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## The Tale of the Old Forest: The Damaging Effects of Forestry in J. R. R. Tolkien's Written Works

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### Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Dr. Matthew Townend for his comments and suggestions which helped shape this piece. I would also like to thank my family who gave up much of their time to read my drafts.

## INTRODUCTION: A View of the Cultivated Field

Imagine a log left to rot. A willow tree reduced from ethereal beauty to dripping sadness, as fungus spreads across it. It is a stirring image—an image it becomes clear, upon reading Humphrey Carpenter’s (2000) *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography* (30), that Tolkien never forgot. Beyond the few lines quoted by Carpenter, little is known of this willow tree, but it seems to have been a defining moment in Tolkien’s childhood. Tolkien loved trees, and viewed their mutilation by pruning and unsustainable forestry in an unfavourable light, to the point where he allows one of his deities in *The Silmarillion* (Tolkien, 2008), Yavanna, to lament, ‘Would that the trees might speak on behalf of all things that have roots, and punish those that wrong them!’ (40). But woodland management across Tolkien’s written works is a neglected area of criticism. Therefore, using *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1992), abbreviated to *LotR*, and *Unfinished Tales of Númenor & Middle-earth* (Tolkien, 2014a), abbreviated to *UToNM*, the present article shall examine one of the woodlands in Middle-earth most damaged by forestry and woodland management: the Old Forest.

But much of the material, including *UToNM*, was published posthumously. Critics must therefore be aware that Tolkien might have been attempting to explain retrospectively, and if materials contradict each other, we must exert discretion in the choice of which version to adhere to. Christopher Tolkien supervised and edited Tolkien’s works faithfully,<sup>1</sup> but some critics still find it safer to shy away from the posthumous works. Reading too deeply into the Old Forest in *LotR* after reading *UToNM* might cause us to reflect the latter onto the former. This article therefore reads *LotR* first, and treats relevant passages in posthumous works as potential backstory.

In *LotR*, stationary trees follow the trend of nature in Euro-American literature post-1900: they can only be heard through observation. Unfortunately, in Tolkien studies, critical material often favours Ents and Elves, while environmental criticism often prefers realistic literary genres. Although Ents and Elves provide compelling social and political responses to environmental issues (many of which are believed to reflect Tolkien’s own responses), they are not trees.<sup>2</sup> In a narrative mostly seen through the eyes of Hobbits, trees do not speak for themselves. However, Liam Campbell (2020), the author of several eco-

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Tolkien is throughout differentiated from his father as ‘C. Tolkien’.

<sup>2</sup> See Cynthia M. Cohen (2009) for an illuminating study of literary trees that differentiates between trees, and beings that appear like trees.

critical works about Tolkien's Middle-earth, has recently renewed the point that 'Tolkien's foregrounding of nature as a sentient force, rather than a setting of his work, carries with it an ecocentric worldview that promotes environmental awareness' (441). Although, when seen from the Hobbits' perspective, the trees have no voice, some critics clearly have acknowledged Tolkien's nature as sentient—especially his trees and woodlands. It would therefore be useful to deconstruct descriptions of the Old Forest and the Great Willow (also known as the Old Willow and Old Man Willow) to reveal what the trees say through connotative richness.

Tolkien's forests, however, are forests in the folkloric sense. They are related to Faërie. Tolkien (2014b) defines 'Faërie' as the realm in which fairy-stories live (27), and 'Magic' as the power causing fairy-related experiences (32-3). He argues that works of fiction are works of Faërie and Magic, and some of his clearest literary illustrations are *The Hobbit* and *Smith of Wootton Major* (abbreviated to *SoWM*). In his essay about *SoWM*, Tolkien (2015) states that he considers forests to be part of Faërie (116). In forests one might encounter anything from dancing Elves to enchanting and enchanted dales. *SoWM* presents a clear version of the wholesome Faërie. But Faërie is not always wholesome. In *The Hobbit* there are cobwebs and spiders in Mirkwood, because dark forces have settled there. When compared to *SoWM*, we may find that the Old Forest in *LotR* reacts distinctly defensively.

