolkien's works as a contemporary form of living myth, will be the subject of discussion in the next chapter, where it will be examined through the prism of the need to "live in myth".

One thing most critics don't understand is that *LOTR* is more than a story. It's a portal into Tolkien's Middle-earth, the most realized imaginary realm in the history of the fantastic. For millions of contemporary readers, Middle-earth serves the function that Eden once did for the common man, or that Dante's *Inferno* did for the literate elite: It has become a collective map of a moral universe, a fabulous landscape that, in its depth and detail, floats just beyond the fields we know. Many fans would heartily agree with Margaret Howes, a 73-year-old veteran of Tolkien fandom and the guest of honor at the recent Bree Moot Tolkien convention in Minnesota: "Reading *The Lord of the Rings* is like looking into another world, a real world."

Wired, October 1, 2001

Chapter 2.
Fans' Existential Engagement with Tolkien's Myth: Playing, Dwelling, and (Symbolically) Living in Middle-earth

In the previous chapter, selected forms of adaptation of Tolkien's mythopoeic work were presented, demonstrating that in the context of the fan reception of his writings, one can speak of a socio-cultural expansion similar to that which characterises a living myth. It was shown how, thanks to the hippie counterculture, the mythology created by Tolkien gained enormous popularity and, crossing the boundary of the literary universe, revealed the potential to influence the real lives of fans. Even though for Tolkien himself such a form of reception of his works was at times difficult to accept, it nevertheless became a reality and remains to this day a significant phenomenon of contemporary culture. Fans, as it were, assumed the role of sub-creators of the Tolkienian myth, crafting works that allow it to be experienced through diverse forms of popular creativity. Thanks to this, successive spheres of culture and social life among Middle-earth enthusiasts gradually became infused with Tolkien's mythology and its references, in a way reminiscent of how a living myth functioned in pre-modern times. Those possibilities of infusing the socio-cultural life of fans with references to Tolkien's mythology were subsequently significantly expanded by musical and visual adaptations, which were also discussed in the previous chapter.

The ways of adapting Tolkien's works presented thus far do not, however, exhaust the many forms in which the myth of Arda manifests itself in contemporary culture. In this chapter, its presence will be discussed in, among other things, popular games, Tolkienology (see subchapter 2.3 and footnote 64), fan speculation and online discussions, fantasy literature, as well as artistic creations by Middle-earth enthusiasts. Whereas the analysis thus far has concentrated on observing the objective phenomenon of the socio-cultural expansion of the myth of Arda, in the present chapter the emphasis will be placed above all on individual reception, that is, on the psychological-existential aspect of the various references to Tolkien's work.

In the introductory part of this monograph, on defining the phenomenon of the living myth, it was emphasised that it satisfies an essential psychological need of *homo religiosus*: the need to "live in myth", or "live in the context of myth". The aim of the present chapter, in turn, is to put forward arguments that, in the case of the fan reception of the Tolkienian myth, an analogous phenomenon can be observed. At the beginning of section 1.4, it was stated that the musical and film adaptations not only gave fans the opportunity for a sensory "experience" of Middle-earth, but also psychologically extended the impact of that fantasy world beyond the time spent reading the books. In this chapter, we will follow this lead and analyse how various adaptations of Tolkien's works relate to the satisfaction of the psychological-existential need of fans to live their lives in the context of the myth of Middle-earth. It will turn out that often their aim is, in a symbolic as well as affective sense, to "live in Arda" – either by ascending in imagination towards the world of myth so as to, as it were, "dwell in it", or by bringing it into their everyday existence in the world as far as possible.

2.1 Symbolic and Affective Unification of Life with the World of Arda through Transmedial Adaptations and References to Tolkien's Works

In principle, from early on, the active involvement of Tolkien's readers in various adaptations of his works was tied to their desire to experience these works more intensely and for longer periods than during the act of reading alone; hence, such adaptations can be regarded as active forms of literary reception. Although the hippies blended Tolkienian inspirations with the broader countercultural movement and ideas drawn from other domains (e.g., pacifism, a particular mysticism, or an ecological approach to nature), they were among the first to employ a mode of functioning in the real world to deepen symbolic and affective immersion in the reality of Middle-earth. In the opening chapter, examples of behaviours interpreted as implementations of precisely such a strategy were discussed, such as the use of hallucinogens to intensify impressions from the "reader's journey into the world of Arda". Similarly, the role of music in immersing the listener into a mythic-magical Tolkienian atmosphere can be perceived in this manner, particularly if the sensation of entering Middle-earth evoked by musical sounds is reinforced by explicit references to the

Legendarium in the lyrics of the compositions[43].

The experience of a "journey to the world of Arda" can also be intensified by skillfully employing visual stimuli. Given how profoundly sight influences our sense of presence within the world, the strategy of visual immersion in a fantasy universe appears particularly effective. In this context, the heated fan debates regarding film adaptations of Tolkien's works, mentioned in the previous chapter, become more understandable. After all, from a fan's perspective, it seems entirely rational to expect that the visualisation of the beloved Middle-earth should align with their personal reading of Tolkien's works, and that viewing these adaptations would further deepen experiences derived from the books. Any discrepancy between an adaptation and the reader's expectations thus becomes an intrusion, disrupting immersion in the world known from the literary texts. Such reasoning also helps explain the popularity of fan edits of Tolkien's films, as these edits enable fans to select a vision of Arda with which they can most closely identify, and in which they desire to remain immersed in their imagination for a longer time. Thus, these edits are not merely "media phenomena" but they constitute active forms of reception of Middle-earth mythology – ways in which readers experience the Tolkienian myth through contemporary visual culture.

Audiovisual materials published by fans on YouTube, examples of which were mentioned in the first chapter, also prolong and deepen immersion in Tolkien's world. Presentations of the "Tolkien lore" type clearly help one to understand the world of Arda better. Nevertheless, delving into its history, economy, geography, or genealogical and linguistic intricacies constitutes decidedly more than a mere deepening of knowledge. Watching audiovisual materials devoted to these issues causes fans to prolong the attention they devote to Tolkien's world, and thus they remain there in their imagination. Compilations that collect the fates of Arda's characters into a single presentation – often scattered across various works of the Legendarium – allow fans to relive their adventures. In turn, audiovisual content that speculates about alternative courses of events in Middle-earth not only satisfies curiosity, but also helps one imagine more vividly how that universe functions, making it psychologically "more real".

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[43] There are interesting analogies here to entering a trance state in shamanism, wherein hallucinogens and special music were used to induce a state of consciousness in which an individual completely transcends everyday, mundane reality and enters the world of spirits described by traditional myths. There is, however, no room here for a study devoted to such parallels, even though this would undoubtedly be a fascinating subject of research.

Thanks to all of these factors, the audience's imagination remains continuously engaged in the world of Arda. Using Wolf's terminology (2012, 48–51), one can say that processes of immersion, absorption, and saturation of the fan's life with Tolkien's mythology take place here. From the perspective of this monograph, these mechanisms constitute the core of literary reception understood as a living participation in myth. Even the literary works of the Oxford professor, owing to the richness of detail in the fantasy world he created, allow for a profound enchantment with it and evoke a peculiar sense of its reality (Wolf 2012, 48). However, thanks to the aforementioned fan materials, the audience is "absorbed" by the mythological universe of Middle-earth on various levels and by means of numerous narratives referencing the source material. The more details and connections with the world of Arda are built in the audience's imagination by these means, the stronger the impression of the "reality" of that secondary reality. One can see here exactly how fans become sub-creators and continue the weaving of the Tolkienian myth. These materials, published by fans and containing their own narratives drawing on Tolkien's myth, influence his other fans, and the visual aspect of these audiovisual presentations further enhances the audience's sense of immersion[44].

The feeling of being transported into the universe of Arda can also be sought through visualisation alone, i.e. with virtually no use of any original narrative constructions beyond the books[45]. A good example of this is the reconstructions and visualisations of Tolkien's world posted on YouTube by a creator using the nickname "Places of Middle Earth". He has marked his channel with the slogan "visit Middle-earth", and in the description he encourages viewers to regard his work as a short journey through that fantasy realm (Places of Middle Earth n.d.). For instance, he has presented visual reconstructions of Bag End (Places of Middle Earth 2024a), the houses of Tom Bombadil (2024b) and Beorn (2024c), Lake-town (2024d), the "Prancing Pony" inn (2024e), Minas Morgul (2025a), and finally the seven gates of Gondolin (2025b), relying chiefly on Tolkien's own descriptions. The YouTuber declares that he strives to create the most faithful three-dimensional visualisations of Middle-earth ever made, basing them on a combination of descriptions found in Tolkien's texts, his own illustrations, maps from *The Atlas*

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[44] It is also worth noting that in this context the narration of the myth of Arda becomes trans-narrative, transmedial, and, to some extent, trans-authorial.

[45] In the case of films, it is true that this immersion in Arda is audio-visual, but it still employs a narrative element, which in this sense makes it a way of immersing oneself in Tolkien's world that is somewhat similar to that of the books.

of Middle-earth by Karen Wynn Fonstad (1991), as well as additional details contained in the professor's letters (Places of Middle Earth 2024f, 0:01–0:36). Thanks to this, fans can, so to speak, explore Middle-earth "with their own eyes".

On the same YouTube channel, Tolkien fans have the chance to set out for Middle-earth in an even more literal way. By taking advantage of one of the videos (Places of Middle Earth 2024g), one can simply "sail" with Frodo to Valinor. The viewer's perspective here is positioned as though they were sitting in a boat, looking with their own eyes at the Hobbit and the landscapes of Tolkien's world, and the whole experience is accompanied by ambient music that helps one to feel the atmosphere of that imagined journey. The combination of imagery from Tolkien's world with a contemplative musical mood appears to be an attractive way of immersing oneself in Arda, and indeed it enjoys great popularity among Tolkien fans, judging by the number of views of videos featuring this type of content[46].

However, what has been said so far should not be regarded solely in terms of an escape from reality into an imagined, idyllic fantasy world. Transmedial adaptations of the Legendarium are often used by fans as part of a broader strategy of striving for a symbolic and affective union with the world of Arda. The aforementioned ways of "enhancing the imagination" in order to immerse oneself more intensely in the mythical reality of Middle-earth are reminiscent, in this respect, of the ritual ascent to the world of myth among pre-modern peoples described by Eliade.

The essence of those rituals, archaic in their very nature, lay not in the transmission of doctrinal content but in the dramatic making-present of the myth through various techniques that "switched" the participant's mode of experience to a feeling that the myth was actually "taking place" during the ritual (Eliade 1958b, 6–7). In the Eleusinian mysteries, successive sequences of the rite serve not so much to impart new content as to stage Kore's abduction and Demeter's search so that the myth is "happening here and now", and the initiate intensely experiences the presence of the

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[46] Music and imagery from Jackson's adaptation are often used in this context, as for example in the materials of the user "Ambient Worlds", which have already garnered over 20 million views (2018a; 2018b). However, there are also other ways to combine contemplative music with the visualisation of Middle-earth. Ivan Elsasser, on his YouTube channel "Symbology Cinematics", uses his own compositions in this regard – for instance, "Valinor at Last" and "Road to Gondor" – thereby creating content that has likewise achieved impressive, nearly one-million views (Symbology Cinematics 2024a; 2024b).

goddesses (Eliade 1958b, 110–112). A similar mechanism operates in initiation scenarios outside the Greek world. In the Babylonian New Year ceremony (*akītu*), rites of purification and renewal make present the moment of creation and usher the participants into mythical time, where the dramatic battle between Marduk and Tiamat unfolds (Eliade 1959a, 55–62). Eliade emphasises the symbolic aspect of these rites, but the affective power of the accompanying experience is beyond doubt. At the level of experience, the key factors are the affective engagement of participants, multisensory involvement, dramatisation, repetition, and communal co-presence – the stronger these are, the greater the immersion, absorption, and "sense of presence", and thus the more intense the experience of "actually being in the myth", the feeling of living the life of the myth itself.

The transmedial adaptations of Tolkien's myth mentioned above operate in a similar fashion: they engage emotions and multiple senses, unite fans in a communal, repetitive experience of it, and thus fulfil a quasi-ritual function. In both cases, one is dealing with techniques through which the user is meant not only to symbolically carry out a transfer into the reality of the myth, but also to affectively "believe" in the reality of that transference.

This drive toward a symbolic and affective unification with the reality of Arda is also evident in a strategy opposite to the one outlined above. By adapting Tolkien's myths, fans also unite with the mythic Middle-earth by bringing it into the reality of their everyday lives – at least to the extent that this is possible. Examples of this type of activity were also given in the previous chapter. For instance, one may interpret in this way the hippie practice of holding wedding ceremonies modelled on rituals described in Tolkien's texts, Hobbit-style parties at which fans "became" inhabitants of the Shire, and even political graffiti alluding to characters from Middle-earth. Just as archaic man inscribed the most important events of his life into universal mythic patterns (Eliade 1959b, 167–172), so too do Tolkien's fans infuse their lives with references to the mythology of Middle-earth.

In the following sections of this chapter, we will examine ways of adapting Tolkien's works that have not yet been discussed here, as well as other fan undertakings that, to some extent, bring them closer to the ideal of living in the mythological realm of Arda. We will observe how, by creatively interpreting and adapting his mythopoeic work to the context of their everyday lives, fans not only continue its weaving, but also fulfil

a contemporary form of the psychological need for "life in the context of myth". We will also examine the recurring twofold strategy of integrating everyday lived reality with the myth of Arda. The first approach involves a quasi-ritual symbolic and affective transference in the imagination from the real world to the mythic reality of Arda, while the second – conversely – transfers elements of Tolkien's universe into the real world.

2.2 Becoming a Hero of Middle-earth: Tolkien Inspirations and Games

Various games inspired by Tolkien's work – board games, role-playing games, card games, and computer games – allow fans to some extent embody the heroes of Middle-earth and transport themselves into this mythic world. Tolkien's novels themselves had already evoked in readers an enormous "hunger" for further experience of the reality he created. As Peter Buchs observes (2004, 103), Tolkien's Legendarium gained such an ardent following that the books alone could not satisfy their desire, and as a result not only were audio and visual adaptations of Middle-earth produced, but also games set in Tolkien's world. Fan communities were, so to speak, "demanding" ways to continue contact with their beloved fantasy universe. One attractive answer proved to be games, which are an interactive form of narrative. They allow one to "enter" the depicted world and explore it independently, thus constituting a medium of particular significance from the perspective of the desire to "inhabit" Arda.

The uniqueness of this medium also lies in the considerable variety of ways in which players "enter" Tolkien's universe and operate within it. In board wargames, the transfer to Middle-earth takes place only at a purely notional level, whereas in Live Action Role-Playing (LARP) the participants actually enact the roles of characters from the history of Arda, and in certain types of computer games one even "lives" in that universe in the form of an avatar. Middle-earth's interactivity as a game environment can also be realised in different ways. Finally, the diversity of games set in the universe of Arda also concerns the degree of fidelity to the literary original. In view of this diversity, the analysis of Tolkien-inspired games included in the present subsection begins by examining their forms in the order of historical development.

As computer games currently dominate the interactive adaptations of the Arda myth, special attention is devoted to them here. It is worth

noting that in the case of such games, immersion in the world of Middle-earth depends to a large extent on technological factors such as the method of visualising Tolkien's world, the quality of the re-creation of the realities of Arda, the manner of player representation, game mechanics, and many other aspects. For this reason, it is necessary to examine in as much detail as possible not only the symbolic dimension of Tolkien-inspired games, but also the technology through which it is realised. It must be emphasised, however, that the examples of interactive forms of adaptation of Middle-earth's mythology have been selected here strictly in line with the aim of this chapter, namely to show how fans use them to satisfy the essential psychological need to "live in the myth of Arda".

2.2.1 From Board Games to MMORPG[47] – Historical Development of Interactive Forms of Adaptation of the Tolkien's Myth

Games inspired by Tolkien's prose began to appear relatively soon after *The Lord of the Rings* achieved cult status. As early as the 1970s, the first board-game adaptations of battles from Middle-earth emerged. These were mainly strategic wargames that re-enacted the key clashes from the novels (Makai 2022, 512–514). Around the same time, role-playing games (RPGs) also started to develop, spearheaded by *Dungeons & Dragons*[48] (Gygax and Arneson 1974), whose creators drew on Tolkien's bestiary and fictional world (*Did Tolkien Inspire Dungeons & Dragons?* 2018). Although Gary Gygax and the co-authors of *D&D* were inspired by other fantasy texts as well, Tolkien's influence on the birth of role-playing games[49] cannot be overstated (Makai 2022, 516). As noted in the publication *Dungeons and Desktops*:

> (...) the Tolkien phenomenon paved the way for a new type of game, one that would allow fans to go beyond reading and actually enter exciting worlds of fantasy to play a role in their own adventures. (Barton and Stacks 2019, 28)

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[47] Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game – hereinafter referred to as MMORPG. It is worth adding that the world of MMO (Massively Multiplayer Online) games is not limited to role-playing games – there are also MMOFPS (First-Person Shooter), life simulation games, and even strategy games. In the context of the present work, the primary focus is on MMORPGs set in Middle-earth.

[48] Hereinafter referred to as D&D.

[49] Hereinafter often referred to as RPG.

It can therefore be stated without exaggeration that Tolkien's impact became one of the factors that made possible the birth of modern role-playing games, which in the subsequent decades played an important role in shaping interactive forms of the reception of his myth.

The 1980s and 1990s saw a proliferation of further Tolkien-inspired games in a variety of formats. In 1982, the multi-award-winning and very popular game *The Hobbit* (Melbourne House 1982) was released, considered "(...) the first clear adaptation of a Tolkien book to the computer" (Makai 2022, 518). For its time, it was impressive in its sophistication and, above all, it allowed players to explore the novel's world in an interactive form. In the following years, further computer games set in Middle-earth were created, among them *War in Middle Earth* (Melbourne House 1988, real-time strategy), *Riders of Rohan* (Konami 1991, strategy), and the first attempts at computer role-playing games. New titles also appeared in the board and card game market – notably, pen-and-paper role-playing games saw significant development. *Middle-earth Role Playing*[50] (Iron Crown Enterprises 1984) carried the rules of *D&D* into the setting of Arda, offering fans the opportunity to run their own campaigns in Middle-earth. By the end of the 1990s, a collectable card game (CCG) called *Middle-earth: The Wizards* (Iron Crown Enterprises 1995), set in the Third Age, had gained popularity. Patrick Näf (2004, 83) described it as "(...) a fresh example of the 'excesses' eager Tolkien fandom can generate" – emphasising that from the perspective of an uninvolved observer such extensive fan-created extensions of the world may seem excessive. At the same time, as Näf notes, they provide compelling evidence of the remarkable level of audience engagement, which, in the context of these considerations, supports the thesis that the narratives from the world of Arda are experienced by fans in a psychological and existential manner as a living myth. By the end of the twentieth century, Tolkien's world already had its counterparts in many game systems, but the true explosion of *game adaptations* was yet to come.

Middle-earth's entry into mainstream cinema in the early twenty-first century significantly influenced the games market. Peter Jackson's film adaptations (2001–2003) introduced the Tolkien's myth into the popular imagination, attracting crowds of new fans and generating significantly greater demand for further experiences in the reality of Middle-earth. At the same time, the electronic entertainment industry was undergoing a technological boom – video games became more cinematic, more

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[50] Hereinafter referred to as MERP.

networked, and more immersive than ever before. As a result, after 2000 a wave of new games appeared under *The Lord of the Rings* brand. In this context, one should mention especially the film-based action games, such as *The Two Towers* (Stormfront Studios 2002) and *The Return of the King* (EA Redwood Shores 2003) for consoles, which allowed players to fight in person at Helm's Deep or on the walls of Minas Tirith. This trend was also joined by real-time strategy games (RTS), prominently exemplified by the two-part *The Battle for Middle-earth* (EA Los Angeles 2004–2006), which recreated the great battles of Tolkien's world. At the same time, it is necessary to note the new role-playing and adventure games that were emerging at that time, among them *The Third Age* (EA Redwood Shores 2004). At the start of the twenty-first century, Middle-earth also acquired its own tabletop games. Games Workshop released the official *The Lord of the Rings Strategy Battle Game* wargaming system (2001) with miniature models of characters and armies. The Decipher company, for its part, launched *The Lord of the Rings Trading Card Game* (2001), which made use of frames from the films.

The success of the games cited above would not have been possible without Jackson's film adaptation of Middle-earth. The spectacular depiction of Arda on screen created demand, provided game developers with a ready-made aesthetic, and at the same time enhanced the world's credibility. This trend culminated in online games. In 2007, *The Lord of the Rings Online*[51] (Turbine, Inc. 2007) debuted – the first officially licensed MMORPG set in Middle-earth, which was in effect a virtual reconstruction of large regions of Tolkien's world, available online to players around the globe. At the same time, fans began to use new creative platforms – of particular note was Minecraft (Mojang Studios 2011), a sandbox game in which fan communities undertook the ambitious task of recreating the geographic space of Arda. Thus, in the span of just a few decades, a rich ecosystem of Tolkien-inspired games evolved: from simple board games and role-playing sessions by groups of friends, to global online worlds co-created by thousands of users. In this way, successive game formats delineated not only stages in the development of the genre, but also successive circles of reception of the literary myth of Arda.

It is also worth taking a broader view of the development of Tolkien-inspired games outlined above, seeing it as yet another stage in fans' pursuit of immersing themselves more deeply and for longer periods in their beloved world of Arda. Thanks to the element of interactivity,

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[51] Hereinafter referred to as LOTRO.

games are capable of deepening the processes of immersion, absorption, and saturation of the imagination with Tolkien's fantasy universe. Fans not only identify with what they read or what they see on the screen, but can also themselves enact battles, undertake journeys through Middle-earth, and make decisions just like characters inhabiting the reality of Arda. Even at this stage it is evident that these experiences can be considered as a secular, quasi-ritual equivalent of the ascent toward the world of myth by pre-modern societies. As in the past, so too here, what is essential is multisensory engagement, dramatisation, and the repeatability of the experience, while in the case of online games and RPGs, a communal presence is also involved. All of these factors helped pre-modern societies to experience rituals intensely and thereby re-actualise mythic events, which in turn translated into interpreting their own everyday experiences in mythological terms. Similarly, through games fans can ascend to the universe of Arda and quasi-ritually co-participate in its mythic events, which also affects the manner in which they experience their everyday existence.

In what follows, a closer look will be taken at selected interactive forms of adaptation of Tolkien's myth – especially RPGs, LARP, computer adaptations, and projects such as the construction of an equivalent of Arda in *Minecraft* – in order to understand how they enable fans to symbolically and affectively "inhabit Middle-earth" (that is, to fulfil the need to "live in the myth").

2.2.2 RPG – Inhabiting Middle-earth in Interactive Narrative

Role-playing games (RPGs) can be regarded as the medium that brings fans closest to the ideal of "inhabiting Middle-earth", understood as a symbolic and affective immersion in the role of an inhabitant of that world and experiencing adventures first-hand. The essence of classic RPGs (such as *D&D* and its derivatives) lies in playing the role of an imagined character within a collaboratively created story. Tolkien's influence on the genesis and aesthetics of RPGs is fundamental, as mentioned above. *D&D* borrowed from *The Lord of the Rings* not only various types of creatures, but also the general model of a great conflict between good and evil set in a quasi-medieval setting. Moreover, this work constitutes one of the most influential models of elaborate worldbuilding, which set the standards for the entire fantasy genre as well as for role-playing and computer games

(Wolf 2012, 130ff.). Tolkien's Arda demonstrated that a narrative world can be so meticulously developed in detail as to create an irresistible impression of its reality and prompt its audience to immerse themselves in it. RPG players, for their part, had been yearning for immersive experiences in such worlds since the 1970s. It is not surprising, then, that the first editions of *D&D* made direct use of Tolkienian references (although some proper names were later changed for licensing reasons). Tolkien, in a sense, "provided the fuel" for the imagination of generations of players who wished to experience their own "fellowship" adventure.

Despite the aforementioned Tolkienian influences, it was only the emergence of dedicated RPG systems explicitly set in Arda that allowed fans to truly feel like a hero of Middle-earth. MERP, released in 1984, carried RPG mechanics into Tolkien's world under an official licence. As a result, players could create characters of various races and professions – Dúnedain, Elves, Dwarves, mages, Gondorians or Rohirrim – and traverse the lands known from the books, facing the perils of the Third Age. Significantly, Iron Crown Enterprises expanded its system with dozens of supplements and scenarios, broadening those areas of the Legendarium that had been only outlined by Tolkien. As Buchs observes (2004, 104), the MERP series consisted of "several dozen different game-scenarios," and many new characters, events, and places were incorporated into the games, adding information not present in the original so as to provide a basis for gameplay. These expansions, while non-canonical, were prepared with great care: maps, geographical and historical descriptions, and statistics of non-player characters (NPCs) were produced. However, the true creative continuation of the weaving of Arda's mythology occurred during the sessions: it was the players who, making use of these materials, entered the universe of Middle-earth, experiencing their own adventures there and fulfilling the need to "live in myth" beyond what the mere reading of the book could offer[52].

It is worth emphasising that the very participation in an RPG session constitutes an experience of deep imaginative immersion. Players, together with the game master (GM), describe the actions of their characters, improvise dialogues and make decisions as if they were really traversing the forests of Lothlórien or negotiating with Ents. In the course of

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[52] The MERP game system was not limited to the passive re-creation of known stories, but provided a framework for creative invention – fans devised their own scenarios and detailed campaigns, introducing new characters and locations into the "blank spots" of the map of Middle-earth. They also developed alternative stories and "what if…" narratives, maintaining in them the atmosphere of Tolkien's tales from the world of Arda.

a well-conducted campaign, the boundary between the real world and the created one becomes blurred, at least to a certain extent, in the minds of the participants – exactly as Tolkien wrote in the essay *On Fairy-Stories* about "immersing oneself" in a secondary world (2008, 63). RPGs can thus be regarded as a contemporary equivalent of Tolkien's "Faërian Drama", in which the viewer feels as if they were truly present in the depicted world[53]. In this case, it takes place both through the active narrative being created in real time and through the playing of the roles of characters from the universe of Arda. In this manner, Tolkien's fans fulfil their dream of becoming heroes of Middle-earth and experiencing their own epic adventures within it, while at the same time continuing to weave the myth of the world he created.