In order to understand how the Old Forest came to be a fractured Faërie, it will be necessary to examine its history of forestry and war in *UToNM*. Oliver Rackham (2001) is recognised for his insights in *Trees & Woodland in the British Landscape* (abbreviated to *TWBL*). Using maps and records of land, Rackham traces woodlands in Britain and their uses, and debunks the notion that shipbuilding was the death of woodlands (2-4). It is possible that Tolkien observed forestry practices, either in his youth in Sarehole, or at some later point in his life, for it is occasionally mentioned on a small scale in his letters to C. Tolkien (see Tolkien, 2006, 102 as an example), and in *UToNM* (Tolkien, 2014a) it is paid attention to on a larger scale. While I shall refer little to Rackham, I will adapt his method of reading historical events and forestry, and use it to outline a potential backstory for the Old Forest that might explain how the Old Forest came to be a fractured Faërie.

The Old Forest itself, along with the Great Willow, has been the subject of limited focused criticism. That criticism which exists has more often than not been concerned with the Old Forest and the Great Willow as presented in *LotR*, rather than looking into Tolkien's posthumously published works. Verlyn Flieger

(2000) discusses the Old Forest and the Great Willow in detail in her essay 'Taking the Part of Trees', where she focuses on the discrepancy between Tolkien's letter to the *Daily Telegraph* in 1972 (Tolkien, 2006) and his descriptions of the Old Forest (Tolkien, 1992). In the letter, Tolkien states: 'In all my works I take the part of trees as against all their enemies. Lothlórien is beautiful because there the trees are loved [...]. The Old Forest is hostile to two legged creatures because of the memory of many injuries. Fangorn Forest was old and beautiful [...]' (Tolkien, 2006, 419-20). Flieger compares the Old Forest to Fangorn and takes issue with the 'unreconcilable contradiction' that is Tolkien's 'beloved Shire-folk' put 'on par with his orcs', at the same time as 'the villainous Old Willow and his Forest' become 'no more villainous than Treebeard and his Ents' (150). This article's aim is not to disprove the Great Willow's villainy, nor the Hobbits' peacefulness, but to show that Tolkien does not need to make all his trees and woodlands agree with his protagonists to personally 'take the part of trees'.

### **PART I: The Living Land**

Flieger attempts to disprove Tolkien's claim, and argues for a conflict between the agricultural Shire and the wild Old Forest that equates the Hobbits with Orcs and the Great Willow with Ents. But I argue that the conflict between the Hobbits and the Old Forest is one that would have emerged regardless. While Tolkien sympathises with the Old Forest and intends nature to be sentient, he also intends to appear as a translator of a text originally written by Frodo Baggins and Sam Gamgee, and possibly Bilbo Baggins. Since it is supposed to be written by Hobbits, and Hobbits are supposed to be lovers of 'good tilled earth', and a 'well-ordered' and 'well-farmed' countryside (Tolkien, 1992, 13), it follows that Hobbits have a culture of imposing formal structures on their surroundings. If they treated nature as sentient and able of communication, their moral guidelines could easily have been brought into question, and they would not have appeared as peace-loving and complacent as they do. When Frodo and Sam, along with Merry Brandybuck and Pippin Took, enter the Old Forest in *LotR*, there must therefore, as Flieger points out, be a conflict of interest between the cultivated Shire which the Hobbits represent, and the uncultivated Old Forest which the Great Willow represents. For the first time the Hobbits are met by a nature that demands to be heard, rather than objectified.

From the beginning of *LotR*, Hobbits appear to perceive trees and woodlands as objectified scenery. Enjoyable, decorative, and useful, but not

something that might have any significant sentience of its own. When Frodo, Pippin, and Sam leave Bag-End, their second night is spent with Elves. In the morning, Frodo realises he has slept in a ‘bower made by a living tree with branches laced and drooping to the ground; his bed was of fern and grass, deep and soft and strangely fragrant. The sun was shining through the fluttering leaves, which were still green upon the tree’ (Tolkien, 1992, 99). Frodo rests in a ‘bed’ in a ‘bower’. Both are terms suggesting some form of structure imposed on wood or stone. That the tree is ‘drooping’, however, gives it enough voice to suggest weakness and exhaustion. But Frodo focuses on its appearance: ‘living’, leaves ‘fluttering’, and ‘still green’. He notices nothing amiss. In other words, he is used to viewing trees as enjoyable, decorative, and useful—all which are terms of objectification—without looking closer at their shape or posture to consider what it might say of them as sentient creatures.