After the success of MERP, subsequent RPG systems set in Tolkien's universe began to appear. In the early 2000s, the company Decipher released *The Lord of the Rings Roleplaying Game* (2002), and in subsequent decades fans saw the emergence of *The One Ring Roleplaying Game* – first from Cubicle 7 (2011), and later from Free League Publishing (2022). Notably, *The One Ring* places an emphasis on fidelity to the spirit of Tolkien's work: the game's mechanics take into account, among other elements, the influence of the Shadow on the characters' morale[54] and the necessity of periodic rest in safe havens (the Shire, Rivendell). In this way, players not only embark on their own adventures, but also experience the existential tensions characteristic of the myth of Arda in its original literary form.

The above examples indicate that Tolkien-inspired RPGs continue to evolve in order to offer ever more immersive and authentic experiences of Middle-earth. The guiding idea remains unchanged: to allow fans, in their imagination, to "inhabit" the world of Arda and to become a hero of one of its mythic tales. After all, an RPG session – whether based on the MERP system or *The One Ring* – is a simulation of life in that mythic land, where the players themselves become its heroes. In this way, the story is carried over from the book into interactive forms, where the plot yields to rules and the players' decisions and dice rolls determine the course of events. However,

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[53] Makai (2022, 512) suggests identifying Tolkien's "Faërian Drama" – the spinning of a tale with the aim of immersively transporting the audience into a secondary world – with the possibilities offered today by virtual reality, especially video games. It appears, however, that the effect in question is the same psychological one that role-playing games as such are intended to produce.
[54] In the mechanics of *The One Ring*, the "influence of the Shadow" reflects moral and spiritual corruption, leading to the characters' psychological despondency, which can result in lasting, negative changes in their personalities.

despite changing game systems and mechanics, the aim remains the same: to enable fans to experience Arda as a living myth – one that is not only told, but also intensely lived.

The affective power of experiencing Tolkien's world is in this case amplified by immersive participation in an interactive narrative, in which fans collectively create the story and play roles within it. In this sense, an RPG session can be viewed as a contemporary, secular equivalent of ritual in Mircea Eliade's understanding: just as archaic man re-actualised mythic events in ritual, so too do players, through narrative and performative participation, ascend to the world of Arda and actualise its myth. Equally crucial here is the communal element, as well as the repeatability of the experience, which allow players to identify more intensely with the story they are experiencing and to interpret their own existence in light of mythic patterns. RPGs thus appear to be an appropriate medium for the realisation of the idea of an active cultural reception of the mythology of Arda, as a contemporary form of living myth.

2.2.3 Tolkien LARP – Inhabiting Middle-earth through Bodily and Communal Immersion

In contemporary fan culture, one of the most tangible forms of identification with the universe of Middle-earth is LARP set in Tolkien's world. This form is an extension of the idea of RPGs: it moves interactive narrative into the realm of bodily performativity, combining elements of role-playing games with improvised acting (Bishop 2015, 27–31). LARP participants not only describe the characters' actions in words, but literally embody characters from Tolkien's world: they act out their adventures with their own bodies, in costumes styled after the inhabitants of Middle-earth, often in scenery reminiscent of the forests, mountains or settlements of Arda. This form of gameplay allows one to experience the depicted world in a sensory manner – through movement, touch, and even taste or smell (for instance, by eating meals like Hobbits during shared feasts) – and at the same time to do so within a community of other fans, together constructing a living narrative set in Tolkien's mythology. As a result, participants can literally "be" in Middle-earth, experiencing it not only through imagination but also with their bodies and through social interaction.

It is worth noting that Tolkien LARP is a phenomenon with a long tradition in fan culture. Initially, the LARP subculture focused almost

exclusively on fantasy inspired by Tolkien (Bishop 2015, 30–31). As early as the 1970s, alongside the growth of the historical re-enactment movement in the style of the Society for Creative Anachronism, the first fan initiatives began to emerge in which enthusiasts of Tolkien's work took part in forms of play reminiscent of later LARPs. These activities included both battle re-enactments and the acting out of adventures inspired by *The Lord of the Rings* at conventions and fan meetings in the USA and the UK (Bishop 2015, 29–30). In subsequent decades, Scandinavia – developing a rich culture of live-action games and re-enactment – became one of the leading centres of immersive fantasy LARPs that drew inspiration from Tolkien's literature. As Stenros and Montola write (2010, 15–20), these games were characterised by a high level of participant engagement, often lasting several days and involving hundreds of players in outdoor scenarios that combined elements of theatre, performance art, and collective storytelling.

Bishop (2015, 30) observes that early fantasy fandom regarded Tolkien's world as a natural setting for LARPs, before the genre expanded to include science fiction, horror, or other conventions. To this day, many large LARP conventions and festivals in Europe remain of a strongly high-fantasy character – inspired, among other things, by Tolkien's Legendarium – as evidenced, for example, by annual fantasy fan gatherings like Elfia, or during thematic live-action games recreating the setting of Middle-earth (Bishop 2015, 30–31). In other words, Middle-earth remains one of the fundamental "worlds" into which fans transport themselves by means of LARP, thereby fulfilling, as it were, the dream of direct participation in events straight from Tolkien's mythology.

In the context of the considerations of this chapter, it is worth emphasising that participation in Tolkien LARP has a dimension not only of entertainment, but also, and perhaps above all, a profound affective and ritual-symbolic aspect. The communal immersion in a fictional reality causes players to strongly identify with their roles and experience the characters' emotions – from the euphoria of defeating a band of Orcs to the poignancy felt during the re-enactment of scenes of camaraderie or the farewell of the fellowship. As Stenros and Montola observe (2010, 17, 19), this type of game fosters the formation of intense bonds between participants, and the gameplay itself often takes on the form of a contemporary ritual. For example, the coronation ceremony of "King Elessar" at the end of the game, or the collective singing of Elvish songs by a campfire, can be experienced almost like authentic rites, imparting affective intensity and symbolic depth to the experience. Tolkien LARP

realises the entry of its participants into the mythical world of Arda in a manner reminiscent of the myth-based rituals of pre-modern peoples. In a similar vein, it consists of a dramatic, embodied re-enactment of myth that is intended to "switch" the participant's mode of experience to a feeling that it is indeed "happening" during the ritual.

In this way, the fans' performative play becomes for many something much more than just a game: a kind of quasi-ritual journey to Middle-earth, experienced here and now in the real world. Tolkien LARPs serve essentially the same purpose as classic RPGs – they enable fans to symbolically "inhabit" the world of Arda and to play the role of a hero in one of its mythic stories. Therefore, whereas classic Tolkien RPGs can indeed be regarded as a suitable medium for realising the idea of a living myth, the experience offered by LARP seems even more immersive and, in this sense, is a medium particularly well-suited to that purpose. For a LARP participant enters the reality of the myth not only with imagination or voice, but with all their senses and their entire body. The possibility of literally stepping into the skin of a Middle-earth hero and acting within Tolkien's universe thus gives fans a unique sense of authentically being part of Arda, of living its life, which is difficult to achieve by other means.

2.2.4 Computer Games: Digital Journeys through Middle-earth and the Phenomenon of the Avatar

Electronic media have opened up new possibilities for Tolkien fans to immerse themselves in his world – in the form of computer games, including those available on consoles and online. Unlike traditional role-playing games (RPGs), where everything takes place in the imagination and through verbal narration, digital games also provide a visual and auditory simulation of Middle-earth, and the player typically controls directly the actions of their avatar on the screen. This different form of interaction brings with it both certain limitations (such as less narrative freedom than in a classic RPG) and a unique immersive potential afforded by technology.

As mentioned above, as early as the 1980s a variety of video games set in Tolkien's world began to appear: from simple text-based adventure games, through strategy games and RPGs, to elaborate 3D games developed in the twenty-first century. It is worth examining some of these in more detail in terms of how they allow for an immersive experience of being transported

into the universe of Middle-earth. One of the first computer-based attempts to step into Tolkien's narrative was *The Hobbit* (1982), in which the player, as Bilbo Baggins, explored locations known from the book while solving text-based puzzles that appeared on the computer screen. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, interactive adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* were developed, allowing players to traverse Middle-earth on screen for the first time, albeit in a rather limited form[55].

A breakthrough in both quantity and quality occurred between 2000 and 2007 with the development of 3D graphics and the internet, and – as noted above – as a result of the popularity of Jackson's adaptations. In this way, players were presented with a series of games that enabled them to participate in battles and scenes from the cinematic version of Middle-earth. Among the most important of these were the spectacular action games *The Two Towers* (Stormfront Studios 2002) and *The Return of the King* (EA Redwood Shores 2003), in which players assumed the roles of Aragorn, Gandalf, Legolas, Gimli, Frodo or Sam, and fought against Orcs to the accompaniment of Howard Shore's music and with scenery and shots taken directly from the films. These games offered dynamic gameplay focused on faithfully recreating the most thrilling scenes from the films. Although they did not provide much freedom for world exploration and were designed according to a fixed storyline, they allowed players to experience key moments of Tolkien's stories from the perspective of their favourite Middle-earth characters – for example, the defence of Helm's Deep as Legolas or the battles at Minas Tirith as Gandalf.

The action and adventure games of this period were characterised by high-quality production values and cinematic dynamism, which greatly enhanced the feeling of genuine immersion in the world of Arda. The player was no longer merely a spectator, but became an active participant in the events: their dexterity and decisions determined whether the Orcs would break through the gate, or whether the Hobbit could be protected from a Nazgûl. This interactive control over the course of events is the essence of the gaming experience, which offered a semblance of actually "living" in Middle-earth.

Even further advances were made with the development of computer

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[55] It is worth noting a few titles in this context. Beam Software at that time developed a trilogy of text-based adventure games: *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Beam Software 1986), *Shadows of Mordor* (Beam Software 1987), and *The Crack of Doom* (Beam Software 1989), published by Addison-Wesley and Melbourne House, respectively. Interplay Productions, in turn, was responsible for a two-part RPG: *J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings, Vol. I* (Interplay Productions 1990) and *Vol. II: The Two Towers* (Interplay Productions 1992).

RPGs and MMORPGs set in the Tolkien universe. Here, the player creates themselves as a hero of Middle-earth, effectively inhabiting that fantasy world in the form of an avatar. It should be noted that the player's character within the game's version of Arda need not correspond to any specific figure from Tolkien's books. It could just as easily be one of the anonymous participants in the events described in the works of the Oxford professor. For example, in the console RPG *The Third Age* (EA Redwood Shores 2004), one controls a party of characters not known from the books, who journey alongside the Fellowship of the Ring, observing key moments of the war from the shadows[56]. Even greater freedom is offered by the aforementioned LOTRO – an MMORPG in which each player creates their own character, for instance a human ranger from Bree, an Elf from Lothlórien, a Hobbit burglar from the Shire or a Dwarven warrior from Ered Luin, and, assuming that role, sets out into the vast open world of Arda.

LOTRO geographically encompasses most of the well-known regions of Middle-earth – from the Shire, through Rivendell, Moria and Rohan, to Mordor – and is constantly expanding. Importantly, the game's narrative unfolds essentially in parallel with the events of *The Lord of the Rings*, but from the perspective of side characters. Players therefore do not take on the roles of Frodo or Aragorn, but they can encounter them in the game world and have an impact on plotlines not developed by Tolkien[57]. Through this approach, players gain the impression of having a real influence on the story world, while not disrupting Tolkien's original narrative. LOTRO is renowned for its meticulous attention to lore – many dialogues, descriptions, and quests refer to Tolkien's texts (Chapman 2022). For fans, it thus provides an apt platform for immersing themselves in Middle-earth so deeply that it creates the illusion of actually inhabiting that world. One can, for example, spend hours wandering through the Shire, visiting every known town and ruin, and then augment the experience by browsing dozens of entries explaining the context in the game's fan encyclopedia (Lotro-Wiki 2025).

Players describe LOTRO as an immersive game that offers a realistic experience of being in Middle-earth (Feed_Me_Moar_Humans n.d.). Importantly, it is also a social experience – thousands of players are present simultaneously in this space, able to form player guilds (kinships), embark

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[56] For example, the game allows one to fight alongside Legolas at Helm's Deep or assist Gandalf in Minas Tirith.

[57] Players can, for instance, defend the village of Archet from bandits, fight Sauron's minions on the outskirts of Gondor, and as part of the quest "Gandalf's Secret Recipe" it is possible to appear in Rivendell and meet Gandalf there.

on adventures together, and even organise virtual events[58]. In the Middle-earth thus created, players – as its inhabitants – re-enact the everyday life of Arda by interacting with one another[59], which sometimes leads to genuine friendships forming. All of this deepens the impression that Middle-earth is "alive" – not only in text, but as a "real space" that can be visited at any time.

The analysis of LOTRO prompts a broader reflection on the role of the avatar in computer games set in Middle-earth. In the case of Tolkien's literary works, the reader always observes the events from a certain distance. Even if one strongly identifies with the characters, one has no real influence on the course of the story. It is entirely different in video games, where the player is both the audience and the protagonist. The avatar here serves as a kind of bridge between the player and the depicted world: it is their "body" in Middle-earth. Regardless of whether this avatar is a specific character (for example, Aragorn, whom one controls in an action game) or a hero created exclusively within the game, the player experiences events as if they were happening to "them". Slaying a digital Orc with a mouse click offers a different kind of experience than reading about the heroes' victory in a book. Similarly, discovering a new place in the game (for instance, reaching the Chamber of Mazarbul in LOTRO) is accompanied by a unique experience: the player personally traverses the corridors of Moria, faces enemies, and finally reaches Balin's tomb. Moments like these can be emotionally moving for fans, as they have imagined them for years while reading, and, thanks to the game, can finally be "present there" themselves.

The above examples show that thanks to the player's digital representation and the element of interactivity in Tolkien-themed games, the reception of the Arda myth acquires a deeply personal and emotional dimension, thus becoming part of the fan's actual life. Of course, it remains a virtual simulation, but it gives the feeling of personally "ascending" into the universe of Middle-earth and being its hero. The key here is the psychological transfer of one's sense of "self" onto the digital avatar, the ability to explore the mythic space of Arda in this form, and also the potential to influence its course of events. Thanks to all of this, participation in Tolkien games

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[58] Such virtual events do in fact take place in the game and are popular, as exemplified by the famous Tolkien music concert "Weatherstock" on the summit of Amon Sûl, organised each year within the game (Lotro-Wiki, "Weatherstock," 2025).

[59] Through their presence in the virtual space, players fill Middle-earth with life – they talk to each other "in character", acting out scenes of everyday life in Bree or the Shire, for example tavern gatherings, trading at the market, celebrating local festivals, or organising small narrative events.

functionally resembles the ritual enactment of myth by a pre-modern person. Identification with the avatar character ensures affective engagement. In respective games, elements such as multisensory engagement, dramatisation, repetition, and the communal co-presence of experiences in the virtual Arda are likewise manifested to varying degrees.

What differentiates the situation of the pre-modern *homo mythicus* from that of the contemporary player is fundamentally a difference in worldview. The latter is aware of the illusory nature of what they are participating in. Nevertheless, even here a real element emerges. In the virtual Arda created in LOTRO, players, as inhabitants, engage in real interactions with one another, which sometimes become the foundation for close relationships in the real world. In this context, one can conclude that in Tolkien's games there occurs not only a quasi-ritual ascent to the mythic space of Arda, but also the bringing of that space into the real world, to the extent that this is possible.

In recent years, new computer games set in Middle-earth have continued to appear. An example of particular interest from the perspective of this monograph is the survival game *The Lord of the Rings: Return to Moria* (Free Range Games 2023), which allows players to assume the role of a party of Dwarves exploring the subterranean depths of Moria, extracting resources, and rebuilding the Dwarven kingdom of Khazad-dûm. Reviewers have noted that mechanically it resembles Minecraft, but set in Middle-earth. The gameplay involves exploring procedurally generated chambers of Moria, gathering resources and crafting items, all in the spirit of a Dwarven adventure (Gould-Wilson 2023). The popularity of its sandbox mode suggests that fans desire not only to recreate known scenes, but also to craft their own stories in Middle-earth through free-form gameplay. Modern games increasingly make this possible, providing players with Tolkien's fantasy world (even if only a fragment like Moria) with minimal constraints – a world that can be explored, built in, fought in, or simply inhabited for the sake of its environment.

2.2.5 *Minecraft* and Fan Megaprojects: Building Your Own Middle-earth

A particular case of the convergence between games and fan creativity is the phenomenon of Minecraft Middle-earth (MCME) and related initiatives (Minecraft Middle-earth 2025a). *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios 2011)

is a seemingly simple game based on placing cubic blocks in a procedurally generated world; however, its openness and sandbox nature have made it a platform for some of the most impressive creative projects in the history of games. In the context of Tolkien's work, *Minecraft* proved to be an ideal tool for fans who dreamed of literally building Middle-earth with their own hands (even if only virtual ones).

The aforementioned MCME is a project aimed at recreating the entirety of Middle-earth (primarily from the Third Age) within the game environment. In the context of the active cultural reception of the myth of Arda, it is undoubtedly one of the most ambitious virtual undertakings, requiring a systematically organised, long-term engagement from thousands of fans. It was initiated by a few enthusiasts in October 2010 (shortly after the release of the early versions of Minecraft) and quickly transformed into a dynamic online community. According to a statement by one of the team members, Shorvok, published on Reddit in the early days of the server's existence, MCME already had over 13,000 registered users on its so-called whitelist at that time – although, as he noted, not all of them were active builders (Shorvok n.d.). Thanks to their efforts, many key locations known from Tolkien's Legendarium were recreated in the game's virtual world, such as Minas Tirith with its distinctive rings of walls, Isengard with the tower of Orthanc, Rivendell, Lothlórien, the Shire with individually crafted Hobbit-holes, and the vast interiors of Moria. The project remains active to this day, and its world stretches over more than 870 square kilometres at Minecraft scale (Minecraft Middle-earth 2025a), impressing not only with its sheer scope but also with a meticulous attention to topographical and architectural detail. Significantly, any interested fan can join in the building effort. The community organises events during which dozens of people simultaneously construct landmarks, landscapes, caves, castles, cities, farms, or other structures from Tolkien's fantasy world (Minecraft Middle-earth 2025b), thus resembling a communal fan recreation of the mythological space of Arda in virtual reality.

The Minecraft Middle-earth project can be interpreted in two ways in the context of the present monograph. On the one hand, it is a product of fan passion, demonstrating how deeply one can enter the mythic world of Middle-earth through creative work. The MCME builders study Tolkien's maps and texts and discuss even the minutest details in order to faithfully recreate the universe of Arda within the game environment. The endeavour of these fan builders is therefore centred on painstaking accuracy in reproducing the original vision of Tolkien's literary myth.

On the other hand, the constructed world of MCME is available for anyone to explore, which enables all fans to log onto the server and feel like tourists in Middle-earth: to sail down the Anduin, climb Orodruin, or lose themselves in the labyrinth of Moria. The impression can be extraordinarily vivid: when entering Edoras, a player sees a panorama of mountain ranges around them, waves of steppe grass, and hears the sound of the wind (with the help of add-ons) – the immersion can rival that of professional games, even though Minecraft's graphics are stylised[60]. The fan reconstruction in Minecraft Middle-earth thus offers the chance to inhabit Arda on one's own terms, without any imposed storyline.

The MCME project has also given rise to related fan endeavours, such as ArdaCraft (2025a), which uses a modified version of *Minecraft* with more realistic textures in order to render the architecture and landscapes of Middle-earth even more faithfully. ArdaCraft focuses, among other things, on recreating Eriador in the Second Age (for example, the city of Ost-in-Edhil in Eregion) and on an exceptionally detailed reconstruction of the Shire (ArdaCraft 2025b; ArdaCraft 2025c). Both of the aforementioned projects exemplify how virtual space can serve as a venue for fan reconstructions of Middle-earth's literary universe, and their development spanning over a decade demonstrates the fandom's perseverance in building faithful adaptations of Tolkien's myth. By immersing themselves in his works, fans are in effect "translating" the world of myth woven in words into a space that can be explored by means of an avatar. The adaptations realised within MCME and ArdaCraft undoubtedly constitute a unique dimension of the active cultural reception of Tolkien's mythopoeic literature.

Survival mods represent another dimension of creativity. The most famous of these is the *Lord of the Rings Mod* for *Minecraft*, which introduces a new dimension to the game – Middle-earth, procedurally generated with corresponding biomes (e.g., the Shire, Mordor, Mirkwood)[61], together with non-player characters (NPCs), and a quest and faction system (LOTR Mod Wiki n.d.b). Players create a special portal to travel to Tolkien's world,

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[60] It would appear that the reason for its success lies in the scale and authenticity of the spatial arrangement: by traversing the vast expanses between cities, one begins to understand the geography of Middle-earth better than from a two-dimensional map.
[61] In *Minecraft*, a biome denotes a distinct type of environment, characterised by a specific climate, type of terrain, vegetation, colour scheme, as well as characteristic animals and structures. Biomes such as forests, deserts, tundras or swamps differ from one another not only in appearance but also in resources and survival conditions. In thematic modifications such as *The Lord of the Rings Mod*, biomes mirror the fantastical regions of Middle-earth (e.g., the Shire, Mordor or Lothlórien), providing unique exploratory experiences and gameplay mechanics in each case.

where – as in a classic survival game – they gather resources and build shelters, but also visit Hobbit villages, join factions (for instance, Elves of Lórien or Men of Gondor), and fight against hostile forces (LOTR Mod Wiki n.d.a). *The Lord of the Rings Mod* resembles a simplified version of LOTRO, but it is important to underscore the non-commercial nature of this project. It is a fan adaptation of Tolkien's myth that has been in development for years, maintained in Minecraft's distinctive aesthetic, and available free of charge. It blends creative elements with RPG gameplay, offering yet another way to live in Middle-earth – this time in a pixelated form.

All the above projects to recreate Middle-earth in *Minecraft* reveal another aspect of fan initiatives in the virtual world: the desire to play the role not only of a resident or hero, but also of a "demiurge." Fans literally become the builders of Tolkien's universe, and therefore it can be said that they engage in the sub-creation of the world of Arda in the strict sense of the term. In this way, they continue the weaving of Tolkien's myth, realising the author's original dream that the collection of legends and sketches he created would serve as a kind of mythological seed for creation, one that could later be continued and developed by "(...) other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama" (Tolkien 2023a, Letter 131, 204). In the context of the main focus of this chapter, fan adaptations in *Minecraft* can be described as a regular "ascension" to the world of Arda, artistic sub-creations of it, and bringing that myth down into the real world, for as a result of the work carried out, a space is created which anyone can visit *in concreto*.

2.2.6 Tolkien Games as the Realisation of the Strategy of Symbolic and Affective Identification with Arda

Looking at the forms of Tolkien fan activity presented in this subchapter – from traditional games, through computer RPGs and LARP, to virtual megaprojects – one can discern two complementary strategies that are intended to satisfy the desire to psychologically identify one's functioning in the world with the content of the mythic stories of Arda. The first and dominant is the symbolic and affective ascent in the imagination toward the universe of Middle-earth, which functionally corresponds to Eliade's descriptions of how pre-modern people re-actualised mythic events through rituals and religious festivals. According to the famous Romanian

scholar, the participants of those rites, after appropriate preparation, would symbolically and affectively transfer themselves from historical reality into sacred time, dramatically re-enacting the archetypal gestures of the gods or ancestors performed in *illo tempore* (Eliade 1959a, 34–36). In this way, they intensely experienced the content of the myth, becoming in their perception "contemporaries of the gods", living among them and experiencing their own existence through participation in the myth. Such a peak experience then had deep psychological consequences for everyday life.

Similarly, during gameplay, fans shift their entire attention from the real world to Tolkien's universe, symbolically and affectively becoming its "inhabitants" during that time. Various techniques intensify the feeling of transportation into the mythical reality of Arda. Within an RPG session, immersion and absorption in the world of myth occur thanks to participation in an interactive narrative, the communal weaving of a story in the universe of Arda, and the personal enactment of roles within it. In a Tolkien LARP, the sense of reality of "being in the myth" is further reinforced by its physical, quasi-theatrical form, transforming the experience into a quasi-ritual journey to Middle-earth, lived out in the real world. In computer games, the feeling of being transported into the space of Arda is fostered, among other factors, by the quality of the visualisation and the representation of Tolkien's universe, the sense of agency within it, and the player's psychological identification with the avatar; in the case of online games, it is also aided by the possibility of experiencing adventures communally in the environment of Middle-earth. In turn, fan projects such as MCME or ArdaCraft heighten the immersion of participants through a strong sense of being a sub-creator of the mythic world.

The second strategy works in the opposite direction by bringing elements of Arda into the real world. In the introductory part of this monograph, referring to Eliade, it was mentioned that archaic people inscribed their lives into universal mythic patterns, seeking connections between important events in their lives with the archetypal representations of grand myths. In essence, this was closely linked with the affectively intense (though short-lived) experiences of myth in rituals. In the context of contemporary interactive adaptations of the Arda myth, a similar connection can also be observed.

Above all, the communal character of the experiences derived from gameplay often translates into real-life interpersonal relationships. People who get to know each other during shared gameplay often form

friendships beyond it – they discuss on forums, meet at conventions or fan gatherings. For example, the LOTRO player community has for years organised meetups during Tolkien Days or fantasy events (Standing Stone Games 2025), and members of the MERP and *The One Ring* forums publish their own stories inspired by campaigns and comment on their experiences, creating living fan archives (MERP Fan Modules n.d.; The One Ring Forum n.d.). A shared passion for a Tolkien game is often the starting point of lasting friendships, and even relationships – in the MMORPG gaming community it is not hard to find stories of couples who met in Middle-earth (online) and then carried that bond into the real world (PhillyBurbs 2023). In this way, Tolkien's myth tangibly unites people, and virtual sub-creation gives shape to the fan community.

Another dimension of bringing the myth of Arda into the realm of real life is fan creativity, which has grown out of games. Tolkien gamers not only consume content, but often become its co-creators and authors of derivative works. A good example here is projects like Minecraft Middle-earth – the final result, a virtual Middle-earth, is something tangible that exists independently of any given gameplay. It can be explored and admired, and therefore it should be regarded as something "real", a new medium for the myth, which lives a life of its own. Similarly, RPG game masters often develop original scenarios set in Middle-earth, which then circulate among fans and are used by others[62]. All these works enrich the fan corpus of the Legendarium – in other words, Arda penetrates our world through fan works inspired by games. This also occurs through events organised in the real world but related to games, such as tournaments of *The Lord of the Rings Trading Card Game* in the 2000s (Player's Council n.d.), championships of *War of the Ring* (Ares Games n.d.), or cosplay contests accompanying RPG conventions (Wikipedia 2025b).

To sum up, despite the far-reaching diversity of interactive forms produced by the adaptations of Tolkien's myth, the main goal remains the same: to create a vehicle that enables fans to experience the mythology of Arda as a contemporary form of living myth. In the introductory part of this monograph, it was emphasised that originally, myth enabled the pre-modern *homo religiosus* to "live in myth", or to "live in the context of myth". The content of myths was thus something much more than just a story. For their audience, it became an intensely experienced, integral element of functioning in the real world. Within this framework,

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[62] In this way, fan-made supplements to MERP are created, including statistics for new monsters, fan-created maps and illustrations (MERP Fan Modules n.d.).

the mythic reality was periodically made present in rituals and everyday events were interpreted in terms of myth. Analogous mechanisms are also at work in the case of Tolkien games, although players obviously do not adopt the mythic reality as a worldview, as was the case with pre-modern *homo mythicus*.

Certainly similar in both cases is the aim to fill one's life with the content of the myth, which, in the context of Tolkien's mythology, has been metaphorically described here as "dwelling in Arda". It is precisely in Tolkien games that the fans' efforts to symbolically and affectively unite their lives with the reality created in the myth are most evident – above all through ascending to the mythic sphere of Arda, but also by bringing a fragment of that fantasy realm into real life. The first strategy, the dominant one, gives the immediate joy of fulfilling the dream of being a hero of a beloved story. The second makes Arda no longer just a fiction on paper, but a living fan culture: a network of relationships, works, memories and artefacts (physical or digital) that exist in reality. Ultimately, the two strategies of active cultural reception by fans permeate one another and synergistically reinforce each other, causing the Tolkien myth to intertwine with reality in an inseparable way, and Arda becomes, as it were, a "second home"[63].

On the following pages of this chapter, we will examine other forms of dwelling in Middle-earth by fans. We will see that although games constitute a powerful vehicle transporting them to Tolkien's universe, they by no means exhaust the ingenuity and engagement of the enthusiasts of his literature. All these fan activities spring from the same root: a deep need to unite one's life with the reality of Arda, both in the created space of the paradigmatic myth and in its numerous adaptations for functioning in reality. In this way, we will unveil fan engagement in the active cultural reception of Tolkien's mythopoeic work as a contemporary form of living mythology – a mythology that is not only told, but also lived.

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[63] This phenomenon is most clearly seen in the context of LARP games, in which both an ascension toward the mythic reality and its incorporation into the bodily experience of being in the world take place. A LARP allows one not only to imagine Middle-earth or enact it with words – but also to physically "inhabit" it, engaging the senses and the body in the process of sub-creation. In this sense, LARPs realise the affective identification with Arda in the most direct and total way: through communal rituals, performative acts of embodying characters, and the creation of a community narrative that extends beyond the boundaries of the game.

2.3 Tolkienology – Studying Arda as an Extension of an Immersive Engagement with Myth[64]

Tolkien's Arda encourages its fans to continually return to it in their imagination and to integrate its myth into their everyday lives. To this end, a variety of adaptive forms have emerged, thanks to which one can hear Middle-earth, see it, and, thanks to Tolkien-themed games, even feel oneself to be its hero. Interactive forms also allow, to a certain extent, for independent exploration of this fantasy universe, although for some enthusiasts this comes with a certain shortcoming. Those who wish to immerse themselves for longer and more deeply in that fantasy land in its original literary form can turn to Tolkienology, which is also a form of exploring it.

Can in-depth analysis of Tolkien's works and of the secondary world presented in them, as well as the systematisation and investigation of his Legendarium, constitute a fan-based form of psychological "dwelling in Arda"? Such activities certainly allow admirers of the Oxford professor's literature to spend more time with it and to understand it better. This subsection analyses the phenomenon of how the study of Arda – whether done amateurishly on discussion forums or in a more academic form – becomes a way to sustain immersion in Tolkien's mythology and to make it a constant element of one's reality, a contemporary form of "living in the context of myth". Importantly, this striving is evident in both the activities of fan enthusiasts and professional researchers, whose personal engagement often brings them closer to the fan community.

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[64] The term most commonly used in the context of studying the works of J. R. R. Tolkien is "Tolkien studies", whereas "Tolkienology" is a term created by fans of the Oxford professor's work to describe their own approach to studying the Legendarium. In this understanding, Tolkien studies is a recognised academic field encompassing philology, linguistics and literary criticism, whereas Tolkienology is less formal in character and concentrates primarily on studying Middle-earth from an in-world perspective. The present research, however, focuses on demonstrating the shared, fan-oriented elements in both academic research devoted to the author of *The Lord of the Rings* and the non-academic inquiries by enthusiasts of his work. For these reasons, the primary term used here is "Tolkienology" and it is not contrasted with "Tolkien Studies". Consequently, the term "Tolkienologist" in this monograph refers to any practitioner of this approach – whether an academic researcher or a non-academic enthusiast.

2.3.1 Fan Research as a Way of Deepening and Prolonging Immersion in Tolkien's Arda

Tolkien enthusiasts have for decades engaged in various grassroots research projects aimed at a better understanding and ordering of the rich world of Arda. As early as the 1960s, at the beginnings of organised Tolkien fandom, the first fanzines devoted to analyses of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* began to appear. The distinction of being first in this regard should probably go to *I Palantír*, published from 1960 by a group of Tolkien fans calling themselves The Fellowship of the Ring (Coker 2022, 526). From that point on, new Tolkien journals quickly began to emerge, and although some of them ceased to exist after a few years[65], the demand among fans for in-depth inquiries into the works of the Oxford professor kept increasing. Fans were no longer content with re-reading the books purely for their plot; rather, they craved information on the tiniest details of the Legendarium, which is best reflected in the words of Tolkien himself:

> Most people want more (and better) maps; some wish more for geological indications than place-names; many want more specimens of Elvish, with structural and grammatical sketches; others ask for metrics and prosodies, (…). Musicians want tunes and musical notations. Archaeologists enquire about ceramics, metallurgy, tools and architecture. Botanists desire more accurate descriptions of the *mallorn*, of *elanor*, *niphredil*, *alfirin* and *mallos*, and of *symbelmynë*. Historians require more details about the social and political structure of Gondor, and the contemporary monetary system; and the generally inquisitive wish to be told more about Drúadan, the Wainriders, the Dead Men, Harad, Khand, Dwarvish origins, the Beornings, and especially the missing two wizards (out of five).[66]

With the publication of *The Silmarillion* in 1977, *Unfinished Tales* (1980) and finally the successive volumes of *The History of Middle-earth* (1983–1996), the material for research expanded significantly.

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[65] Such a fate befell, for instance, the aforementioned *I Palantír* (Coker 2022, 526).

[66] The quotation is based on the transcription provided by Pieter Collier on the Tolkien Library, where photographs of the letter itself are also available (Collier 2014). A somewhat different version is given in the collection of Tolkien's letters edited by Carpenter (Tolkien 2023a, letter 187, 356–357), but the meaning of the statement is the same – Tolkien notes the fans' interest in the details of the secondary world he created.

Increasingly, Arda came to be treated not only as a literary world, but even as a quasi-historical reality that could be studied with methods similar to those of the humanities (Burdge and Burke 2007a, 194–195). Fans created chronologies of events, genealogical trees of Elven and Human lineages, lexical and grammatical studies of Tolkien's languages, and even investigated the geographical consistency of Middle-earth's maps. All these endeavours sprang from a desire to systematise and complete Tolkien's vision, so that the world of Arda would become even more complete and tangible, and would speak to the imagination like reality – and thus it would be possible to "inhabit" it more fully, just as we do the real world.

In the 1970s and 1980s, fan-run Tolkien journals with a scholarly bent developed. In the United States, in 1969 Glen GoodKnight founded *Mythlore* as a periodical of the Mythopoeic Society, which initially had the character of a fanzine but in 1999 transformed into a peer-reviewed academic journal focusing on Tolkien, C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams (Mythopoeic Society n.d.a). In Great Britain, from 1970 onward, the Tolkien Society published *Mallorn*, which over time became a refereed scholarly journal, publishing articles concerning Tolkien and his work (The Tolkien Society n.d.a).

Tolkien fandom also saw linguistic initiatives focusing on the languages created by the Oxford professor. As early as 1971 the Mythopoeic Linguistic Fellowship (MLF) was established within the Mythopoeic Society (Hostetter 2007, 4), bringing together enthusiasts of Arda's languages. Within the British Tolkien Society there was also a Linguistic Fellowship, which from 1980 published the bulletin *Quettar* (Hostetter 2007, 9). In 1988 the Elvish Linguistic Fellowship (ELF) was founded as the successor to the MLF (Hostetter 2007, 13). The periodicals issued by the aforementioned organisations, such as *Parma Eldalamberon* and *Vinyar Tengwar*, contained transcriptions and analyses of Tolkien's linguistic notes as well as grammatical studies produced by fan-linguists (Elvish Linguistic Fellowship n.d.). Thanks to these, many readers learned the basics of Quenya or Sindarin, thereby gaining the opportunity to enter more deeply into the world of Tolkien's Arda.

With the development of the internet, fans created extensive online linguistic resources, such as Ardalambion (by Helge Fauskanger) and the Elvish.org site run by ELF, which provide dictionaries and pronunciation guides for the Elvish languages (Fauskanger n.d.; Elvish Linguistic Fellowship n.d.). It should be emphasised that such initiatives allow enthusiasts not only to admire Tolkien's prowess as a philologist, but also

to "experience the culture of Middle-earth" – for example, by reading Elvish poems in the original or practising calligraphy in Tengwar. This undoubtedly strengthens the sense of immersion in the Tolkienian universe as if it were in the real world, while also bringing closer the possibility of "living in the context of the myth of Arda".

Another important domain of fan Tolkienology has been the cartography and geography of Middle-earth. Fans meticulously analyse the topographical descriptions from all the works in order to reconstruct coherent maps of Arda. A classic example is *The Atlas of Middle-earth* by Karen Wynn Fonstad (1991), which contains dozens of maps and diagrams illustrating the journeys of characters and the geographical changes over the ages of the Legendarium. Although Fonstad was a cartographer by training, her work was a fan endeavour – it formed a bridge between professional analysis and a passion for Middle-earth[67]. In the wake of this work, many enthusiasts create their own maps (including in digital, interactive form), cataloguing every road, river or mountain range mentioned by Tolkien (Ring n.d.). Similarly, "anthropologists of Arda" strive to describe the cultures and customs of the fantasy races; genealogists compile family trees of Elves, Humans, Hobbits, or Dwarves, and fan-historians draw up detailed chronicles of the successive ages of the fantasy world[68]. In this way, fans in a sense assume the role of sub-creators of the myth, systematising and elaborating that which the author left not fully explained. As one Polish fan vividly put it, Tolkien left his world "in many places covered in mist, pocked with holes, with more than one path barely sketched out" (Ring n.d.), which became an opportunity for fan-researchers to fill in the picture of Middle-earth – perfecting its languages, drawing maps, cataloguing knowledge – in order to make Arda their "second home".

The breakthrough in fan Tolkienology was, of course, the era of the internet. In the 1990s and 2000s, dozens of discussion forums and encyclopedic websites created by the fan community sprang up. These enabled rapid sharing of discoveries and theories, as well as collaborative development of vast knowledge bases about the Legendarium. One of the most important undertakings is *Tolkien Gateway* – an online encyclopedia launched in 2003 by fans from around the world, which currently

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[67] In the introduction to the work mentioned in the main text, Fonstad explicitly admits to the fan motivation for creating the maps of Middle-earth (1991, IX).

[68] Evidence supporting the above statement is provided by the fact that in popular online fan encyclopedias, such as those discussed in the next paragraph, one can find detailed treatments concerning the anthropology, genealogy, historiography, and other aspects of Arda mentioned here.

contains over ten thousand entries on characters, places, and concepts from Tolkien's world (Tolkien Gateway, "Tolkien Gateway," n.d.). A similar role is played by other encyclopedias, among which it is worth mentioning *The Lord of the Rings Wiki*, *The Encyclopedia of Arda*, and *The Council of Elrond* (The Lord of the Rings Wiki n.d.; Encyclopedia of Arda n.d.; Council of Elrond, "Encyclopedia," n.d.)[69]. Importantly, the editors of these sites often carry out research comparable to that of academics: they refer to footnotes and Tolkien's letters, analyse unpublished manuscripts (as soon as these become available), and consult one another on their findings.

The compendia created in this way serve the entire community. Any fan can quickly find an answer to detailed questions (e.g. about the birthdate of a certain character or the etymology of a geographic name from Tolkien's world) instead of having to search through the sources on their own each time. As a result, the shared knowledge bases function as fan archives of the mythology of Arda, keeping the fictional world constantly accessible and close at hand. It can be said that the internet has enabled fans to realise the dream of almost unlimited access to Middle-earth – there is always something new to discover in yet another Tolkien encyclopedia, on blogs or YouTube channels, which once again immerses fans in the world of Arda. In this way, one can traverse that universe incessantly by means of various media, and almost never "leave" it in real life. Thanks to this, for many fans Arda becomes a kind of "homeland", a place to which they feel they belong, almost a second home. From there it is only a short step to realising what was called in the introductory part of this monograph "living in myth" or "living in the context of myth".

The aforementioned YouTube channels and social media represent the latest chapter of fan Tolkienology. Popular YouTubers such as Nerd of the Rings (n.d.), Men of the West (n.d.), and Tolkien Lore (n.d.) create hour-long video essays and series of films delving into specific themes or aspects of the Legendarium[70]. Although the format is popular rather than academic, their research work – compiling information from the books, appendices, and letters – reflects the same imperative: to understand and feel Middle-earth more deeply, in a sense "more real." Podcasts too, for example *The Prancing Pony Podcast* (n.d.) or the Polish *Pod Zielonym Smokiem*

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[69] It is worth noting that only the largest English-language fan-created online Tolkien encyclopedias are mentioned here. These are, however, merely examples among dozens or even hundreds of other such internet compendia created by fans in many different languages.

[70] Examples of this type of material were cited in the previous chapter.

(n.d.), offer hours-long discussions on the works of the Oxford professor, combining erudition with the enthusiasm of a fan. Such grassroots activity ensures that Tolkien's myth remains alive in everyday discourse – fans continuously reinterpret it, pose new questions, and formulate hypotheses. This can be compared to a never-ending communal reading – the fandom as a whole is constantly "reading" and processing the Legendarium, thereby extending their contact with the beloved world.

The motivation behind fan Tolkien research is clear: to extend and deepen immersion in the reality of Arda, thereby making it an integral part of one's real life. Every article in a fanzine, every forum post analysing, for example, the riddle of Tom Bombadil's identity, stems (at least in part) from the desire to continue "dwelling" in the world of the story – even if this takes place in an analytical mode rather than a purely narrative one. As mentioned in the previous subsection, after closing the book fans feel a sense of dissatisfaction, hence the need to delve deeper: for instance, to investigate the history of the Second Age, trace the family lineage of the Tooks, or establish details of the Shire's calendar. What from the point of view of an outside observer may look like escapism or pedantic curiosity is, for the committed Tolkien enthusiast, a form of emotional investment. By examining the details of the Legendarium, fans are in a sense domesticating the world of Arda, making it closer and more real for themselves. Here, the reception of the literary myth becomes its sub-creation. Tolkien wrote in one of his letters that in creating his mythology he deliberately left many parts of it undescribed – as if "to be filled in" by the minds of readers (Tolkien 2023a, letter 131, 203–204) – and indeed, successive generations of readers have taken up that challenge. Both through fan creativity and through diligent research, the fandom continues the creation of Arda, filling in the blanks with its own inventiveness and knowledge. In this way, Tolkien's mythology becomes a space co-created and co-experienced, enabling fans, to some extent, to realise a contemporary form of "living in myth" – experiencing their existence in the context of the myth of Arda.

It should also be noted in passing that many fans attain a level of expertise comparable to that of professional researchers, and their work is sometimes valued even in academic circles. *Mythlore* and *Mallorn*, Tolkien fanzines mentioned above, have over the years taken on a scholarly character. In Poland, meanwhile, since 2004 an almanac called *Aiglos* has been published (by the Silesian Speculative Fiction Club), featuring interpretative essays, translations of Tolkien's texts,

and reviews – written by both amateurs and academics (Morawski 2007, 535; Tolkien Gateway, "Aiglos (journal)," n.d.). It is also worth noting a publication like *The People's Guide to J.R.R. Tolkien* (Challis 2003), which contains essays and articles by Tolkien fans associated with the portal TheOneRing.Net, published under the authors' online pseudonyms. This collective work by fans is prefaced by an introduction by Tom Shippey, thus demonstrating the convergence of the paths of amateur and professional Tolkien researchers.

The above examples show that many fan-led research initiatives become professionalised over time, and conversely, some professional Tolkien scholars emerge directly from the fan community. For instance, one can point to active members of the fan movement who are also known for producing professional translations of Tolkien's texts – such as Agnieszka Sylwanowicz (Evermind HS Took) and Ryszard Derdziński (Galadhorn)[71]. Such cases demonstrate that fan passion can translate into a tangible contribution to the professional study of Tolkien's Legendarium. The line between fandom and academia blurs here: amateurs become experts, and their work becomes part of the broader body of research on Tolkien. This synergy is not coincidental – it stems from the fact that at the root of both kinds of activity often lies the same profound love for Tolkien's world.

2.3.2 Academic Tolkienology: Fan-Immersive Scholarship in Tolkien's World

The phenomenon of the Tolkien fandom is so powerful that it has also permeated the academic sphere. It is worth emphasising that many

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[71] Agnieszka Sylwanowicz, known in the fan community as Evermind HS Took, is a co-founder and editor of *Aiglos*, a Polish Tolkien almanac published since 2004. As a translator, she has rendered into Polish, among other works, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* and *The Children of Húrin* (Tolkien Gateway, "Agnieszka Sylwanowicz," n.d.; Wikipedia 2024a). Ryszard Derdziński (Galadhorn) has been actively involved in the Polish Tolkien fandom since the 1990s as editor of the magazines *Simbelmynë* and *Gwaihir*. He is also co-editor of the portal Elendilion.pl and a researcher of J. R. R. Tolkien's genealogy. As a translator, he has rendered into Polish, among other texts, *The Nature of Middle-earth* as well as *The Lost Road and Other Writings* (Tolkien Gateway, "Ryszard Derdziński," n.d.; Wikipedia 2024b). Both have also been for many years associated with the Tolkien Section of the Silesian Speculative Fiction Club, which attests to their engagement in the Polish fan movement (Parmadili.pl, "O sekcji," n.d.).

professional scholars of Tolkien's oeuvre began their journey as enthralled readers, and to this day they are driven by a personal passion comparable to that of fans. While formally academic Tolkien scholarship differs methodologically from amateur inquiries (employing literary theory, historical methodology, and other scholarly tools), the researchers' emotional relationship to their subject of study is often no less important. Not infrequently, academic works on the Legendarium arise from an author's inner need to understand the beloved fantasy world more deeply or to defend the value of Tolkien's work against unwarranted criticism. This affective motivation brings academics closer to fans: in both cases, Tolkien's mythopoeic vision of Middle-earth becomes something vital to them, a realm they wish to engage with unceasingly[72].

Leading Tolkien scholars often speak openly about their personal engagement with the world of Arda. For example, Patrick Curry, in *Defending Middle-earth: Tolkien, Myth and Modernity*, does not hesitate to mention that his first encounter with *The Lord of the Rings* at the age of sixteen was an almost revelatory experience:

> I first read *The Lord of the Rings* at the age of sixteen (…).
> I was overcome from the beginning by the unmistakable sense
> of having encountered a world that was more real than the one
> I was then living in, or the reality of which was much more
> concentrated. Accompanying this feeling was the equally odd one
> of inexplicable familiarity with that world. And finally, there was
> a definite sense of loss when I had finished, which, combined with
> delight and curiosity, impelled me immediately to recommence
> reading it. None of this was a unique experience on my part;

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[72] A telling indication here may be the opinion of Dirk Vanderbeke (2011), cited in footnote 10, according to which Tolkien studies are dominated by Tolkien enthusiasts who, in their scholarly work, assume the role of apologists. Although this view is overly far-reaching – after all, in his article he provides examples of academic works that are distinctly critical of Tolkien – nevertheless his observation indirectly confirms the legitimacy of regarding professional, academic Tolkien scholarship as often motivated by desires akin to fan-like immersion in Tolkien's world. It is also worth noting that such a stance should not be considered academically dubious, since it does not imply any lack of rigour in scholarly literary research. There is nothing objectionable in being fond of something to which one devotes a great deal of time as part of one's academic profession. An affective motivation on the part of professional academics to explore Middle-earth does not preclude their analytical inquisitiveness or their scholarly rigour, nor does it hinder their ability to notice any shortcomings or imperfections in Tolkien's writing.

to a greater or lesser degree, *The Lord of the Rings* has affected
many readers in just these ways, and they deserve some attempt
at understanding. (1997, 126–127)

Throughout Curry's book, one can clearly sense a tone of personal
engagement, which, combined with the quoted passage, suggests that it
was written not merely out of a need to defend Tolkien from critics'
charges. It is also a defence of an intimate inner experience that proved
significant enough to demand articulation not only in literary terms but in
metaphysical ones. This personal confession thus indicates that Curry
draws from Tolkien's work not only material for analysis but also spiritual
inspiration – much like many ordinary fans, who find in Middle-earth
the reality of an "exemplary story" (in Eliade's sense), and desire
to "dwell" in it affectively even in their daily lives.

Verlyn Flieger, one of the foremost scholars of Tolkien's
mythopoiesis, likewise openly acknowledges her personal connection
to his work. In an interview for the podcast *Pod Zielonym Smokiem*
(2025, 7:00–9:10), she recalls her first reading of *The Lord of the Rings*
by saying "it was such a joy to read." This was before the publication
of the first American edition of the novel; at the time she was working
at the Folger Shakespeare Library, and a copy of the book reached
her through a British colleague who brought over a freshly published
three-volume edition from England. Years later, Flieger began to read
Tolkien anew, this time to her children – and this renewed encounter with
The Lord of the Rings became an important impetus for the development
of her academic career. When, in the early 1970s at the University
of Maryland, she proposed a course devoted to fantasy literature,
it was "just an excuse to be able to teach *The Lord of the Rings*," as she
admits (History Bites 2021, 4:28–5:01).

Most moving, however, are her remarks about the emotional impact
of the book – especially about one passage that never fails to move her,
even after many years. It is the moment when Frodo explains to Sam
that he can no longer remain in Middle-earth. Speaking of this, Flieger
adds, with tears in her eyes: "(...) we all sooner or later lose what we love
just in the course of time" (Pod Zielonym Smokiem 2025, 10:20–10:35).
In another interview, she admits that Frodo is her favourite character because
he moves her so deeply and is "the heart of the story" (History Bites 2021,
8:37–9:23). These candid admissions leave no doubt that her long-standing
academic activity was not only the fulfilment of intellectual interests,

but also the result of a desire to prolong and deepen that enchantment which reading Tolkien's works had given her – that imaginative transport into the world of Arda.

Nick Groom also writes about his personal connection to Tolkien's work, emphasising that his fascination began in youth and was deeply emotional. He recalls that as a teenager he was enchanted by Middle-earth, and his parents supported this passion by taking him to conventions and LARP events. As he himself writes:

> My parents, Elisabeth and Michael, were very understanding when their young teenage son suddenly became captivated by Tolkien's work, and they spent countless hours taking me to gaming events and what are now called LARPs (...); they also bought me many books by and about Tolkien, which I still treasure. (Groom 2022, XIII)

Groom still remembers the people with whom he discovered Middle-earth, and these memories, he notes, were rekindled during the writing of his monograph *Twenty-First Century Tolkien*.