This is a view-point many readers might be familiar with in terms of forestry, wood-craft, and day-to-day lives. The forester pollards and coppices trees, and the gardener prunes and cuts off branches that are diseased or become too cumbersome.<sup>3</sup> Inside, there are doors, chairs, tables, cupboards, beds, and certain toys—all made of wood. Tolkien’s contemporary writers, such as C. S. Lewis (2013), make references to ‘wooden bench[es]’ (8) and ‘wooden box[es]’ (22). Even Tolkien himself is frequently depicted with a certain wooden instrument: the wooden pipe. This goes to show that, while Frodo was used to trees and their wood being objectified, it was not something Tolkien’s readers were meant to balk at. They should recognise the Hobbits’ lives as rural, and find those lives relatable.

Before the Old Forest, only the Party Tree seems to be accorded some singularity. During Bilbo’s one hundred and eleventh birthday-party, the Party Tree is included in ‘a specially large pavilion’ and stands ‘proudly near one end, at the head of the chief table’ where it is decorated with lanterns (Tolkien, 1992, 38). The Party Tree is accorded some personality through ‘proudly’, but beyond that it is clearly stationary and seems to carry more significance as a landmark than as a sentient being. In Tolkien’s works, forests, woods, and trees tend to signalise Faërie. By situating the Party Tree by the head of the chief table, it stands as a dominant feature signalling Bilbo’s departure from the Shire into Faërie, as he is never seen in the Shire again and becomes a character of lore and fairy-stories. The tree itself gains no recognition as a sentient being, but as a symbol of

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that these are by no means uniformly destructive.

someone, which again speaks of how the majority of Hobbits perceive trees: as objects and cultural symbols.

Therefore, when Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin approach the Old Forest, especially Frodo and Pippin find it strange. Whilst it is relatively void of ‘old bogey-stories’, such as ‘goblins and wolves and things of that sort’ (Tolkien, 1992, 125) (‘bogey’, as defined by the OED, n.d.a, being an element suggesting ‘terror or dread’), Merry acknowledges the trees’ sentience upon entry, saying that ‘the Forest *is* queer. Everything in it is very much more alive, even more aware of what is going on, so to speak, than things are in the Shire’ (Tolkien, 1992, 125). He immediately contrasts the threat of ambush by a villainous being, such as goblins or wolves, with the threat of nature itself being alive and aware. In the same sentence he juxtaposes the Old Forest and the Shire, confirming that ‘[e]verything’ is allowed to be ‘more alive’ in the Old Forest compared to ‘things’ (or objects) in the Shire which have to fit into the Hobbits’ ‘well-ordered’ world. As anyone from outside or going outside the Shire is considered ‘queer’ by Shire-folk (Tolkien, 1992, 36), so Merry considers the Old Forest ‘queer’. Tolkien also uses ‘queerness’ in ‘On Fairy-Stories’ when he discusses viewing something or someone from a new angle (Tolkien, 2014b, 68), which could suggest that the Old Forest demands to be seen differently to the trees the Hobbits are used to. It emphasises their position as outsiders and strangers, and signals that they are not used to treating nature as anything other than ‘things’.

The point is reinforced when Merry says that the trees communicate in ‘an unintelligible language’ at night, giving them great agency with active verbs such as ‘drop’ in ‘drop a branch’, and ‘grasp’ in ‘grasp at you’ (Tolkien, 1992, 125). There is a language, but the Hobbits do not understand it, and the trees do not seem willing to teach them, for the Old Forest is characterised by silence and watchfulness as the Hobbits make their way into it. The first clear sound they hear is the ‘trickle and babble’ of a brook (Tolkien, 1992, 130). while brooks more often than not are described as ‘trickl[ing]’, they do not often ‘babble’. Like ‘unintelligible’, ‘babble’ suggests something that is supposed to be comprehensible, but is not. It accords nature voices, and shows how entirely unequipped the Hobbits are in dealing with a forest consisting of not only sentient trees, but sentient nature.

When described, the trees are vivid. There are ‘tree-trunks of innumerable sizes and shapes: straight or bent, twisted, leaning, squat or slender, smooth or gnarled and branched; and all the stems [are] green or grey with moss and slimy, shaggy growths’ (Tolkien, 1992, 126). It is a description entirely different to descriptions of trees found in the Shire. In the Shire, trees are pleasantly green,

pleasantly shaped, and pleasantly useful. In the Old Forest, the majority of the trees tend towards crooked and distinguishable shapes and patterns, suggesting age and deformity. As Tolkien revealed in his letter to the *Daily Telegraph*, the Old Forest is hostile ‘because of the memory of many injuries’. The deformity could be related to those injuries. The listing of adjectives makes the trees appear enormous and crowding, as though they are everywhere around the Hobbits. The ‘slimy, shaggy growths’, in addition to being a hidden linguistic joke, could be further deformities of the trees, or they could be some form of fungi, which would suggest a corruption of the trees which also could be related to the injuries. The Hobbits do not necessarily understand the voices of nature, but even to them it is evident that the trees of the Old Forest are old. Their observations suggest that the trees have been deformed, possibly corrupted, by time and age, so even though the trees do not say so themselves, their descriptions reveal them.

The corruption of the Old Forest is made explicit in the Great Willow. A willow-tree, like the tree Tolkien in his youth found cut down and left to rot, he stands in the Withywindle valley in the Old Forest. Of all the trees encountered so far in *LotR*, he is the most animated. He enchants Frodo, Merry, and Pippin, captures them, and speaks to Merry and Pippin.<sup>4</sup> It is clear that he is a sentient being. When the Hobbits encounter him, one of the words describing him is ‘hoary’ (Tolkien, 1992, 131). In the way in which Tolkien occasionally plays with his word-choices, ‘hoary’ is multifaceted. While it in the case of botany and dendrology refers to the tree or plant being covered in short white hairs, the OED (n.d.b) reveals that it could also mean ‘mouldy, dusty; corrupt’. This is obsolete, but that has not at any point appeared to hinder Tolkien. Rather, it seems to have been an incentive to use a word. The OED gives one further definition, which is ‘[a]ncient’. The Great Willow might be all of these; it is evident that he is ancient, it might be that something has caused him to become corrupted, and for all we know he might be covered in short white hairs. His mouldiness or mustiness could be related to his corruptness, since mould also is a fungus that corrupts. Like injuries, it is external, corrupting from the outside in, which suggests that some external force has corrupted him and, possibly, the whole Old Forest.

Entering the Old Forest, the hobbits bring the threat of cultivation, and the Old Forest reacts accordingly. It is in many ways similar to how the Ents of Fangorn react when they come across Orcs, and indeed how Treebeard first reacts towards Merry and Pippin when they seek refuge in Fangorn. Only their voices

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<sup>4</sup> It is a curious case that Sam is less affected by the enchantment. It might be related to an inherent closeness to nature due to his profession as a gardener, or it might be that his profession as a gardener gives him some control of nature. Regardless, it seems that he is an outlier.

save them, as Treebeard says: ‘if I had seen you before I heard you, I should have just trodden on you, taking you for little Orcs’ (Tolkien, 1992, 485). Voices are evidently important. A voice can change how something is perceived, and because Treebeard recognises their voices as something other than the voices of Orcs, he does not immediately tread on them. It also shows how easy it is to mistake something good for something bad if nothing is known of it. Flieger (2000) notes that, because of the similar positions of Treebeard and the Great Willow, it becomes ‘more difficult to distinguish good guys from the bad guys than one might wish’ (152), but as Treebeard suggests, sometimes the ‘good guys’ and the ‘bad guys’ cannot be distinguished at a glance. It is evident from more than a glance that the Great Willow and the Old Forest have malevolent intentions towards the Hobbits, but it also appears that the Great Willow and the Old Forest have been corrupted by, possibly, external injuries. Cultivation is a threat to forests. As Treebeard reacts defensively against Orcs who he believes to be a threat, so the Old Forest reacts defensively against Hobbits who they believe to be a threat.