Similar declarations can be found among other Tolkien scholars. Bradley J. Birzer, author of the monograph *J.R.R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth*, recalls that as a young boy he loved Tolkien and prayed for him every night before bed, and that the characters of Tolkien's books became for him life models of a noble, Christian ideal (Birzer 2002, xv). Dimitra Fimi, from a younger generation of researchers, relates that her first encounter with *The Lord of the Rings* was a true revelation: "You just open the book, you start reading it and you fall inside it… it was a revelation. It was something I'd never seen anything like this before" (The Tolkien Experience Podcast 2020, 6:56–7:38). Ultimately, this and subsequent readings set her on the path towards an academic career devoted to Tolkien's works (8:27–9:00). Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull likewise acknowledge that reading Tolkien's works had a life-changing significance for them: it influenced their reading interests, career choices, membership in Tolkien communities, and even, in a certain sense, resulted in their marriage (Deutsche Tolkien Gesellschaft 2020, 41:36–42:33).

These statements bring to light an important fact: academic Tolkien scholarship has, to a significant extent, grown out of a fan's love for Middle-earth. Of course, professional researchers uphold scholarly standards and maintain critical distance; however, at the foundation of their work there often lies a deep personal fascination with Tolkien's mythopoeic vision.

These scholars immerse themselves in the world of Arda much like fans – except that they do so through academic rigour, textual analysis, comparative research and historical linguistics. As a result, their scholarly works often serve an inspiring role for the fandom: they provide new interpretations and discoveries that subsequent fans can absorb, discuss, and use to experience the story in an even deeper way.

The dialogue between fandom and academia is particularly lively in Tolkien's case. One need only look at Tolkien conferences and symposia – for example, the annual Mythcon organised by the Mythopoeic Society or the Tolkien Society's Oxonmoot – where professors and amateurs sit at the same table, united by their shared fascination with Middle-earth. Professional speakers often address audiences composed mainly of fans, sharing their research findings in an accessible way (The Tolkien Society n.d.c; Mythopoeic Society n.d.b). There are also publications featuring articles by both academics and fan researchers, examples of which were cited above. This permeability of boundaries demonstrates that, in the case of Tolkien, the traditional division into "dispassionate scholars" and "emotional fans" does not quite hold true – many scholars are fans, and many fans are scholars.

2.3.3 Tolkienology as a Way of "Dwelling in Middle-earth"

Tolkienology, in both its fan and academic incarnations, may be regarded, in the affective sense, as a form of fulfilling the fan ideal of "dwelling in Middle-earth". Through various research activities, such as textual analysis, the creation of maps and chronicles, or linguistic studies of Elvish dialects, admirers of Tolkien's work prolong their contact with the beloved universe over time. Yet something more is happening in the process: analytical reflection on the works of the Oxford professor organises and completes his vision, making the world of Arda even more complete and tangible, so that it can speak to the imagination almost as vividly as reality. In this way, the Tolkienologists' reflection deepens their own immersion in the world of Arda, while at the same time enabling other members of the fan community to do so as well.

In this way, the reality of the myth becomes "alive", "real", and one can "dwell" in it in one's imagination just as we do in the real world. Arda has, among other things, its own languages, history, culture, metaphysics, geography, botany, and architecture, and all of these can also be made the subject of systematic study. From this perspective, for both scholars

and fan researchers, Tolkien's world thus becomes a particular kind of "second home" – a place to which they return regularly, whether in their professional life or as a hobby, yet always accompanied by a unique sense of being in contact with something essential and extraordinary. Thus, Tolkienologists – regarded here as fans – share a certain community of emotional experiences that bind them to Arda as a symbolic "spiritual homeland".

In Tolkienology one is dealing, in a sense, with an imaginative ascent to mythical Middle-earth. Admittedly, it is difficult to compare this with secular quasi-rituals, as was done, for instance, in the case of interactive adaptations of Tolkien's mythopoeic work. Here, there is neither any dramatic re-enactment of the myth content, nor any symbolic-affective identification with a mythic archetype, nor the use of special techniques to intensify the experience of immersion in the reality of Middle-earth. Simply put, Tolkienology does not aim to produce any sort of peak experience in which fan-researchers would feel transported into the universe of Arda. That "transportation" occurs here only through a deep reading of Tolkien's mythopoeic texts. If one were to seek an analogy with the pre-modern world, Tolkienologists could, in a certain sense, be described as the mythographers of Middle-earth. Just as ancient scholars devoted considerable effort to rationally compiling traditional myths, so Tolkienologists work to develop the mythology of Arda intellectually and to make it more comprehensible. The rational element here serves not only scholarly purposes, but also the strengthening and prolonging of the immersion of those conducting such inquiries into Tolkien's work, as well as that of other fans.

Research work on the mythical Middle-earth does not here entail abandoning the rationality of the world of everyday existence. Thanks to the efforts of Tolkienologists, scholarly publications, periodicals, Tolkien encyclopedias, and research centres devoted to exploring the works of the Oxford professor have been established; academic conferences are organised; cultural texts are translated into Elvish languages – all of these are examples of initiatives expanding the presence of Middle-earth myth in contemporary culture. Through these activities, the real lives of Tolkien enthusiasts (including the researchers of his work themselves) can in various ways be filled by contact with the fantasy world he created. The activity of the Tolkienologists who seek to fill their lives by communing with the universe of Arda thus consists primarily in transferring elements of its myth into reality. Both strategies of integrating a fascination with Middle-earth into real-world life are present here, but the dominant one – contrary to the case of games – is "bringing Arda to Earth".

In this context, one should also note the creative element of Tolkienologists' work. Enthusiasts of the Oxford professor's literature, regardless of their degree of "professionalisation", through their research take part in the contemporary development of the mythology of Arda. For many of them, studying and interpreting the world created by Tolkien is also a way of life that allows for deeper rooting in the mythological universe, translating literary fiction into a real symbolic experience. The entirety of this process can thus be viewed as a contemporary realisation of the desire for myth, which remains alive and continues to develop thanks to the constant engagement of successive generations of readers and interpreters.

The next subsection will undertake a closer analysis of specific examples of fan theories that not only interpret, but also actively continue Tolkien's stories. The investigation will focus on how certain elements of Middle-earth mythology, not sufficiently explained by its creator, become a pretext for dynamic debates and creative speculations, in which fans continue the weaving of that myth, thereby activating its immersive potential and reinforcing its status as a living myth.

2.4 Fan Theories and Debates as Weaving Tolkien's Myth and Striving to "Dwell in Arda"

Tolkien devoted essentially his entire adult life to creating the Legendarium of Arda, but similarly to traditional myths, this is an open collection of stories, inviting further weaving[73], and, as emphasised in the present work, fans have undertaken this task in many ways. There are, however, topics within the Oxford professor's oeuvre that interest his enthusiasts to such an extent that they have become, so to speak, traditional avenues of fan inquiry, speculation, or even sub-creation. In this way, numerous hypotheses and theories concerning Tolkien's universe have arisen, which can be regarded as a collection of additional texts accompanying the Legendarium of Arda. Fan speculations broaden the intellectual reality of Tolkien's myths, or develop their various alternative versions. Essentially, then, they are part of Tolkienology, yet at times they also

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[73] This is a reference to the previously cited letter to Milton Waldman, a fragment of which also serves as the motto for this monograph. In it, Tolkien writes that he intended some of the great tales to be presented in full, while others were left merely sketched and placed within the broader outline, thus leaving room for others to continue his work (Tolkien 2023a, letter 131, 203–204).

venture speculatively beyond its domain, leaning towards the narrative development of the universe of Arda.

2.4.1 Universal Existential Themes in Fan Speculation on Tolkien's Works

Among the favourite topics of fans' inquiries and speculations are universal issues that pertain to the most pressing dilemmas of human existence, such as the nature and origin of evil, the problem of free will and fate, and the question of death and the possibility of an afterlife. These themes are frequently analysed not only in fan commentaries but also in academic works.

An example of a fandom discussion on the first of the aforementioned topics is the extensive thread "The Nature of Evil in Middle-earth," initiated by the user Radaghast in 2024. In it, various manifestations of evil are compared in the context of Sauron and Morgoth. The discussion considers the metaphysical nature of evil in terms of order, law, and the privation of good, in accordance with the Catholic scholastic tradition (Radaghast 2024). In a popular essay by Ryan Petrie, "The Nature of Evil: Evil in *The Lord of the Rings*" (2018), evil is likewise examined through a comparison of the characters of Sauron and Morgoth. Here, however, Tolkien's depiction of evil is also related to the real world, especially in a historical context. The author points out that the evil in Tolkien's work is complex, seductive, and capable of corrupting even those of noble intentions. Its shapeless nature, visible through the actions of servants and institutions, makes it disturbingly relevant to the contemporary world. This theme is also reflected in academic research. Tom Shippey (1992, 128–133), analysing Tolkien's texts in the context of philosophical and Christian tradition, reconstructs the debate on the nature of evil, pointing to the convergence of Tolkien's thought with the Boethian tradition, in which evil is understood as a lack of good rather than an equal opposing force.

No less lively is the debate over the tension between free will and destiny. The "Fate and Free Will" thread on *The Hall of Fire* forum (2011) takes up the topic of the relationship between free will and fate in Tolkien's Legendarium, drawing, among other sources, on the Boethian concept and Verlyn Flieger's interpretations regarding the role of Ilúvatar and the Gift of Men. On the Polish discussion site *forum.tolkien.com. pl*, the subject of destiny, free will, and Ilúvatar's providence has been

the object of detailed, years-long discussions, exemplified by extensive threads such as "Przeznaczenie w Śródziemiu" ["Destiny in Middle-earth"] (Mimoleusz 2003), "Przeznaczenie Atanich" ["Destiny of the Atani"] (M.L. 2004) and "Iluvatar/Opatrzność we *Władcy Pierścieni*" ["Ilúvatar/ Providence in *The Lord of the Rings*"] (M.L. 2023). Participants in these debates do not limit themselves to quoting *The Silmarillion* or Tolkien's *Letters*, but engage in in-depth exegesis of passages – for example, comparing different translations, analysing nuances of the original, and also referring to texts from *The History of Middle-earth* along with Christopher Tolkien's commentaries. Notably, interpretations on the Polish fan forum often enter into dialogue with academic analyses (for instance, the motif of "splintered light" in Flieger's work), while at the same time developing their own original positions.

The issue of death and immortality is one of the most important themes in Tolkien's literary work, as he himself asserted (Tolkien 2023a, letter 186, 353). It is therefore no surprise that his readers are passionate about contemplating this issue as well. In his mythology, Elves are immortal, and their souls (*fëar*) remain bound to Arda even after the death of the body (*hröa*). They then go to the Halls of Mandos, where they can be re-embodied. Humans, endowed with the Gift of Ilúvatar, leave the world after death, venturing into the unknown – which arouses both fear and hope. Fans often explore these motifs in their speculations, analysing the differences between the fate of Elves and that of Men, as well as the consequences of choices made by characters such as Arwen, who renounced immortality for love of Aragorn[74]. These issues also continually resurface in the works of prominent Tolkien scholars, the best example being the collection *Death and Immortality in Middle-earth*, edited by Daniel Helen (2017), which gathers the presentations from a Tolkien Society seminar in 2016.

All these discussions show that the Tolkienian myth, by touching on universal problems of human existence, profoundly resonates

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[74] Enthusiastic fan discussions on these topics can be found in many places online. One example from Reddit is the thread "What happened to men and elves souls after they died?" (Nikipootwo n.d.). A similar example from the question-and-answer platform Quora is the discussion "What happens to humans who die in Lord of the Rings?" (Adams n.d.). The issue of death and what comes after it extends also to other beings inhabiting Arda, as demonstrated by the Science Fiction & Fantasy Stack Exchange thread "What happens to spirits/souls of other creatures than Elves and Men after their death?" (Stack Exchange, "What Happens to Spirits/Souls…," n.d.). However, the most extensive speculations and exchanges of views can be found on numerous Tolkien fan forums, exemplified by the thread "What happens to mortals when they die?" on *The Tolkien Forum* (Mimzy 2011).

with readers and provokes them to share their reflections in the form of online discussions and inquiries published as scholarly texts. In the course of this public discourse, the questions and issues posed by the Oxford professor in the form of mythopoeic stories are developed and deepened, leading to philosophical and at times even contemplative meditation on the essence of being in the world. This phenomenon should be regarded as an example of the culturally active reception of the source myth, and as evidence that it is not only told, but genuinely lived.

2.4.2 Ardological Issues in Fan Debates and Speculations

In addition to themes of a universal, existential nature, the subject of fan interest and sub-creation also encompasses more detailed, indeed ardological issues. These are questions that have significance only from the perspective of the world of Arda itself, which is treated by fans almost as a lived reality[75]. Among them one can list, for example, the problem of Tom Bombadil's identity, the issue of the nature of Orcs (including their ability to reproduce), or the question of whether Ents and Arda's animals endowed with the gift of speech possess souls (fëar). The fan elaboration of these topics should be regarded as a specific way of continuing Tolkien's myth, an expression of the desire to "inhabit

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[75] In this monograph, the term "ardology" and its derivatives (such as "ardological," "ardologist") are used following Krzysztof K. Maj, who explains that ardological analyses focus primarily on the world of Arda itself, rather than on the narratives set within it. As he writes: „O ile (…) tolkienistę czy tolkienologa interesować mogłyby na przykład różnice pomiędzy rozmaitymi wersjami czy permutacjami historii powstania Ardy, kradzieży Silmarili i wojny z Morgothem, sprowadzające się do żmudnego zestawiania *Księgi Zaginionych Opowieści* z fabularyzującym ją *Silmarillionem*, o tyle ardologa interesować będzie wyłącznie ów świat: okoliczności jego powstania, geografia, topografia, języki, sztuka, literatura i wszystko to, co może się składać na wiedzę o wyobrażonej rzeczywistości. (…) Ardologia nie interpretuje tekstów: ardologia odczytuje informacje na temat świata Ardy (…)" ["Whereas (…) a Tolkienist or Tolkienologist might be interested, for example, in the differences between various versions or permutations of the story of the creation of Arda, the theft of the Silmarils, and the war with Morgoth, essentially involving the painstaking collation of *The Book of Lost Tales* with the *Silmarillion* that novelises it, the ardologist will be interested solely in that world: the circumstances of its creation, geography, topography, languages, art, literature, and everything that can constitute knowledge about the imagined reality. (…) Ardology does not interpret texts: ardology reads information about the world of Arda (…)", my translation] (Maj 2017, 75–76).

Arda." For without a fascination with this fantasy world and its mythology, there would be no interest in such detailed questions[76].

This study has already pointed out several times that Tolkien wrote his stories in such a way as to encourage readers to weave the myth of Arda on their own in certain matters. This is precisely the case with Tom Bombadil, whom he deliberately made one of the mysteries of his mythology (Tolkien 2023a, Letter 144, 263), thereby provoking the creation of numerous theories about him. Indeed, Tolkien succeeded in instilling in fans the desire to delve into the puzzles associated with Tom Bombadil and to propose various solutions. To this day, it remains one of the fans' favourite topics in exploring Tolkien's world.

It is often said that Tom Bombadil is a Vala or a Maia, sometimes even identifying him with specific figures from Arda's pantheon. For example, Gene Hargrove (2006), in his essay, identifies him with Aulë and his wife Goldberry with Yavanna, and this theory is also explored on Tolkien forums[77]. Equally common are interpretations that consider Bombadil to be a primaeval spirit of the earth or nature, or the embodiment of the spirit of Arda itself (Tolkien Gateway, "Tom Bombadil/Nature," n.d.). There are also ideas to situate him metaphysically in the mythical reality before the creation of Arda. According to this view, he could therefore be a personal incarnation of the Music of the Ainur not described in Tolkien's texts (Rangerfromthenorth 2013; Glorfindel Goldtress 2023). Some even suggest that Bombadil is an embodiment of Eru Ilúvatar, although Tolkien explicitly ruled out such a possibility (Tolkien 2023a, Letter 153; Tedoras 2013). Many other theories have been discussed among fans from the 1950s to the present day, and an overview of the most popular ones can be found in online Tolkien encyclopedias.

The second of the above-mentioned problems, namely the question of the nature of Orcs, is an issue that Tolkien himself struggled with. In his Legendarium, one can find several mutually contradictory solutions to it. In the early versions of the myths of Arda, the concept appears in the

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[76] Since the universal themes in Tolkien's works concern the nature of human existence, interest in them may arise both from the need for philosophical reflection and from the desire for prolonged engagement with the myth of Arda. By contrast, it is difficult to suppose that the development of ardological issues stems from anything other than the desire to continue Tolkien's myth, which is an expression of the longing to "inhabit Middle-earth".

[77] Hargrove's theories about Bombadil from the aforementioned article are taken up, for example, by Sirielle on a Polish Tolkien forum, in a post dated 31 July 2013, published in the thread "Kim wg. was był Tom Bombadil?" [Who do you think Tom Bombadil was?] (Goku 2001).

form of Morgoth creating the Orcs on his own "of the subterranean heats and slime" (Tolkien 2002a, 159). This version, with some modifications, was still current in his writings of the 1930s[78], but was later rejected by the author. In the "Annals of Aman," published by Christopher Tolkien as part of *Morgoth's Ring*, we read that the Orcs are Elves captured by Melkor before the destruction of Utumno, who subsequently "(...) by slow arts of cruelty and wickedness were corrupted and enslaved" (Tolkien 2015a, 74). In this way, a race of Orcs was to have arisen as a caricature and mockery of the Elves, who later became their greatest enemies. According to this theory, the Orcs were to live and reproduce just like the Children of Ilúvatar, since Melkor was no longer capable of creating living beings from scratch after his rebellion (Tolkien 2015a, 74).

In the same volume, in the chapter "Myth Transformed," other concepts of Tolkien concerning the Orcs are also presented. According to one of these, Orcs were animals capable of speech (like parrots), but lacking rational souls (fëar). Morgoth was said to have shaped them so that visually they were a mockery of the Children of Ilúvatar and taught them to speak (Tolkien 2015a, 409–411). However, this was not Tolkien's last word on the matter. According to another theory, the Orcs originated from Men corrupted by Melkor (Tolkien 2015a, 415–422), which accords with the presence in *The Lord of the Rings* of creatures that are half-human, half-Orc (Tolkien 2001d, 552). Finally, there is a theory that they may originate from Elves, Men, and also from various kinds of "(...) corrupted minor spirits, which took terrible and similar bodily forms in order to dominate" (Tolkien 2015a, 414). Each of these theories has both advantages and drawbacks from the perspective of the consistency of Arda's universe, and Tolkien himself ultimately left the questions of the origin and nature of the Orcs unresolved.

These problems were subsequently taken up by fans of the Oxford professor's works, who, in a sense continuing his deliberations, attempted to resolve them in their own ways. An important aspect of discussions within the Tolkien fandom is the issue of canonicity concerning various hypotheses about the Orcs. Exchanges of opinions among fans on Tolkien forums or in Reddit threads frequently evolve into genuine

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[78] In "Quenta Noldorinwa," published in the volume *The Shaping of Middle-earth*, Tolkien writes: "(…) the hordes of Orcs he made of stone, but their hearts of hatred" (Tolkien 2002b, 82). In "Quenta Silmarillion," written in 1937, one reads: "(…) Orcs Morgoth made in envy and mockery of the Elves, and they were made of stone, but their hearts of hatred" (Tolkien 1993, 233). In the quoted fragments, the material from which the Orcs were made is now different, reflecting Tolkien's changing conceptions, but they remain the work of Morgoth.

debates involving theology, anthropology, philosophy, and philology within the universe of Arda. A good example in this regard is the thread "Pochodzenie Orków" ["Origin of the Orcs"] on the Polish *forum.tolkien.com.pl* (Nifrodel 2003). The discussion begins there with the presentation of essays discussing theories about Orcs, whose arguments are then debated by forum members. The arguments primarily concern metaphysical resolutions, but the aforementioned fields are also taken into account. An equally interesting example is a Reddit thread titled "What origin story of the Orcs do you prefer?" (LeonPrien2000 n.d.), in which a completely different philosophical stance is adopted. Here, the possibility of a definitive answer regarding the origin and nature of Orcs is abandoned from the outset in favour of presenting solutions and arguments of a subjective nature.

Proposals to resolve the issue of the nature of Orcs are also discussed in film adaptations of Tolkien's works. For example, in Jackson's films, Saruman breeds Orcs using a process resembling cloning (Jackson 2003a, disc 1, 0:19:47–0:19:57): viewers see them being extracted from the mud as fully grown individuals, which recalls the aforementioned solution from the early versions of the Legendarium. On the other hand, in Amazon's *The Rings of Power*, we have a scene featuring an entire Orc family, including an Orc child (Payne and McKay 2024, season 2, episode 3, 0:19:18–0:19:45). In this way, one comes closer to solutions in which Orcs are treated like the other races of Middle-earth, and one can imagine them as genetically related to Men or Elves.

Just as fans have developed theories about Orcs, one can also consider the issue of whether Ents and the animals of Middle-earth endowed with speech have souls (fëar). Tolkien offered various solutions in this regard; however, in the end, it remained a mystery no less intriguing than the identity of Tom Bombadil or the riddle of the Orcs' origin. Devoted fans of Middle-earth took up these questions in search of answers, and their speculations developed into something that can be called a "fan metaphysics of the universe of Arda." For the intricate, multifaceted discussions among Tolkien's fans – concerning the relationship of souls (fëar) to bodies (hröar), and the metaphysical status of individual creatures of Arda – resemble medieval philosophical-theological debates in the real world. This "fan scholasticism" is most clearly revealed in the disputes over whether Ents and speech-endowed animals have their own souls (fëar). Various positions are put forward, and efforts are made to place these beings within "Arda's great chain of being", determining their origin and posthumous fate. The fans' metaphysical speculations deepen their

understanding of the beings of Arda, just as debates about whether animals possess a rational soul (*anima rationalis*), consciousness, and will have furthered the understanding of animal spirituality in the real world[79].

In the modern world, there is a widespread aversion to metaphysical approaches to reality. It is claimed that metaphysical propositions are meaningless (the Vienna Circle), that metaphysics has come to an end (Heidegger), or that it should be deconstructed (Derrida and others); accordingly, the slogan "death of metaphysics" in the title of a well-known book by Vittorio Possenti (1995) does not seem shocking today. Meanwhile, however, Tolkien's fans are passionate about metaphysical discussions concerning the world invented by a fantasy writer. How can this phenomenon be explained? Probably only by acknowledging that it attests to a deep desire to immerse oneself more deeply, intellectually and affectively, in that fantasy world – to become part of it, to live its life. In other words, fans have taken up the metaphysical puzzles of the universe left unresolved by Tolkien himself in order to prolong and deepen their immersion in it, and also to ensure that his myth would not disappear into the archives of twentieth-century literary history, but would endure as a living myth – in their personal engagement and in contemporary culture.

2.4.3 The Case of Tolkien's Eagles

In the preceding discussion of fans' debates about the souls of Middle-earth animals endowed with speech, the case of the so-called Great Eagles was omitted. Not because it was unimportant, but because it merits a separate discussion here. On one hand, Tolkien indeed struggled with the problem of the origin and nature of Manwë's Eagles throughout his writing life, without ever resolving it in a definitive and satisfactory way[80], which makes this case analogous to others discussed above. On the

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[79] This comparison may seem overly bold, since the differences between medieval metaphysics and contemporary online discussions in the Tolkien fandom are undeniable. Even so, the aptness of the analogy is confirmed by examples of topics raised on Reddit: "What happens to the Ents after they die?" (bredor4 n.d.), "Do animals have souls in Tolkien's universe?" (csandelin n.d.), "Are all animals intelligent in Tolkien's mythos?" (ramoncg_ n.d.). These constitute clear examples of metaphysical deliberations on Tolkien's universe, and very many similar discussions take place in the fandom.

[80] From the materials published by Christopher Tolkien concerning his father's writings, readers may learn that the author of *The Lord of the Rings* himself had serious doubts as to how the question of the Great Eagles should be resolved. A short draft,

other hand, however, the creator of *The Lord of the Rings*, already in his comments on Zimmerman's film script (discussed in subchapter 1.4), clearly discouraged readers from concentrating too much on these birds, emphasising that they should remain episodic characters. This did not, however, stop fan speculations. On the contrary, the Great Eagles became one of the fandom's favourite topics of speculation – as if in spite of the Oxford professor's intention. This highlights the active and culture-forming nature of the fan reception of Tolkien's myth.

Historical Context: Tolkien, Zimmerman, and the Problem of Eagles

It is worth recalling the historical context that vividly illustrates Tolkien's own ambivalence toward the Eagles[81]. In 1957, Tolkien was presented with a draft film script of *The Lord of the Rings* by Morton Grady Zimmerman. The author of the literary original reacted very critically, and in an extensive letter to Forrest J. Ackerman, he offered a number of comments, including some regarding the role of the Eagles. Tolkien felt that Zimmerman had overused the motif of these aerial creatures, turning them into a convenient means of transport for the protagonists. As he stated in the letter: "The Eagles are a dangerous 'machine'. I have used them sparingly, and that is the absolute limit of their credibility or usefulness" (Tolkien 2023a, Letter 210, 390). He added that the idea of an Eagle from the Misty Mountains flying all the way to the Shire to fetch the heroes was absurd, and that such a solution weakened the logic of the plot. Tolkien clearly treated the Eagles of Manwë as a tool for creating *eucatastrophe*, that is, a sudden and joyous turn of events in which unexpected salvation reveals a deeper dimension of hope (Neubauer 2015; Thayer 2016; Dawson 2023). Too frequent an employment of the Eagles would have made this device too commonplace and deprived it of credibility in the story's climactic moments. In other words, according to Tolkien, the Eagles should remain background characters – spectacular, yet episodic saviours in the final extremity – and not regular participants in events.

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known under the titles "Of the Ents and the Eagles" and "Anaxartamel", was indeed written, in which one might have expected clarifications of this matter. Yet the draft provides no such resolution and has survived only in the form of a brief manuscript and its typescript expansion (Tolkien 2015b, 340–341).

[81] This ambivalence was discussed earlier in section 1.4.1 of the present monograph.