Deconstructing the descriptions of trees and woodlands reveals that a conflict would have arisen between the Hobbits and the Old Forest regardless. By giving the Old Forest a rationale, although not one that can be perceived or even understood at a glance, Tolkien shows that he did take ‘the part of the trees’, but the Hobbits could not. At this point, the narrative is told from the Hobbits’ perspective, so Tolkien’s own perspective would be limited. Coming from a rural community that imposes formal structures on nature, the Hobbits cannot understand the Old Forest before its rationale is revealed to them, so they observe without interpreting, and when the Great Willow captures them, their logical course of action is to attempt to control him with fire. Clearly the Hobbits’ only desire was to travel through the Old Forest, but as they are unaware of the Old Forest’s rationale, so the Old Forest is unaware of their’s. Acting on an incomplete understanding, possibly motivated by corruptness and injuries, the Old Forest defends itself like Treebeard would have defended himself, showing that every narrative is told from a certain perspective that carries certain moral guidelines and cultural expectations. Unless every voice and version of the narrative is revealed, misreadings and misinterpretations are bound to occur.

## **PART II: On the Defensive Side**

It is not a coincidence that some recognise the Old Forest as a forest emerged from a fairy-story, while others refer specifically to the Grimm Brother’s fairy-

stories.<sup>5</sup> Tolkien worked with the folkloric notion that trees, woodlands, and forests were entries into Faërie, the realm where beings and powers of fairy-stories live, and it is beneficial to understand the Old Forest as such. Forest as an entry into Faërie is seen in *SoWM*,<sup>6</sup> where Tolkien lets the protagonist, Smith, enter Faërie through a forest, and it is similar in *LotR*, where the Hobbits find the Withywindle valley after traversing the Old Forest. However, while Smith is a visitor and rarely encounters personal threats, it is the threat that draws the Hobbits into Faërie against their will. I shall therefore take a moment here to suggest that, since it seems that the Old Forest is corrupted, it might be reacting defensively due to Faërie.

When Tolkien lists all that exists in Faërie in ‘On Fairy-Stories’ (Tolkien, 2014b), he ends with, ‘and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted’ (32). Unless enchanted, ‘mortal men’ cannot safely enter Faërie, or not enter it at all. Due to the nature of ‘On Fairy-Stories’, ‘mortal men’ must necessarily refer to the people who are to enter a Faërie. In *SoWM*, Smith holds that position. Previous to entering Faërie, he receives an enchanted silver star that, to some extent, protects him (Tolkien, 2015, 20). In *LotR*, ‘mortal men’ must be applied to any one mortal about to enter a Faërie who is not also of Faërie. This would include not only Men, but also Hobbits and, potentially, Dwarves. In the chapter about the Old Forest, the Hobbits must therefore be the ‘mortal men’. Upon entry, the text does not betray that they are enchanted. It must therefore be inferred that, previous to entry, they were neither enchanted nor received anything enchanted that might have protected them. However, their senses start to become distorted. They lose their sense of direction, and feel eyes that are not there. They start to fear, and their path turns them towards the Withywindle valley. It might not be an explicit enchantment, but it seems that the Old Forest is affecting them and actively turning them towards the valley.

Superficially, the Withywindle valley is one of the most beautiful places encountered throughout *LotR*:

Coming to the opening they found that they had made their way down through a cleft in a high steep bank, almost a cliff. At its feet was a

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<sup>5</sup> See for example ‘Wildwood’ in Richard Cavendish (1983), and Jared Lobdell (2005) with special attention to p. 99.

<sup>6</sup> *SoWM* has by Flieger been described as Tolkien’s ‘latest, purest, and most uncompromising presentation of that world [of Faërie], and of its effect on a human being who travels there’, and ‘is thus the imaginal realization of the theoretical concept he put forward in [‘On Fairy-Stories’]’ (Tolkien, 2015, 68).

wide space of grass and reeds; and in the distance could be glimpsed another bank almost as steep. A golden afternoon of late sunshine lay warm and drowsy upon the hidden land between. In the midst of it there wound lazily a dark river of brown water, bordered with ancient willows, arched over with willows, blocked with fallen willows, and flecked with thousands of faded willow-leaves. The air was thick with them, fluttering yellow from the branches; for there was a warm and gentle breeze blowing softly in the valley, and the reeds were rustling, and the willow-boughs were creaking (Tolkien, 1992, 130).

It stands in stark contrast to the rest of the Old Forest. It is bathed in the ‘warm and drowsy’ sunshine of a ‘golden afternoon’, a ‘dark river of brown water’ winds ‘lazily’ through it, and the river is ‘bordered with ancient willows, arched over with willows, blocked with fallen willows, and flecked with thousands of faded willow-leaves’. It inspires peace—a peace that has allowed the willows to grow and spread for decades. Untouched by cultivation, this particular valley, hidden in the depths of the Old Forest, appears to not only have preserved some grace of beauty through centuries, but to also be under some influence of Magic that causes it to be ‘warm and drowsy’.

The Withywindle valley is, in many aspects, similar to a dale Smith finds hidden in the mountains of the Faërie of *SoWM*. ‘[A]t [the dale’s] bottom lay a lake, calm and unruffled though a breeze stirred the woods that surrounded it. In that dale the light was like a red sunset [...]’ (Tolkien, 2015, 24). The similarities include the shape of the land (dale and valley), the breeze stirring the woods, and the late sun (afternoon or sunset). It is doubtful that it is an intentional similarity. Therefore it is of more importance that the soft and slow adjectives and the attention to sensory details evoke a sense of peace, stillness, and wonder. This seems to be a common feature for Tolkien’s wholesome Faeries.<sup>7</sup> It is evident that the Withywindle valley, at least as far as appearance goes, is part of a Faërie.

But Faërie is also meant to be perilous. In ‘On Fairy-Stories’, Tolkien (2014b) phrases it as ‘beauty that is an enchantment, and an ever-present peril’ (27). Despite the enchanted silver star, Smith discovers that he is being hunted and that he must leave because he does not belong in Faërie (Tolkien, 2015, 25). The Hobbits discover that while the Withywindle valley appears beautiful, it is the most perilous part of the Old Forest. It ‘is said to be the queerest part of the whole wood—the centre from which all the queerness comes, as it

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<sup>7</sup> Other Faeries in *LotR* include Lothlórien and Fangorn.

were' (Tolkien, 1992, 128). There the Great Willow casts his 'spell' of sleep on them, and, with the exception of Sam, they are placed in situations of peril. As Tolkien suggests, the beauty is deceptive. Beneath it run those potent powers of enchantment which make Faërie so perilous to 'mortal men'. And yet the Withywindle valley does not appear any more dangerous than Smith's encounter in *SoWM*.

Because the discord lies elsewhere. Tolkien discusses possessiveness and wholesomeness in 'On Fairy-Stories', and argues that the wholesomeness of Faërie is that it releases everything one thought one possessed. In Faërie 'all you had (or knew) was dangerous or potent, not really effectively chained, free and wild; no more yours than they were you' (Tolkien, 2014b, 68). Under the influence of Faërie, possessions and concepts become new and strange. '[F]ree and wild', they should be released and belong to no one. It is evident that, when entering the Old Forest, the Hobbits bring the danger of possession into Faërie. They must let go of the notion that they can cultivate trees, because cultivation would suggest possession of something 'free and wild'.

But the Hobbits do not realise this. Merry might begin to guess, but Pippin sings of woods that 'must fail' (Tolkien, 1992, 127), and Sam and Frodo attempt to control the Great Willow with fire when Merry and Pippin are trapped inside him (133). This is not how Faërie operates, and the Hobbits must therefore suffer from a lack of knowledge and understanding. Since there is no effective communication, the Great Willow does not see that the Hobbits merely wish to pass through, and the Hobbits do not grasp how Faërie operates. The Hobbits represent a culture of agriculturally cultivating nature, which means taking control of nature and imposing structures on it, and the Great Willow views this as a threat to Faërie, therefore drawing them in to end that threat.