One might wonder whether Tolkien's reluctance to develop the myth of the Eagles may not also have stemmed from the fact that the questions of their nature and origin in the Legendarium were never fully resolved. In his writings, he never definitively decided what the Great Eagles really were. In early texts, he considered the idea of Eagles as Maiar in the form of birds, i.e. powerful spirits in the service of Manwë (Tolkien 2015, 38). Later, however, Tolkien adopted the general principle that Valar and Maiar could not have offspring, and yet in the already published *The Lord of the Rings*, Gwaihir and Landroval are described as "mightiest of the descendants of old Thorondor" (Tolkien 2021b, 927)[82]. For this reason, the creator of the myth of Arda later leaned toward a theory according to which Gwaihir, Thorondor and the other Eagles were raised by the Valar, taught speech by them, and in this sense were elevated above the level of ordinary animals, but did not possess *fëar*, i.e. immortal souls (Tolkien 2015, 409–411). In still later notes, published as *The Nature of Middle-earth*, Tolkien again returned to the idea of Eagles as Maiar incarnated in the bodies of birds (Tolkien 2023b, 291, 308). This issue – crucial from a metaphysical point of view – was ultimately left unresolved in his texts, which presented the fandom with a fascinating puzzle concerning the nature of these aerial creatures.

On the one hand, then, Tolkien himself was reluctant to give the Eagles prominence in the narrative and did not clarify their place in the order of creation of Arda. On the other hand, their episodic appearances – from Thorondor rescuing Maedhros and aiding Fingolfin in his fight with Morgoth (Tolkien 2013, 125, 179–180), through the Eagles coming to the aid of Beren and Lúthien (Tolkien 2013, 214–215) and of those escaping from Gondolin (Tolkien 2013, 292), to the memorable interventions of the Eagles in *The Hobbit* (Tolkien 2017, 126–127, 332–333) and *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien 2001a, 255; 2001b, 927–929) – were so spectacular that they kindled readers' imaginations. Even the earliest audience had a tendency to exaggerate the role of the Eagles, as exemplified by Zimmerman's inclination to "(...) gallop about on Eagles at the least provocation" (Tolkien 2023a, letter 201, 376). Ironically,

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[82] This issue is in fact even more complicated. In earlier versions of *The Silmarillion*, the names Gwaihir (sometimes also in the form Gwaewar) and Landroval appear as Eagles accompanying Thorondor in Middle-earth (in the First Age), but because Christopher Tolkien was convinced that this resulted from a mistake on his father's part, he changed it so that these names appeared only in *The Lord of the Rings*. He later regretted this decision, which – as he admitted – resulted from the difficulty of understanding his father's original intent (Tolkien 1993, 301).

it was precisely this caution on the author's part, and the aura of mystery surrounding the Eagles, that made fans all the more eager to fill the gaps with their own ideas.

Contemporary Fan Speculations: Online Theories and Discussions

Despite Tolkien's clear suggestions not to overemphasise the subject of the Eagles, the Middle-earth fan community has made them one of the primary objects of inquiry and theory. On discussion forums, in fan essays, and on YouTube channels, a question regularly resurfaces that has attained iconic status: "Why didn't the Eagles simply carry the Ring to Mordor?"[83]. This question, though seemingly naive, has prompted countless discussions and attempts to answer it. In the eyes of many casual readers it constitutes a supposed plot hole in *The Lord of the Rings*, but for dedicated fans it has become an invitation to deeper analysis of the rules governing Tolkien's world.

Over the years, many arguments have been developed to explain why the "Eagles plan" could not have been carried out, and importantly, many of them are ardological in nature. It is worth presenting them here as evidence of the fans' commitment to devising scenarios intended to justify Tolkien's narrative device without upsetting the internal logic of the myth of Arda's story – as if it were actually recounting a true history, or were the equivalent of a "sacred story" whose original course must be defended against profanation.

Some fans point out that using the Eagles would have meant depriving the Ring-bearer's mission of the element of surprise that came from the secrecy in which it was kept (Prins 2015, Eldy n.d.). Furthermore, if the Eagles had indeed been used, they could have been shot down by Orc arrows or attacked by the Nazgûl's fell beasts, which would spell doom for the mission (Prins 2015, StasM 2011). Others note that the Eagles, as intelligent beings, could have succumbed to the temptation of the One Ring (Alexander 2011). The closer they came to Orodruin, the stronger the temptation would have grown, and if they yielded to it, then given their power the consequences would have been catastrophic. Yet others invoke Gwaihir's words: "I was sent to bear tidings not burdens" (Tolkien

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[83] On YouTube, one can find a very popular short film humorously discussing the idea of using the Eagles to destroy the One Ring (How It Should Have Ended 2007). It is worth noting that this film already has over 27 million views, which in some way shows the scale of fan interest in the issue.

2001a, 255), highlighting the Eagles' free will and their distinct place in the world's order (Prins 2015), or pointing to their physical limitations that would have made such a role impossible for them (The Hall of Fire Forum 2008, Prins 2015).

Some fans try to defend the logic of Tolkien's mythopoeic narrative by asserting that in fact Gandalf planned to use the Eagles in the mission to destroy the Ring of Power, and that only his death in Moria foiled this scenario. According to this theory, which arose mainly on the basis of Jackson's adaptation, after escaping from Orthanc thanks to Gwaihir, Gandalf was to contact the Eagles and arrange for their participation in the quest. The plan was that the Fellowship, keeping everything secret, would reach the far side of the Misty Mountains, where the Eagles would, quite literally, pick them up and carry them directly to Mordor, exploiting the advantage of surprise over the Nazgûl. For this reason Gandalf chose the more difficult but less obvious route via the pass of Caradhras, avoiding the obvious High Pass and not wishing to head toward the Gap of Rohan. Entering Moria was a last resort, and the famous words "Fly, you fools!" (Tolkien 2001a, 322) were, in light of this interpretation, meant as a veiled hint to summon the Eagles. Gandalf's death at Khazad-dûm, however, ruined that plan, and upon his return as Gandalf the White he forgot the details of his earlier design (VulcanDeathGrip n.d.).

There are many more fan theories concerning the Great Eagles. The examples cited above are sufficient, however, to conclude that fans to some extent "live the myth of Arda" affectively, defending the logic of the events described in the mythology. The most paradoxical case of this tendency is the last theory mentioned, where Jackson's film is used to protect Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* from the charge popularly known as the "eagle's plot hole". The author of the book, however, nowhere suggests the existence of any such secret plan. Instead, he accentuates the role of the Hobbits (especially Frodo and Sam), consistently depicting the Fellowship's mission as a journey full of trials and suffering that could not have been shortened by a simple flight. After all, this would have undermined the moral message of the story, which can be expressed in Elrond's words:

> Yet such is oft the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world: small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere. (Tolkien 2001a, 262)

Great Eagles in Adaptations

The Great Eagles were not only the subject of online fan debates, but also appeared in a variety of adaptations. They appear, for instance, in the BBC Radio 4 1981 adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*, as well as in various Tolkien games, such as the expansion for the board game *War of the Ring* (Di Meglio, Maggi, and Nepitello 2016), the RPG *The One Ring*[84], or LOTRO (Turbine, Inc. 2007). In the acclaimed comic adaptation of *The Hobbit* by David Wenzel, the rescue scenes by the Eagles were given distinct, iconic portrayals (Dixon, Deming, and Wenzel 2001, 59–61, 125).

The phenomenon of fans' fascination with the Eagles, however, had a particularly strong impact on high-budget film adaptations of the myth of Arda. Filmmakers and television creators seem to be aware that Tolkien's Eagles are regarded within the fandom as iconic symbols of eucatastrophe and divine intervention. Already in Jackson's film adaptations, they emerge as important characters in the myth of Middle-earth, for they appear at key moments of *The Lord of the Rings* (2001–2003) and *The Hobbit* (2012–2014) trilogies with extraordinary visual power. Jackson followed the canonical episodes fairly closely[85], yet the manner of their presentation – long shots of majestically soaring Eagles, characters shouting "The Eagles are coming!" – made these scenes among the most memorable. As a result, the popularity of the Eagles increased enormously among fans. Taking advantage of this fact, nowadays even in adaptations loosely based on Tolkien's prose, the motif of these winged creatures is emphasised more than the canon itself would suggest, as if in response to viewers' expectations.

A good example is the series *The Rings of Power*. Although its plot focuses on entirely different storylines, the creators decided to feature an Eagle, whose sudden appearance in the palace in Númenor is treated as a sacred sign, used by Ar-Pharazôn to demonstrate his right to seize the throne (Payne and McKay 2024, season 2, episode 3, 0:58:35–1:00:12).

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[84] This refers to selected scenarios. The role of the Eagles is perhaps most clearly visible in Richard Harrison's fan-written scenario (n.d.).

[85] In the *Hobbit* film trilogy, the role of the Eagles in freeing the protagonists from the burning trees (Tolkien 2017, chap. VI) and their involvement in the Battle of the Five Armies (Tolkien 2017, chaps. XVII–XVIII) are depicted, whereas the episode of the night spent at the Eagles' eyrie (Tolkien 2017, chap. VII) is omitted. In the case of *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy, all the most important scenes from the books were included – namely, Gandalf's rescue from Orthanc (Tolkien 2001a, Book II, chap. II), the arrival of the Eagles during the Battle of the Morannon (Tolkien 2001b, Book V, chap. X), and the rescue of Frodo and Sam from Mount Doom (Tolkien 2001b, Book VI, chap. IV).

No such scene ever took place in J. R. R. Tolkien's texts and notes, and although Manwë's Eagles were present in Númenor, it was in a manner entirely different from what is depicted in the series. The inclusion of this scene in *The Rings of Power* was most likely intended to tap into the sentiment of fans expecting an "Eagle moment," or at least to attract their attention[86].

The motif of the Great Eagles was likewise used to attract fan attention in the latest film production set in Middle-earth, *The War of the Rohirrim* (Kamiyama 2024). The story it recounts draws on the tale of Helm Hammerhand and the legendary origins of Rohan, taken from Tolkien's Appendices (Tolkien 2001b, 1040–1041), which make no mention whatsoever of any involvement of Eagles; indeed, the logic of employing these creatures in the Oxford professor's writings essentially rules out such a possibility. Nevertheless, the screenwriters decided to add plotlines involving these winged creatures in this story. The film even opens with shots of Eagles, and the creators establish a special connection between these creatures and the main protagonist – Hera, Helm's daughter (Kamiyama 2024, 0:01:40–0:03:56). The screenwriters acknowledge that they made this bond a key element of her development as a character and her path to becoming a leader (Edwards 2024). At a pivotal moment, she climbs to the Eagles' nest and sends one of them with a message and the late Helm's armour to her cousin Fréaláf, calling for reinforcements (Kamiyama 2024, 1:34:57–1:37:21). The Eagle, acting as a messenger, delivers the package in time, ensuring that the relief is effective. Fréaláf dons it during his army's attack on Wulf's forces. The sight of Fréaláf in Helm's armour, outlined against the moon, causes Wulf's men to flee, convinced that they have seen a ghost (Kamiyama 2024, 1:51:56–1:53:42). These added scenes not only lend dynamism to the plot, but above all correspond perfectly with the popular fan myth of the Eagles as unfailing saviours in the hour of need. This is a deliberate strategy by the creators: they exploit the emotional capital that the Eagles enjoy among the fandom to enhance the epic dimension of the story. This can be interpreted as a kind of "fan-service" – providing viewers with an element that they subconsciously anticipate, because it has become part of the version of the Tolkien myth popular in the fandom.

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[86] This intent is confirmed by the fact that the scene with the Eagle in Númenor was prominently featured as early as in the official materials promoting the series' second season (Prime Video 2024). This elicited lively fan reactions, leading to intense discussions – initially after the trailer was released (Demosthenes 2024), and later following the premiere of the third episode, entitled "The Eagle and the Sceptre" (BreadEggg n.d.).

On the subject of the Great Eagles, one can observe a kind of transmedial debate among audiences about the role of these winged creatures in the myth of Arda. Participants in this debate include scholars, ordinary fans, as well as the creators of professional adaptations. It is also worth noting that the references made in fan speculations and media adaptations here diverge most markedly from Tolkien's source myth. The myth lives and evolves thanks to collective debates and adaptations, and it also stirs the emotions of its fans, much as was the case with traditional myths.

2.4.4 Fans' Online Speculations and Debates as "Personal Sub-creations" Extending the Myth's Influence over Time

As noted above in the discussion of Tolkienology, it was emphasised that its practitioners, through their research work, participate in the development of the mythology of Arda. Similarly, the theories formulated within online fan speculations and debates may be regarded in the same light. Drawing on information left in the Legendarium, these fan speculations expand those threads of the myth that have proved particularly interesting from the audience's perspective. As emphasised at the beginning of this subsection, however, this type of fandom activity goes beyond Tolkienology due to its speculative character. Here, the fans seek not only to intellectually analyse the reality of Tolkien's mythopoeic work, but also to continue narrative scenarios beyond what its creator set down, or indeed to develop a variety of alternative versions of the myth.

Usually, this pertains to those strands of the mythology of Arda for which Tolkien provided no definitive resolutions, and for which there is no widespread consensus as to their meaning. This situation gives rise to interpretative freedom and room for speculation, which in turn facilitate the further weaving of the Tolkienian myth in a more personal manner, while simultaneously prolonging its effect on the audience.

The personal nature of these speculative sub-creations is evident in fans' discussions of the mythology of Arda, which address the universal, existential questions of the human condition: what evil is and where it comes from, whether we have free will, and what happens to us after death. These are the chief themes of Tolkien's mythopoeic works, and their reception naturally centres on these issues. It is beyond doubt today that the reception of literature is personal. Even if the Oxford professor had explicitly stated how the message of his works ought to be

understood, each fan's interpretation of them would still differ slightly. The living experience of Tolkien's literary myths is manifest in the fact that every admirer reads them through the prism of their own existential context. Thus, feeling in the deep recesses of their soul that their own reading carries truth, they wish to share it with other fans – which takes the form of both online fandom discussions and scholarly publications.

Within this public discourse of the fandom, the questions and issues raised by Tolkien assume the form of philosophical and theological inquiries, and at times a sort of contemplative reflection on the essence of being in the world. From the perspective of this study, the voices of all the participants in these fan debates are equally important, since they testify to how deeply Tolkien's mythopoeic narrative touches them on a psychological-existential level.

This dimension of the fans' personal engagement with the myth of Arda is even more visible in their debates on ardological topics. Since these topics have no direct reference to the real world, yet they nonetheless engage members of the fandom in intense discussions, they provide evidence of the affective power of the fans' commitment to Tolkien's mythic world. Speculations about Tom Bombadil – which have been continuously pursued by generation after generation of fans since the 1950s – and the dozens of theories concerning the origin and nature of Orcs that have been forged through years of online discussions, show that for each enthusiast of Tolkien's works, it is the myth itself – not only the human dilemmas of existence in the real world that are portrayed within it in the form of a literary narrative – that becomes the object of personal experience.

These discussions about creatures from the universe of Arda are reminiscent of medieval philosophical-theological debates in the real world, as was pointed out when discussing fan theories and speculations on the ontological status of Ents and of animals endowed with speech. Significantly, the "fan metaphysics of the universe of Arda" under discussion here enjoys greater interest within the fandom than do metaphysical interpretations of the real world in the contemporary academic philosophical milieu. This is yet another argument in support of the thesis that the mythopoeic oeuvre of the Oxford professor is perceived by fans not as an ordinary literary work, but as a truly living myth.

In its original, pre-modern form, a living myth functioned as a story woven by a community, continually evolving toward versions that met the community's current needs. A similar mechanism can be observed in the public discourse among fans regarding the Great Eagles. Despite

Tolkien's warning against overstating their role in the mythology of Arda, the Eagles nevertheless became one of the fandom's favourite subjects of speculation. On the subject of the Eagles, one can thus most clearly see the active and culture-creating character of the fan reception of the myth of Middle-earth. In this case, the fans' sub-creations diverge most strongly from the original literary version, evolving – much like the pre-modern living myth – in line with the current needs of its audience. In the case of the Eagles, the reception resembles a transmedial debate about their role in the myth of Arda.

In summary, all the aspects of the fan debates, theories, and speculations examined in this subchapter indicate that, for fans, Tolkien's mythopoeic oeuvre functions as a contemporary version of a living myth. The emotional investment of the participants in this public fandom discourse, demonstrated by their engagement over many years, shows that one is dealing here with something experienced more intensely than literature created purely for entertainment – the supposedly escapist fantasy literature[87].

In the same way as with Tolkienology, the goal here is not a quasi-ritual experience of "entering into the mythical Arda", but rather bringing its myth into the real world. Through interpretations of its contentious elements, speculation, and communal discussion, the Tolkienian myth extends its impact on its audience. Fans fill their real-life existence with time spent searching out Tolkien's own commentaries that clarify ambiguous issues, pondering solutions to inconsistencies in the Legendarium, or formulating replies to other participants' posts. By doing so, fans keep their imagination and intellect constantly engaged with the myth of Arda, which thus becomes a lasting presence accompanying them in their daily lives.

In light of the phenomena discussed in this subchapter, one can clearly discern the distinctly personal aspect of the active cultural reception of Tolkien's myth. The indeterminacy of the myth's content in certain respects – whether planned by Tolkien himself (as in the character of Tom Bombadil) or resulting from internal contradictions in certain threads of the Legendarium (the origin of Orcs, the metaphysical status of Ents and of animals that speak with a human voice, including the Great Eagles) – allows its enthusiasts to continue the sub-creation of the myth by devising

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[87] I discuss the charge of escapism levelled against mythopoeic fantasy literature, especially at Tolkien, in more detail in the article "Mythopoetic Fantasy: In Search of Harmony with the World. Metatheoretical Considerations that Use the Example of Tolkien's Arda." (Jastrzębski 2024).

their own alternative scenarios for the development of the story. In this way, the myth of Arda becomes, for each fan, in a sense "my myth". In the next subchapter, we will examine a situation in which this tendency to create a "private version of Arda" is the main element of the phenomenon under scrutiny – for such is the case with narratives inspired by Tolkien, which will be the main focus of our inquiry.

2.5 Tolkien-inspired Narratives: Prolonging the Immersive Power of the Myth of Arda through its "Personal Versions"

As shown in subchapter 2.4, both the indeterminate fragments of the Legendarium and the vibrant culture of fan debate give rise to the need to incorporate elements of personal interpretation into Tolkien's myth. This represents a step towards the narrative development of alternative versions of the Oxford professor's stories. However, the present subchapter focuses not on discourse itself but on narrative – on the creation of one's own, alternative scenarios of the myth, and thus on the emergence of "personal versions of Arda". Its object of interest is narratives inspired by Tolkien, both in the professional sphere as post-Tolkienian fantasy and in the form of grassroots fan creativity. The aim here is not merely to present the influence of the myth of Arda on the further development of the fantasy genre, nor the phenomenon of Tolkien fan fiction, but rather to reflect on how these forms enable their audience to symbolically and affectively "dwell" in Middle-earth. Accordingly, the question at hand is in what sense these narratives can intensify the experience of mythical Arda and extend it beyond the act of reading Tolkien's own works. In other words, this subchapter seeks to determine in what sense narratives inspired by the works of the Oxford professor form part of the reception of his literature as a contemporary form of living myth.

2.5.1 Post-Tolkienian Fantasy

One cannot discuss the reception of Tolkien in fantasy literature without citing Edward James's statement (2012, 62) that "most subsequent writers of fantasy are either imitating him or else desperately trying to escape his influence". As Dimitra Fimi (2022) points out, however, these two approaches – imitation and the attempt to escape – do not in fact constitute

simple opposites. Instead, they form a broad spectrum of intertextual strategies: ranging from the repetition of patterns borrowed from *The Lord of the Rings*, through selectively incorporating those patterns into one's own narrative, to the critical reworking of conventions and a conscious "escape" into deliberately anti-Tolkien forms. The influence of Tolkien on fantasy writers is a very interesting phenomenon in itself; however, it has already been described in detail and well documented in historical accounts of the genre's development, so there is no need to discuss it again in this monograph[88].

In the context of the present discussion, what is key is the sheer scale of the influence that the Tolkien's writings have exerted on subsequent generations of fantasy enthusiasts – both writers and readers. A fitting metaphor for the force of this influence was offered by Terry Pratchett, who observed in an interview:

> Tolkien appears in the fantasy universe in the same way that Mount Fuji appeared in old Japanese prints. Sometimes small, in the distance, and sometimes big and close-to, and sometimes not there at all, and that's because the artist is standing on Mount Fuji. (Littleton n.d.)

From this point of view, the entirety of fantasy literature written after the publication and popularisation of *The Lord of the Rings* can be regarded as post-Tolkienian. However, such an approach to Tolkien's influence on the development of fantasy is not useful when considering in what sense narratives inspired by the Legendarium of Arda play a role in the reception of his literature as a contemporary form of living myth. In the present discussion, it is preferable to focus on those works that can be seen as distinct continuations of the Tolkienian myth, and to consider the universes created in them as forms of a "personal version of Arda" for their authors and readers[89].

Many authors followed the path of this understanding of post-Tolkienian fantasy, taking up threads and motifs strongly inspired

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[88] Among those works one could recommend, for example, the analyses by Attebery (1980, 154–186), James (2012), Fimi (2022), Shippey (2001, 318–326), Rosebury (2003, 193–220), and finally the extensive monograph by Majkowski (2013), in which Tolkien's influence on the fantasy genre is the main subject of reflection.

[89] It is precisely in this "quasi-fan" sense that the term "post-Tolkienian fantasy" will be used henceforth, and the discussion and selected literary examples refer to this very way of understanding.

by Middle-earth. For example, Terry Brooks's *The Sword of Shannara* (1977) closely follows *The Lord of the Rings*, as Shippey explicitly notes (2001, 319-320). He points out the analogous lineup of characters in Brooks's novel compared to Tolkien's Fellowship of the Ring: Allanon, a druid filling the role of a wizard, is the counterpart of Gandalf; the dwarf Hendel corresponds to Gimli; two young heroes replace the four Hobbits; two Elves correspond to Legolas (one of them bears the name Durin, a Tolkien name); and the human characters Menion and Balinor resemble Aragorn and Boromir (Balinor, in fact, has a younger brother, just as Boromir does). The far-reaching similarity extends to other key characters of *The Lord of the Rings* as well. Moreover, the entire plot structure unfolds point by point following Tolkien's scheme: the journey to the safe haven of Culhaven (*Rivendell*), a stop in the Storlock (*Lórien*)[90], the loss of Allanon, who vanishes into an abyss along with the Skull Bearer much like Gandalf on the Bridge of Khazad-dûm (and similarly returns later), and the splitting of the group after the capture of the Hobbit-analogue heroes by the Orc-analogue enemies, followed by their recovery after a classic tracking scene.

Indeed, the similarities between Brooks's work and Tolkien's story are even more numerous. The pattern of a fellowship setting out on an epic quest in a world reminiscent of Middle-earth, recreated by Brooks, met with both criticism for its very close resemblances to *The Lord of the Rings* and enormous reader interest. Notably, Brooks openly acknowledged his fascination with Tolkien regarding this work, saying in a radio interview: "...I was heavily under the influence of Tolkien when I wrote *The Sword of Shannara* and it shows in that particular book" (Peterson 2009). In this sense, the novel in question can be regarded as *weaving a private version of the myth of Arda*, despite the obvious differences between the adventures of its characters in the Four Lands universe and the journey of the Fellowship in *The Lord of the Rings*.

The above interpretation is further supported by the enthusiastic reaction of readers. Despite charges of excessive imitation, Brooks's book achieved spectacular commercial success, indicating that readers craved more stories in the spirit of the myth of Arda. Shippey takes a critical view of this fact, stating:

[90] Shippey prints "Starlock" (2001, 320); the canonical Shannara toponym is Storlock.

> What *The Sword of Shannara* seems to show is that many readers had developed the taste (the addiction) for heroic fantasy so strongly that if they could not get the real thing they would take any substitute, no matter how diluted. (Shippey 2001, 320)

If one were to regard the phenomenon in question purely in terms of the literary reception of fantasy texts, one would have to concur with his harsh opinion. If, however, one considers it as the result of the reception of Tolkien's mythopoeic work as a contemporary form of living myth, then the entire matter should be viewed differently. In such a context, the enthusiastic reaction of readers to *The Sword of Shannara* is perfectly understandable, and indeed should have been expected. After all, works of post-Tolkienian fantasy can serve for fans of Middle-earth as particular forms of continuation of Tolkien's myth, and the literary universes created in them as "personal versions of Arda". Through such readings, they are able to fulfil the psychological-existential need of "living in the context of myth".

Indeed, in subsequent years new writers emerged who developed this strand of post-Tolkienian fantasy, and they too gained great popularity among readers. A good example here is Dennis L. McKiernan, who reportedly even planned a direct sequel to *The Lord of the Rings*, but after the Tolkien Estate refused to grant a license, he transformed it into his own fantasy cycle set in the universe of Mithgar – at times uncannily reminiscent of Middle-earth (Peterson 2010)[91].

McKiernan's trilogy *The Iron Tower* repeats the structure of *The Lord of the Rings*: a threat from a dark power, a journey of a fellowship composed of representatives of various races, the involvement of Hobbit-like heroes (here called Warrows), the presence of Elves and Dwarves who serve as guardians of ancient traditions, and monumental battles that form the culmination of the conflict. The duology *The Silver Call*, which was originally intended to be a sequel to Tolkien's work (McKiernan 2010), develops a variant of the quest to a lost stronghold, a clear reminiscence of Moria from Tolkien's works. The narrative style – archaic in tone, full of songs and genealogical allusions – likewise imitates Tolkien's manner, though with a greater emphasis on action and spectacle and less on metaphysics or moral reflection.

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[91] As McKiernan himself admits in the interview cited in the text, among the stories he set in the Mithgar universe the following works were directly inspired by Tolkien: *The Dark Tide* (1984a), *Shadows of Doom* (1984c) and *The Darkest Day* (1984b), which make up the *The Iron Tower* trilogy, and *Trek to Kraggen-Cor* (1986b) and *The Brega Path* (1986a), which together form the *Silver Call* duology.

A particularly interesting figure in the context of post-Tolkienian fantasy is Guy Gavriel Kay, whose work is connected to Tolkien's world by unique ties. As a young writer, he collaborated with Christopher Tolkien on the editing of *The Silmarillion*, an experience he recalls as a very important factor in shaping his identity as an author. In an interview for SFFWorld, he openly admits that he was a devoted admirer of *The Lord of the Rings*, and that working on the legacy of its author affected him profoundly (SFFWorld 2011). In this sense, *The Fionavar Tapestry* – Kay's trilogy (*The Summer Tree* 1984; *The Wandering Fire* 1986b; *The Darkest Road* 1986a) – not coincidentally contains clearly recognisable Tolkienian elements, such as characters in the style of the Dark Lord (Rakoth Maugrim), Elves (lios alfar) and Dwarves. At the same time, in describing this series Kay stated that his intent was "throwing down a gauntlet" to writers who had "diminished and degraded" high fantasy by producing "derivative, mercenary, lazy fantasies" (Thompson 1999). In a sense, then, the story created by Kay also grows out of an initial awe for Tolkien's myth of Arda, although he himself distances it from what is usually termed post-Tolkienian fantasy. As he remarked in another interview: "*The Tapestry* was a conscious decision, however, to work squarely in the Tolkien tradition while trying to allow room for character development and plausibility that I tended to find missing in most post-JRRT High Fantasy" (Adams 1995).

Christopher Paolini, author of the bestselling *Inheritance* cycle (2002–2011), belongs to a somewhat later generation than the writers cited above. Yet his work too can be regarded as creating a "private version of the myth of Arda". Even as a teenage writer, Paolini drew heavily on Tolkienian models, incorporating into his story many archetypal elements borrowed from the Oxford professor's Legendarium: a world full of Elves and Dwarves, mysterious dragons, and an age-old conflict with a powerful, dark tyrant. Importantly, Paolini never hid his fascination with Tolkien, consciously placing himself within the heritage of his work (Wilson 2011; Moss 2015). The enormous commercial success of the *Inheritance* cycle – especially the first volume, *Eragon* (2003)[92] – indicates that in the twenty-first century there remains a demand among readers for Tolkien's archetypes, reworked as variations on the myth of Arda. One reader, reviewing *Eragon*, declares outright: "Great for Tolkien fans. They will not be disappointed" (Raj 2018).

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[92] The first, limited edition of the book was published independently by the Paolini family in 2002; however, the present citation refers to the popular, widely circulated edition from 2003.

These and similar examples can be interpreted as attempts to weave Tolkien's myth further. The authors, being enthusiasts of the Oxford professor's work, wished to explore beloved motifs and archetypes, creating new worlds of imagination that nevertheless preserve the "core of the Tolkienian myth", thereby becoming "personal versions of Arda". For readers, the experience of such works constitutes a way of making further literary "returns to Middle-earth". Even if post-Tolkienian works use new place-names, characters, and plot details, or even introduce more significant changes, they still provide their audience with experiences similar to those they had during their reading of Tolkien's own works – an epic adventure in a quasi-mythical world full of magic, archetypal heroes, and the ageless struggle of good against evil. Thus, by means of post-Tolkienian fantasy, fans can in a sense relive the original impact of the myth of Arda, extending their experience beyond the time spent reading Tolkien's own works.

2.5.2 Tolkien Fan Fiction

Another important dimension of narratives inspired by Tolkien is fan fiction set in his literary universe. For decades, fans have been adding further continuations to his stories, filling in "gaps" in the narrative, and exploring side plots. As a result, they can connect with the world of Arda for longer than only the duration of reading Tolkien's works. Moreover, such practice allows for a more intense immersion into the world of the myth through the creative play of the imagination, which yields a "personal version of Arda". By writing, fans in effect transport themselves personally into the Tolkienian myth, which ceases to be merely an external object of reading for them and becomes a living reality within their minds – one that is creatively developed inside them through the active engagement of their imagination.

The phenomenon of Tolkien fan fiction dates back to the period immediately after the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*. The oldest known fan fiction set in Middle-earth was the poem "The Passing of the Elven-kind" by Ted Johnstone, published in the fanzine *All Mimsy* (Hunnewell 2010, 5). For many years, it was primarily through fanzines that fans could share works set in Tolkien's Arda. Perhaps the best-known Tolkien fan fiction of that time was "The Jewel of Arwen" by Marion Zimmer Bradley, published in *I Palantír* No. 2 in 1961 (Hunnewell 2010, 7). These initiatives, however, were scattered.

The true flourishing of fan literary creativity came with the development of the internet, and especially following Jackson's film adaptations, which attracted a multitude of new enthusiasts into the Tolkien fandom. The first decade of the twenty-first century saw the creation of numerous online archives for fan stories set in Tolkien's world, including the *Henneth Annûn Story Archive* (2002; Fanlore 2025a), *Stories of Arda* (2003; Fanlore 2024), and the *Silmarillion Writers' Guild* (2005; Fanlore 2025b). Over time, this phenomenon assumed a global scale; suffice it to note that on one of the largest multi-fandom websites – FanFiction. net – the *Lord of the Rings* section currently contains over fifty thousand works created by fans from all over the world (FanFiction.net n.d..).

Tolkien fan fiction is characterised by tremendous variety, ranging from works faithful to the spirit and literary canon of the original (the so-called *bookverse*), through stories that elaborate on peripheral threads (for example, the fate of the Ents searching for their wives, Aragorn's youth, the histories of the Haradrim, etc.), to humorous and parodic works. In outlining this phenomenon, Amy Sturgis (2007) presents various types of fan fiction that are particularly favoured by Tolkien's fans. Many of these fill story gaps left by the Oxford professor – for instance, they recount what happened to characters during periods omitted in the books, or expand upon the stories of secondary characters (the so-called *gap fillers*). Other works present alternate versions of events from the Legendarium (so-called AU, or *alternate universe*), thereby fulfilling fans' dreams of a different course of the stories they know. For example, they imagine what would have happened if Boromir had survived or if Frodo had kept the Ring. Yet other stories connect Middle-earth with other fictional worlds (so-called *crossovers*) or introduce romantic plotlines that were absent in the original – including the specific genre of stories known as *slash*, which explore homoerotic relationships between characters.

Recalling Tolkien's reaction to the hippie reception of his works (discussed in Chapter 1), one might assume that he would not have supported at least some of the ways his work is utilised in fan fiction – especially given his well-known aversion to fan attempts to publish a sequel to *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien 2023a, Letter 292). There is no doubt, however, that fan fiction represents for its authors and readers not merely a form of creative amusement, but also – and perhaps even primarily – a means of deepening and extending their bond with a beloved universe. By writing and reading fan fiction, Middle-earth enthusiasts can indeed continue to experience adventures in Arda long after turning the final

pages of Tolkien's books. Furthermore, they can also reformulate the myth of Arda so that it corresponds even more closely to their personal vision[93].

Tolkien's mythopoeic literature is often significantly modified in fan fiction; consequently, the fandom has developed its own standards and debates regarding the canonicity and quality of such texts. Robin Anne Reid observes that the notion of "canon" in the Tolkien fandom is multi-tiered and often the subject of disputes – some fans recognise only Tolkien's published works as canonical, others include *The History of Middle-earth* or the author's letters, and still others also regard Jackson's film adaptations as canonical (Reid 2007, 348–350). These differences are to some extent reflected in the reception of Tolkien fan fiction. Stories consistent with the spirit of the books (*bookverse*) may be more appreciated by fans focusing primarily on Tolkien himself, whereas works inspired mainly by Jackson's films (*movieverse*) tend to resonate more strongly with a somewhat different group of fans. One should not, however, overstate these differences in individual fans' preferences, especially since they have become increasingly less important over time (Walls-Thumma 2019, 3).

Despite these divisions, one undeniable aspect of the phenomenon of Tolkien fan fiction as a whole remains the fact that fan creativity significantly extends the possibilities for the reception of the mythology of Arda as a contemporary form of living myth. It even creates the impression that this mythology is being "told" anew continually and is living its own life through the fan community. In this context, fans explicitly take on the role of sub-creators of the Tolkienian myth, by creating works that allow them to experience it in a personal way. As a result, an integration can take place between their real life and the world of the myth at a level not seen in the fan adaptations of the mythology of Arda discussed so far. The myth is thus completed to better reflect their real-life needs and, consequently, can in turn influence their lives.

This mechanism of the interpenetration of "personal versions of the myth of Arda" in Tolkien fan fiction with the real lives of fans is highly significant in the context of the present discussion, because it demonstrates a similarity to how the living myth functioned in pre-modern societies.

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[93] In the Tolkien Fan Fiction Survey conducted in 2014–2015, 57% of respondents agreed with the statement: "Writing fan fiction lets me tell the story how I wish it had been told," while as many as 95% agreed with the milder thesis: "Writing fan fiction lets me express my views or interpretations of Tolkien's world" (Walls-Thumma 2019, 21–22). From the perspective of this article, these results confirm that fan fiction is a significant tool enabling fans to deepen their personal connection with the myth of Arda – by developing their own "personal" versions of Tolkien's world.

In the introductory part of this monograph, it was noted that pre-modern people inscribed their lives into universal mythic patterns, which allowed them to satisfy the psychological-existential need to "live in myth" or "live in the context of myth". In the case of Tolkien fan fiction, myth and real life likewise permeate each other to a considerable degree, and a similar desire is realised. This applies primarily to those fans who themselves write fan fiction, though not only to them. Given the vast number and considerable diversity of versions of the myth of Arda available in fan works collected in online archives, each audience member can select the form of Middle-earth's mythology that best aligns with their personal vision and psychological needs.

One should not, however, set the creators of Tolkien fan fiction against its audience, since in essence they form a single community (Sturgis 2007, 190). Readers often become creators in this community, and creators are usually also active readers of other authors' texts. In this community, new stories set in the world of Arda continually emerge, forming countless fan versions of Tolkien's mythology. Thus, the boundary between creator and audience gradually blurs, and Middle-earth becomes a real space of shared imagination.

Although it may seem paradoxical, fan-created parodies and pastiches also have immersive potential. A good example is the humorous *The Very Secret Diaries* by Cassandra Claire – a series of tongue-in-cheek "secret diaries" of characters from *The Lord of the Rings*, published online and widely circulated within the fandom (Fanlore 2025c). Maintained in a tone of grotesque humour, Claire's work illustrates how fans play with literary conventions and with the characters' personae, treating them as if they were real individuals with their own inner lives. The viral popularity of these texts on the internet demonstrated that even in a playful form, audiences want to "remain in the world of Middle-earth" – following the "behind-the-scenes" adventures of the Fellowship of the Ring in a tongue-in-cheek fashion. Although the intent of the authors of parodies may be critical or humorous, for fans the familiarity with these works constitutes part of a deep immersion in the text – after all, fully understanding the joke requires an excellent knowledge of the original. Each such narrative related to Tolkien's world – whether a serious continuation or a playful variation – not only demonstrates the lasting presence of Middle-earth in the minds of its audience, but also further reinforces that presence.

2.5.3 Narratives Inspired by Tolkien as a Way for Fans to Existentially Experience the Myth of Arda

While discussing the phenomenon of Tolkienology (see 2.3) in this chapter, it was noted that this extends fans' engagement with the myth of Arda through the analytical ordering and reconstruction of its details. Tolkienologists thus concentrate closely on the source version of the myth, striving to recreate as faithfully as possible the languages, history, culture, metaphysics, geography, botany and architecture of Tolkien's universe, as well as the subtle nuances of the mythological history recounted within it. In doing so, they subordinate their own imagination to the paths laid down by Tolkien himself. Fan speculations, discussed in subsection 2.4, do not adhere so strictly to the source version of the myth. Since they essentially concern matters left unresolved by Tolkien, they permit the author's enthusiasts a degree of their own creativity, in certain respects moving towards the narrative expansion of the universe of Arda. The narratives inspired by Tolkien, which have been the subject of this subchapter, go even further – they open up to fans the possibility of continuing the mythology of Middle-earth in an almost unrestricted way.

It is beyond question that, as a first step, fan-authors transport themselves into Tolkien's mythic realm. The narrative forms described above are, after all, indeed inspired by the work of the Oxford professor. Next, however, the authors surrender themselves entirely to the power of their own imagination, transforming Tolkien's original mythopoeic story into a kind of "private vision of the myth of Arda", departing to a greater or lesser extent from the literary original. This is apparent both in post-Tolkienian fantasy and in fan fiction inspired by the works of the author of *The Lord of the Rings*.

In the case of the first of the phenomena mentioned, the authors often consciously endeavour not to be "too Tolkienesque" – if only for fear of the accusation of plagiarism. On the other hand, since they openly admit that the myth of Arda was a source of inspiration for them, and the narratives they have created bear clear traces of resemblance to the literary original, the outcome of their creativity can likewise be regarded, at least to some extent, as an extension of immersion in Tolkien's universe. Just as for writers their works offer an opportunity to creatively develop the myth – by creating their own private variants of stories from Middle-earth – so for readers those works constitute an invitation to immerse themselves in these narratives as further variants of the literary

original. In other words, if one considers the myth of Arda to be a kind of collection of archetypes, then post-Tolkienian fantasy, through its numerous references to it, can be treated as a way of prolonging fans' exposure to that paradigmatic myth. This applies to both fan-authors and fan-readers.

Tolkien fan fiction stories, by contrast, are intended to be viewed explicitly as fandom-created, private continuations of the myth of Arda. The authors of fan stories thus transport themselves into the universe of Arda and then, in an uninhibited play of imagination, develop its myth, altering it in accordance with their own desires. As a result, numerous diverse versions of it arise, which are mutually contradictory. In the context of the present discussion, however, the key point is that these narratives offer the opportunity to experience the enchantment of Middle-earth in a more personal way, to discover new stories set in the familiar universe, or to adapt them to one's own existential situation. From a psychological point of view, fan fiction thus broadens and deepens the possibilities of saturating one's own life with Tolkien's mythic world.

In this way, both forms of Tolkien-inspired narrative can be regarded as ways of fulfilling the fan desire to "inhabit Arda". By creating their own version of the myth – one that better corresponds to their personal needs and current existential situation – fans increase the emotional potential of the experience of entering that fantasy world while reading. To some extent, then, one is dealing here with a symbolic and affective entry into the world of myth, functionally analogous to the rituals of pre-modern humans – although the intensity of these experiences for *homo mythicus* was of course significantly greater. At the same time, attention should also be drawn to the process of "bringing the myth of Arda into reality", which can likewise be observed in the context of Tolkien-inspired narratives. In this process, fans assume the role of sub-creators of Tolkien's myth, infusing it with elements of their own personal lives. As a result, the boundary between their real existence and the world of myth becomes blurred to some degree, as is especially evident in the case of fan fiction. The myth, augmented in such a way as to better reflect the needs of fans' real lives, in turn exerts an influence on their functioning in the world.

2.6 Living in Middle-earth: Other Phenomena of Fan Culture Associated with the Need to "Inhabit Arda"

The forms of reception of Tolkien's literature described thus far do not exhaust all the strategies through which fans are able to satisfy the psychological-existential need to "live in the context of myth." Indeed, discussing all of these strategies would be difficult, for with the evolution of contemporary culture their number is constantly increasing – new ways of referencing Tolkien's works continue to emerge, and fans are also learning to innovatively use older, already known adaptations. Fortunately, it is not necessary to discuss all of these phenomena here, since the aim of this chapter is not to provide a comprehensive presentation of all the popular-culture forms through which the active fan reception of Tolkien's literature is manifested. Rather, it seeks to analyse selected forms, chosen specifically to highlight how they may satisfy the psychological-existential need to "live in myth," or "live in the context of myth."

Guided by the aim of the present research understood in this way, and by the limitations outlined above, the selection of culturally active fan forms of reception of Tolkien's literature for analysis was determined by a threefold criterion. First, it was decided to present such modes of reception of Tolkien's works that are popular within the Tolkien fandom and therefore constitute, on a mass scale, the phenomenon examined in this monograph. The next aspect taken into account was the non-obviousness of interpreting given forms of the reception of Tolkien's works as a symbolic and affective "inhabiting of Arda", which made it possible to point to a certain novelty. Finally, it was decided to primarily discuss those forms of fan reception that could be clearly identified and treated as cultural texts, and thus could be coherently interpreted using the methodological tools outlined in the introductory section of this monograph.

Nevertheless, in this subchapter, we will mention some modes of fan reception of Tolkien's mythopoeic works that have thus far been omitted, though we will no longer focus on interpreting them as culturally active forms of fan reception or particular ways of continuing the weaving of Tolkien's myth. Instead, they will be presented briefly and strictly in terms of how they can be understood in the context of fulfilling the psychological need to "live in myth" through the mythology of Arda.

2.6.1 Quasi-religious Forms of Fan Reception of Tolkien's Works

In the introductory part of this monograph, it was noted that quasi-religious forms of fan reception of Tolkien's works have already received fairly detailed scholarly treatment[94]. Returning to those findings, the aim here is to indicate how such forms of fan engagement fit within the broader spectrum of ways in which Tolkien's mythology may serve to fulfil the psychological need to "live in myth".

Davidsen, in his research, points out that there are fan communities which treat Tolkien's Legendarium as a basis for real religious practices (Davidsen 2014; 2017; 2019; 2024). The phenomena that the researcher terms "Tolkien religion" and "Elven movement" can thus be directly regarded as contemporary equivalents of the way in which pre-modern people "lived in myth". The content of the myth of Arda is taken up by members of these groups in a religious manner, just as in the case of archaic forms of living myth. In this way, Tolkien enthusiasts become devotees who treat the Legendarium as an account of actually existing supernatural beings and realms, legitimising their interpretations by presenting Tolkien as a visionary, an esotericist, and even an incarnate fey spirit (Davidsen 2014, 499; 2017, 26; 2019, 38–39). The divine pantheon of Arda is here the object of religious rituals, and some of the faithful even believe that they are incarnations of entities described in the Oxford professor's mythopoeic narratives – the so-called "Awakened Elves" (Davidsen 2014, 202–203; 2017, 18; 2019, 35–36).

According to Davidsen (2014, 509), the fundamental belief of members of the Tolkien religion is that the literary mythology of the Oxford professor pertains to real supernatural beings – the Valar, Maiar, and Quendi – who inhabit a world different from the physical one but accessible through ritual. Although differences and even contradictions thus arise at the level of justification and rationalisation among the followers of the Tolkien religion, from the perspective of the present discussion it can be said that the universe of Arda becomes for them a functional equivalent of the world of the gods in the mythological religions of pre-modern peoples. Even though, in ancient Greece, the divine sphere of existence was regarded as fully real, for mortals it was accessible only in very exceptional cases. And although

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[94] The rationale indicated in the text was, in fact, one of the reasons for which no separate subchapter was devoted here to a discussion of this phenomenon. The second reason is the fact – mentioned in the introduction to this monograph – that strictly cultic forms of reception remain a niche phenomenon within the Tolkien fandom, involving a relatively small group of enthusiasts.

the sacred sphere of Greek religion was not perceived as transcendent, the afterlife sphere, the world of the Olympian gods, and the realm of mortals were permanently separated, constituting, as it were, autonomous dimensions of a single cosmic entity (Jastrzębski 2014, 59–62). In rituals or ecstatic experiences, however, it was possible to transcend the boundaries of those dimensions of existence, thereby reaching the divine world. A similar metaphysical construction of the worldview may be conjectured in the case of the Tolkien religion analysed by Davidsen. The secondary reality of Tolkien's mythopoeic narrative is perceived here in the same way as the world of the gods and heroes of ancient myths – as something real, both in the worldview-intellectual dimension and in the affective-ritual dimension.

It should be noted, however, that such a fully religious reception of Tolkien's myth is rare, and it is even debatable whether it should be regarded as part of fan culture. After all, the adherents of the Tolkien religion themselves, as Davidsen observes (2014, 510), distinguish themselves from the fans of the Oxford professor's literature, whose domain is held to be play, in contrast to the ritual approach to interpretation preferred by the former. This difference is also recognised by Tolkien fans, as Emanuel points out (2025, 42). Nonetheless, there are practices in the fandom that can be regarded as quasi-ritual, and although no strictly religious beliefs lie behind them, they can be seen as behaviours akin to cultic ones. Emanuel draws attention to the quasi-religious ritual of Enyalië, which he calls "fan liturgy" (Emanuel 2025, 29). This is not only a way for fans to pay homage to Tolkien at his graveside, but also a kind of communal ceremony in which the Tolkien community, thanks to the symbolism of the ritual, in a sense blurs to some degree the boundaries between the fictional universe of the myth and the real world (Emanuel 2025, 29, 39–42)[95].

Regardless of the fact that a strictly religious reception of Tolkien's myth concerns only a very small number of the enthusiasts of his literature, certain quasi-ritual ceremonies are already far more popular within the fandom. While from a theological or sociological perspective the difference between the two phenomena is fundamental, from the point of view of this discussion – that is, looking solely at the psychological function of these behaviours in the context of the desire to "live in the context of myth" – there is no difference in essence, only in degree. In both

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[95] The Enyalië ceremony is also examined more broadly in the context of fan pilgrimages to the grave of the author of *The Lord of the Rings*. A survey conducted by Mina Lukić and Dejan Vukelić (2022) found that fans who visit Tolkien's grave and other memorial sites associated with him experience these events in a profoundly ritual-symbolic manner.

cases one can observe a quasi-ritual symbolic and affective ascension in the imagination from the empirical world to the mythic reality of Arda during the ritual, which functions here as a kind of "sphere of the sacred". The very form of the ritual intensifies the feeling of becoming united with the reality of the myth. On the other hand, the emotional power of that experience, along with its communal nature, in turn strengthens the influence of Tolkien's myth on the everyday experience of one's existence in the world and, in this sense, indirectly also transfers elements of the universe of Arda into reality.

2.6.2 Tolkien Fan Organisations – Living Middle-earth in Everyday Life

The above-mentioned Enyalië ritual discussed earlier in the context of its quasi-ritual character is also the culminating element of Oxonmoot, the annual gathering organised by The Tolkien Society – an international association of fans of the Oxford professor's literature, based in the United Kingdom. A natural part of any discussion regarding the active cultural reception of Tolkien's works should therefore be the issue of institutions established by fans largely for the very purpose of promoting such reception.`

In the first chapter, the influence of these organisations on the socio-cultural aspect of the reception of Tolkien's mythopoeic works was deliberately omitted, even though their contribution to that phenomenon is obvious. This was because the aim at that stage was to focus not so much on the role of institutions contributing to the expansion of the Tolkienian myth in contemporary pop culture, as on discerning the spontaneity and multidimensionality of the phenomenon, which developed to a large extent independently of institutional support. After all, initially there were no organisations uniting Tolkien's fans, and the fandom surrounding his works arose from the enthusiasm of readers rather than from any institutional initiative. Tolkien never sought the establishment of institutions to promote Middle-earth – those were founded by his fans. Similarly, the later expansion of the myth of Arda occurred not only thanks to an organised institutional fandom, but also independently of it, and at times even in spite of it[96]. In the discussion of the socio-cultural expansion

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[96] This is especially evident in the context of the adaptation of Tolkien's mythopoeic works by the hippie movement. It is worth noting that The Tolkien Society was founded

of the myth of Arda presented in the first chapter, it was important to recognise precisely its spontaneous, rather than institutionally motivated, character[97].

By contrast, in the second chapter fan organisations were referenced multiple times, especially in the discussion of Tolkienology. In subsection 2.3, among other things, the beginnings of fans organising themselves into small groups were mentioned, such as The Fellowship of the Ring and the fanzines published by them (for example, *I Palantír*). The largest Tolkien organisations were also highlighted, such as The Tolkien Society and The Mythopoeic Society, as well as the symposia they organise (Mythcon, Oxonmoot) and the periodicals they issue, which over time evolved into academic journals (*Mythlore*, *Mallorn*). This is, of course, only a small fragment of the ways in which organised Tolkien institutions can contribute to the fan reception of the Oxford professor's literature as a living myth. Below, we will outline some aspects of this cultural phenomenon[98].

From Local Groups of Enthusiasts to International Fan Organisations

Local groups of Tolkien enthusiasts had already begun to organise themselves at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s, a good example of which is the

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somewhat in opposition to the way Tolkien's works were being used by the hippies. Vera Chapman, the founder of this institution, wrote about this explicitly (Hammond and Scull 2017, 392).

[97] Although in the first chapter of this volume the focus was indeed on the spontaneous reaction of fans, the institutional aspect of the socio-cultural expansion of the Tolkienian myth is nonetheless evident, especially if one takes into account how greatly Tolkien fan institutions have expanded over the years, how the number of initiatives they undertake has gradually increased, and what position they hold today in society. At present, one does not need to be a fan of the Oxford professor's works to hear, for example, about Tolkien Reading Day, organised by The Tolkien Society.

[98] In the present work, no separate subchapter was devoted to fan organisations, in part because of the research methodology employed here, which concentrates the inquiry on Tolkien's own works or their various culturally active fan adaptations as cultural texts. A second, no less important reason is that the issue of Tolkien fan institutions is itself so complex that it would require a dedicated effort to present them reliably, thereby redirecting attention away from the main subject of this research. Finally, relevant studies on the emergence and development of the institutional fandom already exist (Coker 2022; Hammond and Scull 2017, 389–394; Burdge and Burke 2007a), so there is no need to present the phenomenon itself.

aforementioned The Fellowship of the Ring. These groups published fanzines in which Tolkien's works were discussed, and even printed fan works set in Arda (see section 2.5.2 in this volume). However, the Tolkien Society of America, founded in 1965 by a then-teenage Tolkien enthusiast, Dick Plotz, is regarded as the forerunner of the formal Tolkien fandom. He wrote a letter to the author of *The Lord of the Rings* and received his kind (albeit not unconditional) support for the initiative of uniting fans within an association (Tolkien 2023a, Letter 276). From the late 1960s, the Tolkien movement took the form of a permanent infrastructure of societies and periodicals that link fans and researchers in many countries. The founding of the Mythopoeic Society in the USA (1967) and The Tolkien Society in Great Britain (1969) can be considered symbolic moments in the institutionalisation of the fandom. Both organisations have since organised regular conferences and publications, gradually becoming pillars of the community structured around the active cultural reception of the Tolkienian myth[99].

The scale and international reach of these organisations are illustrated by data and organisational structures presented on their official websites. The Tolkien Society reports approximately 4,000 members in over 60 countries and a network of local groups (smials) that meet regularly and run programmes of events and readings (The Tolkien Society n.d.b). The Mythopoeic Society, for its part, defines itself as a "national/international" organisation, maintains a network of discussion groups and has been organising Mythcon since 1970; in addition, it publishes *Mythlore*, a peer-reviewed journal devoted to mythopoeic literature (Mythopoeic Society n.d.a; n.d.b).

Beyond this, there exists a dense network of national Tolkien societies across Europe and elsewhere, which run their own conventions, periodicals and local chapters. For example: Forodrim in Sweden (Forodrim n.d.); Deutsche Tolkien Gesellschaft in Germany (DTG n.d.); Sociedad Tolkien Española in Spain, with an extensive network of *smials* (STE n.d.); Società Tolkieniana Italiana in Italy, with the annual Hobbiton convention (STI n.d.); Unquendor in the Netherlands (Unquendor n.d.); Tolkiendil in France (Tolkiendil n.d.); Bri in Denmark (Bri n.d.); Magyar Tolkien Társaság in Hungary (MTT n.d.); Sociedad

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[99] This is a somewhat simplified picture for the purposes of the present discussion. Both of the mentioned organisations proved over time to be the most enduring and broad-based institutional representatives of the fandom. The actual process of the emergence and development of institutions devoted to Tolkien was more dynamic and full of twists, which, however, is not so important in the context of the main subject of this discussion. A more detailed account of the beginnings and early development of these organisations is provided in the publication by Hammond and Scull (2017, 390–393).

Tolkien Chilena in Chile (STC n.d.); Sociedad Tolkien Peruana in Peru (STP n.d.); Sociedad Tolkiendili de México in Mexico (STM n.d.). Together they form a dispersed, multilingual ecosystem of institutions which – regardless of programmatic differences – sustains the rhythm of celebrations, conferences and everyday practices, allowing fans to truly integrate the myth of Arda with their lives.

Apart from the largest institutions and their national branches that bring together Tolkien's fans, there are also other local organisations dedicated to the literature of the Oxford professor – the institutional structures in Poland provide a good example in this regard. These include clubs, associations, as well as long-standing publishing ventures and recurring events. The longest-running such entity is the Tolkien Section "Parmadili" at the Silesian Speculative Fiction Club (Katowice), established in 1985 (Parmadili.pl, "O sekcji," n.d.). For many years the section has held monthly meetings, producing several Tolkien fanzines as well as – since 2004 – the almanac *Aiglos*, which combines academic and popular perspectives (Aiglos n.d.). In Bielawa (south-western Poland), Stowarzyszenie Tolkienowskie "Wieża" operates as the organiser of one of the oldest open-air Tolkien-themed events in Poland – Tolk-Folk (held since 1997) – which over the years has evolved into a nationwide festival of the Tolkien fan community, combining workshops, talks, field games, and re-enactments (Tolk-folk n.d.). It is also worth mentioning Stowarzyszenie Miłośników Śródziemia "Ennorath," active since 2008, which regularly organises gatherings, Tolkien-themed LARPs, and other fan initiatives (Ennorath n.d.). The organisations mentioned here are only examples selected from among the numerous Polish associations and groups that sustain the circulation of information, the practice of amateur research and fan creativity, and enable the community of Tolkien enthusiasts to come together. A similar situation can be observed in other countries as well.

What has been stated above still does not exhaust the issue of the institutional dimension of Tolkien fandom. Indeed, there are also fan groups centred around internet portals, discussion forums, and hundreds of fan communities on social media devoted to Middle-earth stories. All of these forms of organisation foster the building of interpersonal relationships focused on the shared experience of fascination with the myth of Arda, making it an actual part of fans' everyday existence. They also allow for the exchange of personal reflections, emotions or doubts related to the reading of Tolkien texts, which further supports the creation of various derivative

works that fill the real world with references to the mythology of Middle-earth. The very fact of the existence of these organisations, and above all the scale of their reach and their virtually global character, indicate an intense process by which fans are bringing the myth of Arda down to Earth. Below, we will cite a few concrete initiatives undertaken by major Tolkien institutions to show how they bring admirers of the author of *The Lord of the Rings* closer to realising the ideal of living the Middle-earth myth in their daily lives.

Tolkien Fandom Celebrations: The Calendar of Arda in the Real World

Events organised by fan associations abound in rituals and customs that originate in Tolkien's Legendarium. They are woven into the lives of fans, thus filling their existence in reality with references to the myth of Arda. A paradigmatic example here is the Enyalië, mentioned repeatedly above, that is, the "Remembrance" ceremony at the grave of J. R. R. Tolkien in Wolvercote, which concludes each year's Oxonmoot – the largest gathering of members of The Tolkien Society in Oxford. Enyalië itself was the impulse for the birth of Oxonmoot and remains its culmination (Emanuel 2025, 33–36). As noted above, this ceremony can be viewed as a "fan liturgy" in which, through the symbolism of the ritual, fans dissolve the boundaries between the mythic universe and the real world (2.6.1).

It is also worth mentioning the symbolic spatiotemporal dimension of this event. The very name of the celebration is derived from Old English and Latin, literally meaning "meeting in Oxford" (respectively: *moot* – "meeting"; *Oxonium* – "Oxford"), referring to the city significant in Tolkien's life and work. Accordingly, the city contains sites of symbolic importance for his fans, including Wolvercote Cemetery itself, where the inscriptions on the author's grave unite the mythic and the real realms[100]. The "meeting in Oxford" is always scheduled for the weekend closest to 22 September, the date on which Bilbo and Frodo celebrated their birthdays in Middle-earth (The Tolkien Society n.d.c).

Another example of combining the mythic calendar with the real one is the Birthday Toast – an annual toast to Tolkien that is a tradition

[100] The joint grave of J. R. R. and Edith Tolkien in Wolvercote Cemetery is inscribed with the names "Beren" and "Lúthien", which has made it one of the most recognisable memorial sites for Tolkien fans.

upheld by The Tolkien Society (The Tolkien Society n.d.d; Tolkien Gateway, "Birthday Toast," n.d.). It imitates the custom described in *The Lord of the Rings*, in which Frodo each year honoured Bilbo's birthday after the latter's departure (Tolkien 2001a, 67). Fans carry this tradition from the literary Middle-earth into the real world, annually commemorating Tolkien's birthday each year in a manner reminiscent of the celebration held in honour of the Hobbit. One could say that just as Frodo felt the absence of Bilbo yet at the same time sensed his enduring presence in his heart, so too fans, in raising a toast on 3 January, symbolically remember Tolkien as an ever-present "great absentee". In this way, through these fan practices, the calendar of the myth of Arda is symbolically united with the commemoration of its real-life author.

A further fan celebration that clearly links the mythic calendar with real-world time is Tolkien Reading Day, celebrated on 25 March. This date – the day of Sauron's downfall – is for the fan community a symbolic moment of "victory of good over evil" (The Tolkien Society n.d.e; The Bristorian 2025). There is also a deep religious symbolism woven into this choice of date, as Tom Shippey has pointed out: as a Catholic, Tolkien made 25 March (the Feast of the Annunciation) the day of Sauron's downfall, but left this parallel implicit in the text (Shippey 1992, 181). Fans who discover this connection gain an added sense that the world of Arda is intertwined with our own, for the calendar of the literary myth is here symbolically interwoven with the Christian rhythm of the liturgical year. Indeed, the celebrations of Tolkien Reading Day often take the form of an actual holiday: in addition to communal reading, fans organise feasts, toasts, and film marathons – filling the day with various activities drawn from Tolkien's world (The Bristorian 2025).

The above examples illustrate how the activities of Tolkien fan institutions enable fans to incorporate the mythology of Arda into their real lives. By means of cyclical celebrations, rituals, and the formation of a community centred on Tolkien's work, they constantly maintain contact with the world of myth not only through reading the texts of the Legendarium, but also through their day-to-day existence in the real world. In this way, Middle-earth becomes, in a sense, "a second home" not only for the individual fan but for the entire community, which shares its space as if it were a real homeland. In the pre-modern world, the rhythm of life was determined by myths and by the religious rites based on them (Eliade 1959a, 20; 1959b, 68–69). The Christian counterpart of this vision of time is the idea of the liturgical year (Eliade 1959a, 130; 1959b, 72).

Tolkien celebrations organised by fan institutions serve a similar function, constituting a kind of "liturgical year for fans", allowing them, while living in reality, to simultaneously "live in myth" – that is, to organise the rhythm of their daily existence around the calendar of "feasts of Arda".

2.6.3 Tolkien Tourism: The Space of the Myth of Arda in the Real World

Since the above discussion drew attention to the permeation of Tolkien's myth into reality in the temporal aspect, one should now examine how this phenomenon occurs in the spatial dimension. To this end, it is worth returning once more to the phenomenon of *Enyalië*. The previously cited texts by Emanuel and by Lukić and Vukelić demonstrate how the space of the real world can symbolically and affectively connect fans with the world of Arda (Emanuel 2025, 28–29; Lukić and Vukelić 2022, 83–84). A site particularly associated with Tolkien (his grave) thus becomes a destination for fans' journeys, undertaken not only to honour the writer but also to feel "closer" to the literary myth he created (Emanuel 2025, 39–41; Lukić and Vukelić 2022, 82–85).

For fans, this particular area of the real world (Tolkien's grave) thus takes on qualities of a portal. It enables them, to some extent, to transport themselves into the world of the myth and to have a sense of almost participating in it, while at the same time remaining in physical space. This phenomenon can also be framed in another way. For if a certain place in reality provides fans with a sense of being transported into the universe of the myth, one can also say that the myth itself descends into the real world at that site. Empirical space thus begins, in a sense, to belong to the mythic dimension. This phenomenon, moreover, pertains not only to Tolkien's grave itself but also to other places associated with his life. Furthermore, one may conjecture a similar unification of real and mythic space with respect to places in the real world that served Tolkien as prototypes for his descriptions of the places of Middle-earth. Finally, one may expect the interpenetration of Arda's space and the real sphere to occur in purpose-built environments designed to resemble that fantasy world (such as Hobbiton in New Zealand). It is precisely such places that lie at the heart of the phenomenon of Tolkien tourism – that is, the travels of fans to locations where they can feel as if the myth

of Arda were descending into the real world[101].

Places Associated with Tolkien's Life

Among Tolkien's fans, journeys to places associated with his life are very popular. It is well known that the writer's early years in Sarehole, a quiet village near Birmingham, left a distinct mark on his vision of the land of the Hobbits. Sarehole Mill and the surrounding landscapes significantly inspired the aesthetics of the Shire, and the local miller is often identified as an inspiration for the character of Ted Sandyman in *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien Gateway, "Sarehole Mill," n.d.). Tolkien's fans come to Sarehole to walk the same paths that the young Ronald once ran along, experiencing the sight of the old mill and pond familiar from the Oxford professor's books. In their perception, this space ceases to be a mere corner of the English countryside and becomes a living piece of the Shire. In this way, the content of the myth is, as it were, "manifested" in reality.

Places associated with Tolkien's later life, particularly in Oxford, serve a similar function. The city in which the author spent several decades has become the destination for pilgrimages of a sort: fans make their way from historic colleges (where Tolkien lectured) to the legendary pub "The Eagle and Child" (the meeting place of the Inklings), and finally on to Wolvercote Cemetery[102]. There, at the shared grave of Tolkien and his wife Edith, they experience the culmination of the symbolic convergence of mythic space and reality. On the tombstone are inscribed the names "Lúthien" and "Beren" – the names of beloved characters from *The*

[101] The very issue of Tolkien tourism has already been quite well covered in the literature on the subject: from definitions and typologies of this phenomenon (Beeton 2016), through analyses of the experience of "authenticity" and fan community (Buchmann et al. 2010; Sullivan 2019) and the concept of "pilgrimages to Middle-earth" (Goh 2014), up to studies on the motivations of those visiting Hobbiton (Singh and Best 2004) and fan journeys to biographical sites, especially to Tolkien's grave (Lukić and Vukelić 2022). For this reason, the present work does not undertake a broad discussion of the phenomenon of Tolkien tourism itself, but only selected aspects of it – those relevant to the main aim of the chapter.
[102] Research by Lukić and Vukelić (2022) shows that out of 500 respondents who visited various "Tolkien-related" locations in the United Kingdom, as many as 63% went to the author's grave, and for the vast majority of them (84.4% of responses) this site was a very important, and often the most important, stop on their itinerary (Lukić and Vukelić 2022, 68). One can also easily find online personal accounts of such fan pilgrimages to the cemetery (Zehnle 2016), as well as discussions about the most important Tolkien-related places to visit in Oxford and its surroundings (bigoldad n.d.).

Silmarillion, which Tolkien had attributed to himself and his wife. Many fans treat a visit to the writer's grave as an almost ritual experience: they contemplate the site in silence, sing or recite passages from his works, and leave flowers, letters or small mementoes in homage to "the Professor" (Lukić and Vukelić 2022, 75–76; Zehnle 2016). In their view, it is an almost sacred place to which they make pilgrimages: a material point where the real world touches the story of Arda. In fact, the space of the cemetery is transformed here in the eyes of fans into a mythic space: the real location takes on a symbolic dimension, becoming a bridge between the everyday world and Middle-earth as experienced in the imagination[103].

Real-World Landscapes that Inspired Middle-earth

The second category consists of geographical locations whose landscapes inspired Tolkien in creating the literary scenery of Middle-earth. By visiting them, fans are attempting, as it were, to "touch the original sources of the myth". Seeing with their own eyes the landscapes that served as prototypes for the regions of Middle-earth, they can treat them as if they were physically contemplating the space of the myth. For a paradigmatic example, one may recall the well-known expedition of the young Tolkien to the Swiss Alps in 1911. One of the places he visited – the picturesque Lauterbrunnental valley in the Bernese Oberland – is considered the real-world equivalent of the hidden valley of Rivendell. Admittedly, Tolkien left only a few hints of this in his letters (Tolkien 2023a, Letter 306), but researchers point to striking similarities: Lauterbrunnental is a deep, green valley wedged between steep rocky cliffs from which numerous waterfalls cascade – exactly the kind of image that Tolkien presents in his description of Elrond's abode (Garth 2020, 86–88).

John Garth states that a single trip to the Alps "laid the foundations for almost every mountain scene" that Tolkien later described (Garth 2020, 83). The young writer was confronted there with the majesty of mountain peaks and glaciers, which awakened in him "a sense of endless untold stories" hiding behind every summit on the horizon (Garth 2020, 85–86). Today's fans, aware of these connections, enrich their experience while hiking along Alpine trails by making conscious references to the myth

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[103] Fans reported that it was precisely at the grave – inscribed with the names Beren and Lúthien – that they felt closest both to Tolkien himself and to the world of his myth, as if the boundary between the creator, his work, and reality were blurred in the stone of the headstone (Lukić and Vukelić 2022, 76–77, 82).

of Arda (Haiken 2022; Fuggle 2023; travel_ali n.d.). When they gaze at the snow-covered peaks above Lauterbrunnen or traverse the mountain passes of the Alps – assuming that these inspired Tolkien's descriptions of the Misty Mountains or Moria[104] – they activate their imagination and see the landscapes of Middle-earth. In a similar way, fans of Arda's mythology can also see the Old Forest on the edges of the Shire by visiting Moseley Bog near Birmingham. In reality, this was an area where Tolkien used to play as a child (Garth 2020, 114). Today, however, it is a nature reserve marked with signs reminding visitors that this very place was the prototype for the Old Forest in *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

In all these cases, the real landscape acquires a mythic significance and begins to function, as it were, on two levels at once. The act of fans visiting these places is thus not merely nature or cultural tourism, but also a kind of "journey into the interior of the myth". By physically being present in a space that was, in a sense, the prototype for Tolkien's descriptions of places in mythic Arda, fans merge their visual impressions with the memory of literary descriptions. In this way, thanks to the power of imagination, they experience the space of the myth of Arda within the real world.

Places Constructed to Resemble the Mythic Space of Arda

The phenomenon of the interpenetration of Arda's mythology with real-world space is most fully evident in those places where the imagined geography of Middle-earth becomes directly materialised in the landscape, as is the case with the sites created for Jackson's film adaptation. The Tolkien trails established in New Zealand in the twenty-first century exemplify how literally a myth can enter into the space of the real world. In fact, fan expeditions to New Zealand have assumed the dimensions of a global phenomenon. Just a few years after the premiere of the film trilogy, the number of visitors to New Zealand had increased by approximately 40%, partly as a result of fascination with Middle-earth (Sullivan 2019, 6). The New Zealand government and the local tourism industry consciously fuelled this trend, promoting the country as "the real Middle-earth". The "100% Middle-earth" campaign explicitly invited travellers to visit New Zealand in order to immerse themselves in Tolkien's fantasy world (Readfearn 2013).

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[104] Garth (2020, 83–90) suggests in his book that Tolkien was inspired by the Alps in precisely this manner.

Fans arriving on these distant islands have the opportunity to literally walk the paths of Tolkien's heroes: they visit the Edoras filming location (Mount Sunday), stand by Nen Hithoel – the lake known from *The Fellowship of the Ring* (North Mavora Lake) – and climb the slopes of the on-screen Mount Doom (Mount Ngāuruhoe). A prime destination of these pilgrimages is, of course, Hobbiton – the Hobbit village in Matamata that was preserved after shooting and transformed into a Shire open-air museum. Every year, hundreds of thousands of fans visit this place (Sullivan 2019, 6), strolling along the paths leading to the Hobbit holes and sitting down at tables in The Green Dragon Inn. Researchers describe such experiences in terms of "spiritual experiences" and "touristic pilgrimage" (Beeton 2016, 44; Buchmann et al. 2010, 240–241; Goh 2014, 269–274). Indeed, Hobbiton and the other filming locations of Jackson's adaptations have become for fans a kind of "mythical homeland" to which they journey as if to the world of Arda. From the perspective of Tolkien enthusiasts visiting New Zealand, the green hills of the Shire and the harsh landscapes of Mordor thus become a physical, geographical representation of the mythological space of Arda. By touring each of the locations known from the film adaptations of the Oxford professor's works, fans affectively and symbolically enter into the reality of the Middle-earth stories.

"Tolkienian" Places as a Sacred Space of the Living Myth

By traversing all the aforementioned places – from the mill in Sarehole to the hills of Hobbiton in New Zealand – fans, in their imagination, link the mythic space of Arda with regions of the real world. In this way, they ascend in imagination towards Middle-earth whenever the physical landscape awakens literary memories; at the same time, they bring its myth down to earth each time their footsteps trace symbolic maps of Middle-earth on the surface of our globe. As a result, something akin to Eliade's "sacred place" emerges – a breach in the purely geometrical geography of the empirical world. For pre-modern peoples, the "geometry of the sacred" signified the existence of places where the space of everyday existence was joined with the realm of the sacred (Eliade 1959b, 20–29). In the context of myth, understood as a narratively developed religious symbol, this meant that in such points of physical space, two dimensions of reality coexisted simultaneously: the sacred and the profane. The "sacred place" itself was a kind of portal uniting them into a whole[105].

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[105] The validity of understanding myth in this particular way is addressed in footnote 7 of the present volume.

For Tolkien's fans, places that connect areas of the real world with the space of mythic Arda function psychologically in a manner similar to the aforementioned "sacred places" of pre-modern people. Journeys to these places, when regarded as a ritual of travel, establish a symbolic and affective conviction that Arda, as it were, exists among us, and that one can "feel its existence" in certain special locations. In this way, each new location is established as "Tolkienian", linked to the myth by particular bonds. Fan communities, by sharing accounts of these journeys, further strengthen this conviction. Just as Tolkien fandom celebrations imbue time with references typical of the living myth, so the growing number of "Tolkienian locations" fulfils the same function with regard to space. It is thanks, in part, to such references that the Oxford professor's mythopoeic work can indeed function, in its fan reception, as a contemporary form of living myth.

2.6.4 Fan Art of Arda and the Art of Living the Myth

Tolkien, Art and Sub-creation of the Myth of Arda

In addressing the topic of fan art related to the myth of Arda, it is worth beginning with what the author's own views can contribute to understanding the phenomenon of the widespread popularity of references to the Legendarium in contemporary popular culture.

In Tolkien's understanding of art, a key distinction is drawn between what he referred to by the terms "enchantment" and "magic". The latter term denotes the cunning manipulation of the laws of nature, directed toward achieving efficacy in the external world and intended to secure a certain form of domination or even enslavement. Tolkien compared magic to a "machine" or to technology, understood as the methodical use of various means, procedures, and devices (material or organisational) to force a desired result in the world (Tolkien 2023a, Letter 131, 204-205; Letter 155). Magic is thus conceived as a kind of "will to power" oriented towards its own accumulation, operating through domination, control, and subjugation, as exemplified by Morgoth, Sauron, or Saruman. In contrast to magic understood in this way, one must distinguish "enchantment" – namely, the enchantment of the recipient in contact with art. It does not enslave as magic does, but rather brings about a state of wonder, while at the same time enabling one to penetrate into the work

of Creation, acting as a stimulus to delve deeper toward a more complete understanding of the object that evoked that wonder (Tolkien 2008, 63-64).

The above distinction makes it possible to explain, in Tolkienian terms, why only a portion of the vast number of works that reference the stories of Middle-earth in contemporary culture can be associated with the fan art of Arda. Those references to the myth that attempt in some way to subordinate the audience, manipulate or exploit them for their own benefit are, by their very nature, outside the scope of what is defined here as "fan art of Arda". For if they came into being with motives other than a sincere admiration for Tolkien's work and are meant to serve aims other than sharing that admiration and giving it creative expression, then they represent an example of "magic" which, invoking the fans' love for the Legendarium, attempts to enslave them, in a sense, or at least to profit from them.

Fan art of Arda, by contrast, is a completely different matter, at least in principle. Tolkien's fans, if they truly are genuine fans and understand his work, ought by definition to create from motives of fascination with the myth of Middle-earth. Their works are thus the result of passion and the desire to share it with others – and it is fan art of Arda understood in this way that is the subject of the present considerations[106]. This corresponds to Tolkien's vision of art, which, through the "elvish craft" of "enchantment", enables co-participation through creative activity (Tolkien 2008, 64). The artist's work, including Tolkien's, is by its nature a sub-creation. As the Oxford professor himself observes, an artist does not "create out of nothing", but – as a participant in and sub-creator of the order of Creation – arranges, differentiates, and gives form[107]. It appears that, with regard to the myth of Arda, one can similarly conceive of the meaning of the art of its fans.

Tolkien's well-known dream was of a great mythology in which he himself would write "some of the great tales in fullness", while at the same time leaving room "for other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama" (Tolkien 2023a, Letter 131, 203-204). In this declaration, one

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[106] This study presents only the aforementioned "motivational criterion" for distinguishing "fan art of Arda" from the overall range of products functioning within the "commodified Middle-earth" – a phenomenon compared here to "magic" in Tolkien's sense. It does not, however, determine how specific works should be assigned to these categories.

[107] Tolkien puts it as follows: "(...) we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker" (Tolkien 2008, 66).

hears a desire for the continuity of his work "in the hands of others" – not only writers but indeed people of art in general. One should recall, however, that art, in Tolkien's view, ought to be in the service of reality – not altering it on a whim, but striving for a symbolic adequacy of its message, allowing one to delve deeper to behold the truth and beauty of the work of Creation. A similar function with respect to Tolkien's Middle-earth should therefore be fulfilled by works of fans drawing on its myth, if they are to be acknowledged as "fan art of Arda". Below, we shall examine examples of an artistic reception of Tolkien's literature understood in precisely this way.

Fan Art and Handicraft

The cultural activity of Arda's fans finds expression in an impressive body of fan output in the realm of visual arts and crafts[108]. Fans of Tolkien's literature produce countless works of visual art inspired by his world, ranging from drawings and paintings to digital concept art. There are extensive online galleries of Tolkien fan art (for instance, on platforms such as DeviantArt and ArtStation), where amateurs and semi-professionals present their visions of characters, landscapes, and scenes from the Legendarium. Some of these works rival the quality of officially published illustrations. Moreover, some artists who started out in the fan community were later hired for professional projects related to Tolkien[109]. Fan art serves a twofold function: for the creator, it is a means of entering into the depths of the world of Arda by meticulously recreating its visual elements, whereas for audiences, it represents an additional medium through which they can experience Middle-earth in a sensory way.

The art of Arda's fans also encompasses remarkable forms of artistic craftsmanship that go beyond standard drawings and illustrations. An excellent example is the project by Benjamin Harff, a German fine arts student who created a unique hand-illustrated and calligraphed edition of *The Silmarillion* as part of his thesis project. Harff devoted

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[108] The phenomenon of fan art devoted to Arda is intriguing in itself, but at the same time so rich that it far exceeds the possibility of detailed discussion within the present monograph. The individual fan works cited here – whether as part of the discussion or only through brief citations – have been selected so as to illustrate the phenomenon of fan art as an active cultural reception of the Tolkienian myth.

[109] An excellent example in this context is Ted Nasmith, and in a broader sense also John Howe (Nasmith n.d.; Festival Art and Books, "Interview – John Howe," n.d.).

a year of intensive work to bring to life a volume, the aesthetic of which directly harkens back to medieval illuminated manuscripts. He employed historical techniques of calligraphy and illumination using metallic colours (gold, silver, copper), crafting a work with meticulous attention to detail. The style of the work was chosen because Tolkien himself had a passion for calligraphy, particularly of the medieval variety (Collier 2009). Moreover, the content of *The Silmarillion* itself harmonises excellently with the ambience of illuminated manuscripts. Harff's project is an exemplary instance of fan art of Arda, one that creatively employs its myth while remaining true to the spirit of the original. The artist symbolically brought Tolkien's universe into reality, allowing the audience to feel as if it were an almost historical reality.

In a similar way, fans also engage in recreations of objects and artefacts from Tolkien's world. Some amateur blacksmiths forge their own copies of the One Ring or Elven swords (Patrick Adair Designs 2019; AWE me 2015). Fan jewellers craft necklaces modelled on the film's Evenstar (Instructables n.d.b.; Instructables n.d.c.). Cosplay artisans create faithful replicas of Sauron's helmet or the crown of the King of Gondor (Instructables n.d.g.; Instructables n.d.f.). There are popular online tutorials showing how to make Gondorian armour or a Hobbit pipe, which indicates that there is a demand for possessing a tangible piece of Middle-earth (Instructables n.d.d.; Instructables n.d.e.). Fans furnish their rooms with handmade items: maps of Middle-earth on the walls (Instructables n.d.a), hand-calligraphed scrolls bearing Elvish quotations (Breogan 2006; bagasuit091 2010), and figurines of characters (Cults3D n.d.).

Fan handicraft is a practice that makes it possible to translate Tolkien's myth into a concrete, material object that one can touch, wear (e.g. a ring) or use on a daily basis (e.g. mugs bearing the symbolism of Arda). Of course, the commercial market also caters to this need, offering, for example, licensed replicas of swords or jewellery featuring Arda's symbols. However, many fans choose to create such objects themselves, since the creative process for them constitutes an act of coming closer to the myth. The possession and creation of artefacts from Middle-earth turns a fan's everyday surroundings into a space resembling the beloved fantasy world: one's home can come to resemble Bag End (Smith 2016), and everyday activities allow one to symbolically and affectively connect with the world of the myth – if only through lighting a handmade Hobbit pipe like Bilbo.

Creative Weaving of Tolkien's Myth as Fan Art of Arda

Including all forms of handicraft within the notion of fan art of Arda may raise doubts, as it blurs the boundary between art and craft. Nevertheless, this approach is consistent with the understanding of fan art outlined above. Indeed, Tolkien fan art encompasses everything created out of love for the myth of Arda and a desire to share it with other fans, while at the same time remaining respectful of the myth and consistent with what it conveys. It is therefore worth considering whether an even broader interpretation of this phenomenon would be appropriate here.

Thus far, the clearest criterion for defining fan art of Arda has been the question of the creator's intent. In the case of fan art, the motive should be love for Tolkien's work and its fictional world, gratitude, and a desire to sub-create the myth, rather than any intent of domination, manipulation, or exploitation solely for monetary gain. On this basis, fan art of Arda was distinguished from the array of products and services belonging to the phenomenon of "commodified Middle-earth". Furthermore, the fan works themselves should be consistent with the original myth, which means, for example, ensuring the suitability of the materials used, proper proportions, and an aesthetic sensibility that should invariably evoke the source myth for the audience. Accordingly, when crafting, for instance, artefacts related to Hobbits, one should expect them to conform to the aesthetic of Hobbit culture; Gondorian armour ought to be produced in keeping with Tolkien's heraldry; and scrolls featuring Elvish quotations should observe the rules of the Tengwar script.

However, it is difficult to unambiguously resolve the question of what constitutes adequate fidelity in representing the universe of Arda in fan art. For there are two distinct currents within this art: the affirmational and the transformational, and within the latter, certain aesthetic and semantic alterations are acceptable (obsession_inc 2009; Walls-Thumma 2019). In light of the definition of Tolkien fan art adopted here, one can say that it is on the one hand creative, yet on the other remains true to the spirit of the original. In other words, its works expand or deepen the field of meanings of the myth of Arda, but at the same time, they should not shatter the canon through arbitrary innovations. Moreover, because Tolkien's myth has become a global mass phenomenon, fan art – even when produced individually – presupposes communication and hospitality toward other people "inhabiting Arda in imagination". If, on the other hand, in certain cultural works the motifs and aesthetics of Arda are instrumentalised

to exert influence, manipulate the audience, or exploit them for self-aggrandisement, then those works do not belong to fan art but are part of the "commodified Middle-earth" phenomenon in contemporary pop culture.

Understood in this way, fan art of Arda essentially constitutes a creative continuation of weaving Tolkien's myth. From this perspective, one could incorporate essentially most, if not all, of the forms of adaptation and reference to Tolkien's literary oeuvre that are examined in this monograph. For ultimately what matters here is not the particular domain of cultural activity, but rather the fans' love for the myth of Arda expressed in a creative manner.

Living in Middle-earth: Fan Sub-creations as the Art of Living the Myth

An important lesson on art from Tolkien is contained in the short story *Leaf by Niggle* (Tolkien 2001c, 93–118). Leaving aside its autobiographical interpretations and focusing on the role of art in life itself, it is worth noting that the protagonist – though not talented enough to be considered a great artist – loved his creative work, and his efforts took on for him an almost mission-like significance. A similar attitude can be observed among many creators of Tolkien fan art. They may at times lack technical perfection, but their works are born from a sincere desire to creatively express their fascination with the myth. It is worth emphasising Niggle's passion and dedication, his yearning to convey the perfection of the vision he strove to commit to canvas, as well as the supernatural dimension of the ultimate completion of the work he was creating[110]. This can be understood to mean that art is not exhausted in the final product, but is also a journey and a process of shaping the creator himself.

From this perspective, the active cultural reception of Tolkien's works realised through fan creations is also a path in itself – a path of living in the context of the myth of Arda, and an art of finding ways to weave it into one's real life. For the creative continuation of the Tolkienian myth encompasses both concrete works (music, film, games, transmedia adaptations, fan fiction, paintings, digital graphics, artistic craftsmanship) and everyday practices (Tolkien scholarship, engaging in fan debates,

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[110] It is worth recalling that Niggle's life's work is only completed in an extra-temporal reality, in the "antechamber of heaven", after the inner transformation he undergoes in "purgatory" (Tolkien 2001c, 109–114).

pilgrimages to Tolkien-related places, celebrations of holidays associated with Arda, the creation of art), which raise fans up toward the world of the myth and also allow for its materialisation in the empirical world.

Thus, the expression "the art of living the myth of Arda" unites the fan activities presented in this volume. All of these are manifestations of the reception of Tolkien's work as a contemporary form of living mythology. Although it differs from pre-modern, typically religious forms of response to myth, it remains a mythology that is not only narrated but also genuinely lived.

<center>***</center>

The analysis conducted in this chapter has shown that Tolkien's myth, aside from its socio-cultural dimension, also fulfils an important psychological and existential function, one that in many respects corresponds to the role of a living myth in pre-modern cultures. Through various forms of creative participation, fans can symbolically and affectively "inhabit" the world of Middle-earth, as well as transfer its elements into their own daily lives, thereby satisfying the need for "living in myth" – experiencing one's existence in the context of the myth of Arda. This volume, comprising both a socio-cultural and a psychological-existential analysis, thus represents the first two stages in substantiating the thesis of the fan reception of Tolkien's mythopoeic works as a contemporary form of living myth. The final stage – an analysis of its philosophical and spiritual dimension – will be the subject of examination in the next volume.

Conclusion

The present work constitutes the first volume of a monograph devoted to the study of the fan reception of J. R. R. Tolkien's works. According to the thesis advanced in the introductory section, the distinctive nature of Tolkien's literary oeuvre, combined with fans' engagement in its active cultural reception, jointly create a phenomenon that deserves to be called a contemporary form of living mythology – a mythology that is not merely narrated but genuinely lived. Such a research programme underlies the title of the entire monograph: the contemporary form of living mythology posited here can, in fact, aptly be described as a mythology for the contemporary world.

This volume, subtitled *Cultural Expansion and Psychological Identification*, was primarily intended to answer the question "how?" – namely, how Tolkien's mythopoeic literature manifests itself in culture and in the lives of fans as a contemporary form of living mythology. The research plan thus formulated determined the selection of the forms of active cultural reception of Tolkien's works that would be analysed. In the present study, these forms are collectively referred to as the "continuation of the weaving of the Tolkienian myth," thereby emphasising their nature as a creative development of the Oxford professor's stories by the audience.

In Chapter 1, the culturally creative reception of Tolkien's mythopoeic works within the fan community was examined, focusing on how its various manifestations form a process of socio-cultural expansion of the myth of Arda, analogous to the functioning of a "living myth" in pre-modern societies. The analysis covered the increasing presence in popular culture of diverse references to Tolkien's work, observing in particular those adaptations and continuations that indicated a phenomenon similar to the omnipresence of myth in traditional culture – when a community saturated its language, customs, art, law, and everyday practices with references to sacred stories.

The analysis demonstrated that, from the very outset, Tolkien's works evoked among readers an extraordinarily strong emotional engagement, one that transcended the bounds of a typical literary reading experience.

Despite considerable scepticism from literary critics, the enthusiastic response from readers ensured these works did not fade amidst the flood of new publications. It was the fans, indeed, who turned out to be crucial for the survival and development of Tolkien's myth – thereby indicating that in the process of turning his work into a living myth, they play the most essential role. Extremely enthusiastic readers quickly became the first fans – they founded fanzines, held discussions about the most minute details of the plot and the fictional world, and even dressed in costumes reminiscent of those of Middle-earth. By bringing elements of the literary universe into the realm of everyday life, they initiated a process of creative cultural adaptation of the myth of Arda.

The latter part of the chapter focused specifically on manifestations of this creative reception: examples of adaptations and references to Tolkien were analysed that either appeared first in a historical sense or achieved considerable popularity, thereby contributing to the socio-cultural expansion of the myth of Arda. Particularly significant in this respect was the reception of Tolkien's texts among the hippies. Within this movement, the symbolism of Middle-earth permeated into the system of values, aesthetics, and everyday practices to such an extent that it began to exert a real influence on how individuals experienced their existence in the world, in this respect coming to resemble the way myth affected people in pre-modern times.

At the same time, an important difference was noted between the phenomenon in question and a traditional living myth: in pre-modern culture, myth had generally neither a concrete author nor the status of intellectual property – it belonged to the community and served its spiritual needs. Tolkien, by contrast, treating his works as intellectual property, sought to exercise a certain degree of control over the manner of their use. On the one hand, fans accorded his texts an almost reverential respect; on the other hand, however, they displayed great freedom in the creative use of the myth of Arda. Through such reinterpretations and expansions, the fan community was incorporating the Tolkienian myth into their daily lives, striving to re-experience it in various manifestations of popular culture.

The above phenomenon was clearly illustrated by the analysis of Tolkien-inspired rock and metal music. The literary myth created by the Oxford professor inspired artists with often diametrically opposed musical styles and worldviews – indeed, their fascination with Tolkien's Middle-earth was at times the only common ground between them. This led to the

conclusion that the myth of Arda had become for those specific artist-fans a kind of metanarrative embodied in very diverse cultural works. In turn, the analysis of film adaptations of Tolkien's literature, and of fans' reactions to these screen renditions, confirmed that fans of the stories of Middle-earth clearly distinguish the status of Tolkien's original mythic metanarrative from its various adaptive representations. On the one hand, the creators of those adaptations sought to convey their own interpretation of Tolkien's texts; on the other, fans reacted to the film adaptations very critically and emotionally, especially when they diverged from the content of the books.

While the freedom and diversity of musical references to Tolkien's myth did not give rise to greater controversies, the film versions of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* were expected, in the eyes of many fans, to represent on screen Tolkien's metanarrative itself – hence any deviations from the literary originals were often perceived as a distortion of the canonical version of the myth. At the same time, it turned out that the socio-cultural expansion of the Tolkienian myth described above – achieved thanks to the richness of its diverse adaptations – also influenced the fans' own reception of Tolkien's work. Their previously exclusive devotion to the Oxford professor's books gradually broadened; the myth of Arda was becoming an increasingly transmedial narrative, exerting its impact through a variety of media.

Taken together, the examples surveyed in Chapter 1 indicate that the fan reception of Tolkien's works is manifested in a multitude of adaptations and reinterpretations of his myth of Arda, which has contributed to its impressive socio-cultural expansion. In several respects, this expansion suggests functional analogies to the operation of a "living myth" in premodern societies – for a similar process is at work here, saturating the life of the community with references to the myth and incorporating its elements into everyday practices. In other words, a significant part of the Tolkien fandom has, in a sense, assumed the role of both the custodian and active sub-creator of the myth of Arda – a role that in traditional cultures was fulfilled by the community as a whole in relation to its mythic narratives.

Chapter 2 focused on the psychological-existential dimension of reception, that is, on the ways in which fans authentically experience the myth of Arda. In its traditional form, a living myth fulfilled an essential psychological need of *homo religiosus* that can be described as "living in myth," or "living in the context of myth." In the pre-modern world

this took place in two ways: through periodic, ritual, and affectively very intense experiences of "ascending towards the reality of myth," and through filling one's daily existence with symbolic references to its essential content. Similar psychological-existential references were sought with regard to the functioning of Tolkien's myth in the culturally active reception by its fans. The research encompassed primarily the following areas: various transmedia adaptations, Tolkien-themed games, Tolkienology, fan theories, speculations and online debates, post-Tolkienian fantasy, fan fiction, quasi-religious forms referencing the myth of Arda, Tolkien fan organisations (associations, clubs, foundations), Tolkien tourism, and fan art of Arda.

In this way, it was demonstrated that the integration of fans' lives with Tolkien's myth takes place in two complementary dimensions, metaphorically referred to as "dwelling in Arda." The first of these consists in ascending to the world of myth in order to undergo a kind of "peak experience of full immersion". In practice, this means an intense, though by definition short-lived, feeling of almost "real" participation in events in Middle-earth – in other words, "living the life of the myth". This identification is symbolic in nature, yet by employing various techniques to intensify the experience, it becomes so affectively powerful that it gives fans the impression of a real union with the reality of Tolkien's Arda. As the research showed, experiences of this type dominate especially in such forms of fan activity as music inspired by Tolkien's works, film and audiovisual spectacles, games (both computer and tabletop role-playing), and communal enactments of narratives in the form of LARP sessions. Fans often combine these elements, striving to maximise the impression of immersion in the myth – so that for a moment they can feel that they are truly participating in the events of Arda.

The second dimension of "dwelling in Arda" is bringing the myth into the real world. This strategy requires more reflective engagement – activating both the imagination and the intellect – and consists in searching for symbolic connections between the mythic dimension of the Legendarium and everyday life. As a result, the impact of Tolkien's stories on fans' lives can endure longer, transcending fleeting moments of elation and integrating the myth into the routine of daily life. Examples of such practices include Tolkienology (deepening and systematising knowledge about the Legendarium), as well as lively internet discussions, fan theories and speculations that constitute a grassroots continuation of scholars' inquiries. This type of activity – at times reminiscent of scholastic theological disputes – gives participants a sense of personal

involvement in the interpretation of the Legendarium, becoming a form of sub-creation of the myth by the fans.

Moreover, the category of "bringing the myth into reality" can also include fan creativity that further develops the Legendarium itself. Post-Tolkienian fantasy allows the immersion in the myth of Arda to be prolonged to some extent beyond the influence of Tolkien's own texts. For writers, these works provide an opportunity for the creative expansion of the myth – the creation of their own private variants of the stories of Middle-earth (albeit under different names) – and for readers, they are an invitation to lose themselves in them as further variants of the literary original. Tolkien fan fiction, in turn, allows one to give free rein to the imagination and to add new continuations to the stories in whatever way individual readers wish, thereby creating, as it were, personal versions of the myth of Arda.

In extreme cases, fascination with the mythology of Middle-earth even took on quasi-religious forms; however, this concerned only small groups of enthusiasts (whose members, moreover, do not consider themselves fans). By contrast, Tolkien institutions (associations, clubs, foundations) play a significant role in contemporary reception; thanks to their organisational capabilities, they introduce the myth of Arda into the sphere of real life in a way not available to individual fans. The most interesting element – in the context of the present work – is that thanks to the activity of these institutions, mythic time begins to intermingle with real time, creating something akin to a "Tolkien fan liturgical year" (a cycle of fan events and festivals correlated with the calendar of the tales of Arda). In this way, the myth of Middle-earth is brought into the real world in an almost structural manner, for the myth is reflected in the actual temporal structure of life.

A similar function in the spatial dimension is served by fan tourism, which in a sense "lays the map of Middle-earth over the real world," thus drawing these two realms closer together. For many fans, journeys to places associated with Tolkien (such as the author's grave and various sites in Oxford) and to locations known from the film adaptations become a form of pilgrimage, during which they can symbolically enter into the space of myth within the real world. Thus, for Tolkien's fans, places that bridge areas of the real world with the mythical space of Arda function psychologically in much the same way as the "sacred places" of pre-modern people. Journeys to these locations, treated as a ritual of travel, constitute a symbolic and affective conviction that Arda, as it were, exists among us – that one can "feel its presence" in certain special places.

These temporal and spatial references to the mythology of Middle-earth in the real world recall Eliade's descriptions of sacred time and sacred space in relation to the phenomenon of the living myth, providing an important argument in support of the thesis that Tolkien's work in fans reception functions as a contemporary version of it. This picture is complemented by the art of Arda's fans, which allows its mythology to be translated into a concrete, material dimension. Paintings, sculptures, and various objects inspired by Middle-earth ensure that the world of myth gains a physical presence in the everyday surroundings of its audience.

The above-mentioned dimensions of "dwelling in Middle-earth" complement one another and reinforce their influence on the lives of fans, operating synergistically – just as was the case in the life of the pre-modern *homo religiosus*. As Eliade notes, in the life of archaic people, myth almost always functioned in a ritual-religious context; in antiquity and the Middle Ages, not to the same degree. Nonetheless, in both cases, the ritual enactment of myth went hand in hand with translating it into everyday life – the most important elements of personal and communal existence were interpreted in the context of mythical archetypes. In the case of lovers of the myth of Arda, a strictly cultic aspect is virtually absent (apart from the marginal groups mentioned above, who do not wish to be called "fans"). What is beyond doubt, however, is the very engagement of the fans with the myth. They do not perceive it solely as literature, but as a phenomenon deeply experienced on a psychological and existential level.

Importantly, individual fans often participate simultaneously in many of the forms of cultural reception of the Tolkienian myth discussed above. For example, they listen to music inspired by Tolkien's works, watch film adaptations and fan-made YouTube materials. They also engage in other activities that deepen immersion and trigger "peak experiences of union with the myth": they play Tolkien-themed computer games and RPGs, take part in LARPs, and even build Middle-earth in virtual space (e.g. in Minecraft Middle-earth). In addition, they join community initiatives organised by Tolkien fan organisations, engage in Tolkienology, and participate in online fan discussions – developing theories about Tom Bombadil or the Great Eagles, for instance, or posting their own videos on YouTube. Some of them also take part in the creation of narratives inspired by Tolkien: they write (or at least read) Tolkien fan fiction. Furthermore, they may go on pilgrimages to places connected with Tolkien and his Legendarium, and even create Tolkien-themed handicrafts.

Taken together, these practices enable many fans to remain immersed in the myth almost continuously – to "live in the myth" in daytoday life. Just as pre-modern people viewed reality through the prism of mythology and in that sense "lived in myth," so too do contemporary Tolkien fans perceive in the real world numerous references to the mythical Middle-earth. Ultimately, the entirety of fan sub-creations can be described as the "art of living the myth." The active cultural reception of Tolkien's works through his fans' creations is thus also a path in its own right – a path of living in the context of the myth of Arda and an art of finding ways to weave it into one's real life. In this way, the mythology of Middle-earth "comes to life" in the real lives of its fans.

The analyses conducted in this volume demonstrated that Tolkien's mythopoeic stories serve an important socio-cultural and psychological-existential function in contemporary fandom, in many respects analogous to the role of a living myth in the pre-modern world. The conclusions advanced here derive from an interpretative and hermeneutic analysis of purposefully selected examples, with an emphasis on sources in English and Polish and on developments since the 1960s. They are not intended as an exhaustive survey of the global Tolkien fandom, but as an account of recurrent patterns that, taken together, collectively support the claims advanced in this volume. Future research may broaden the evidentiary base both geographically and linguistically.

Through diverse forms of active cultural reception, the myth of Arda permeates the language, customs, art, and everyday practices of fans, so that the entire community comes to live by it day by day, interpreting their own existence in the world within the context of Tolkien's mythopoeic narratives. Through various forms of creative participation, fans can symbolically and affectively "dwell in Middle-earth," thereby satisfying the psychological-existential need for "living in myth" – that is, for experiencing one's own existence in the world in the context of the stories of Arda. Of course, there is a fundamental difference between the situation of the pre-modern *homo religiosus* and that of the contemporary Tolkien fan. The former fully and literally accepted the reality of myth in his worldview; the situation of the fans is, in this respect, much more nuanced.

Examining this issue – the philosophical and spiritual dimension of the fan reception of Tolkien's myth – will be the task of the second volume of this monograph. In it, we will analyse how the Tolkienian myth addresses the deep need of contemporary individuals to "re-enchant" a disenchanted world and their own lives within it. This will

make it possible to understand the extent to which the myth of Arda operates in fan reception also at spiritual and worldview levels. Only then, after completing all three research steps, will it be possible to fully summarise the results and formulate the conclusion of the entire research project. That conclusion will be presented in a chapter that synthesises the entire study, offering a complete picture of the reception of Tolkien's myth of Arda as a contemporary form of living myth – a myth not only told but also genuinely lived.

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Summary in Polish

Fanowska recepcja twórczości Tolkiena: mitologia dla współczesności Tom I: Ekspansja kulturowa i psychologiczna identyfikacja

Słowa kluczowe:

J. R. R. Tolkien, *Władca Pierścieni*, *Silmarillion*, Śródziemie, Arda, Legendarium, mit, mitologia

Keywords:

J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion*, Middle-earth, Arda, Legendarium, myth, mythology

Niniejsza publikacja stanowi pierwszy tom monografii poświęconej badaniu fanowskiej recepcji dzieł J. R. R. Tolkiena. Wedle tezy postawionej w części wstępnej, specyfika literackiej twórczości profesora z Oxfordu oraz fanowskie zaangażowanie w jej aktywną kulturowo recepcję tworzą razem fenomen zasługujący na miano współczesnej formy mitologii żywej – mitologii, która nie tylko jest opowiadana, lecz także autentycznie przeżywana. Z tak zakreślonego programu badawczego wynika tytuł całej monografii: postulowaną tu współczesną formę mitu żywego można bowiem trafnie określić mianem swoistej mitologii dla współczesności.

Bieżący tom, opatrzony podtytułem *Cultural Expansion and Psychological Identification*, miał na celu przede wszystkim odpowiedzieć na pytanie „jak?" – w jaki sposób mitopoetycka literatura Tolkiena przejawia się w kulturze i życiu fanów jako współczesna forma mitologii żywej. Tak sformułowany plan badawczy zdeterminował wybór form aktywnej recepcji kulturowej jego dzieł, które poddano analizie. W pracy określono te formy zbiorczym mianem „kontynuacji snucia mitu tolkienowskiego", podkreślając ich charakter kreatywnego rozwijania opowieści profesora z Oxfordu przez jego fanów.

Analizy przeprowadzone w niniejszym tomie potwierdziły, że mitopoetyckie opowieści Tolkiena pełnią we współczesnym fandomie istotną funkcję społeczno-kulturową i psychologiczno-egzystencjalną, w wielu wymiarach analogiczną do roli mitu żywego w świecie przednowożytnym. Dzięki różnorodnym formom aktywnej kulturowo

recepcji mitu Ardy przenika on język, obyczaje, sztukę oraz codzienne praktyki fanów tak, iż cała społeczność żyje nim na co dzień, interpretując swe funkcjonowanie w świecie w kontekście mitopoetyckich opowieści Tolkiena. Poprzez różne formy twórczego uczestnictwa fani mogą symbolicznie i afektywnie „zamieszkać w Śródziemiu", zaspokajając tym samym psychologiczno-egzystencjalną potrzebę „życia w micie", czyli przeżywania własnego istnienia w świecie w kontekście opowieści o Ardzie.

Mimo potwierdzonych w ten sposób podobieństw pomiędzy tradycyjną (przednowożytną) i badaną formą mitu, istnieje zasadnicza różnica między sytuacją przednowożytnego *homo religiosus* a współczesnego fana Tolkiena. Ten pierwszy w pełni i dosłownie przyjmował realność mitu w ramach swojego światopoglądu, podczas gdy sytuacja fanów twórczości profesora z Oxfordu jest pod tym względem znacznie bardziej zniuansowana. Zbadaniu tej kwestii – filozoficzno-duchowego wymiaru fanowskiej recepcji mitu tolkienowskiego – poświęcony będzie drugi tom niniejszej monografii.