Tolkien's understanding of Faërie clarifies the Old Forest as an entry into Faërie, and the Withywindle valley as part of Faërie, but it also suggests why the Old Forest and the Withywindle valley react defensively. The threat of possession make them all but leap to action, but the action can only be completed with an absolute removal of the threat. In some ways, this seems to reflect the actions of someone who has had similar negative experiences in the past, and now wishes to defend themselves against a repetition of those events. This begs the question of what happened to make them defensive. *LotR* provides limited material to build an elucidating background of the Old Forest. We must therefore include unfinished materials if we are to attempt to understand the Old Forest as Tolkien came to view it.

### PART III: A Traumatized Forest

According to Treebeard in *LotR*, the Old Forest dates back to at least the First Age, if not further. The events of *LotR* take place in 3018-9 of the Third Age, and compiled timelines on the *Tolkien Gateway* (2020) suggest that there were 590 years in First Age and 3,441 years in Second Age. This makes for a total of 7,049-50 years. I shall therefore examine the timeline chronologically with references to the map of Middle-earth, starting with the First Age.<sup>8</sup>

Treebeard recalls that ‘there was all one wood once upon a time from [Fangorn] to the Mountains of Lune, and [Fangorn] was just the East End’ (Tolkien, 1992, 489-90). This wood would have had to run west through the Gap of Rohan, then north across Dunland, Enedwaith, and most of Eriador to reach the Mountains of Lune (also known as the Blue Mountains or Ered Luin). How far back Treebeard’s memory goes is not made explicit, but *LotR* suggests that the Elves woke the trees (489), and *The Silmarillion* suggests that the Ents as a race awoke about the same time as the Elves (Tolkien, 2008, 41). Both might have been long before the First Age, but since there is no specific point to mark, we must infer that the forest that became the Old Forest did ‘exist at the beginning of the First Age.

Also in *LotR*, Elrond says that ‘all that now remains [of the Old Forest] is but an outlier of its northern march. Time was when a squirrel could go from tree to tree from what is now the Shire to Dunland [...]’ (Tolkien, 1992, 282). He draws the end of the forest west of the Gap of Rohan. In the beginning of the Second Age, Elrond settled by the sea west of the Shire for a while, before establishing Rivendell later that Age. Previous to that he had been living elsewhere, so it seems that by the time he came to Eriador, Dunland, and Enedwaith in the Second Age, the forest had already shrunk from what Treebeard recalls.

It is hinted in *UToNM* that Men lived in the area, but the earliest mentions of forestry seem to be from sometime between 739 and 806 of the Second Age, when Aldarion, a prince of Númenor, established Lond Daer, a haven, on the river Gwathló. During the Second Age, Númenor was a prospering island in the sea west of Middle-earth. To reach the mainland, Númenóreans had to travel by ship. On previous voyages Aldarion had seen the coasts of Middle-earth. From brief mentions we learn that there were ‘green shores’ (Tolkien, 2014a, 226), so that

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<sup>8</sup> For a reader unfamiliar with Tolkien’s map of Middle-earth, it would be useful to consult the LotR Project’s interactive map of Middle-earth through <https://www.lotrproject.com> throughout this part.

when Aldarion's father 'set a curb on the felling of trees in Númenor for the building of vessels [...] it came into Aldarion's mind that he would find timber in Middle-earth, and seek there for a haven for the repair of his ships' (227). It seems a relatively innocent reason for establishing Lond Daer. Rackham, the author of *TWBL*, points out that 'only very rarely did a wood consist entirely of suitable trees' for shipbuilding (96), and Aldarion proves that he could conduct sustainable forestry, so although he built two ships in Lond Daer and brought a shipment of timber back to Númenor, his work should not have caused any massive deforestation.

There are traces of communication by sea between Númenor and Middle-earth in the years following Aldarion's death. Other harbours and settlements were established. Between the years 1634 and 2035 of the Second Age, Tar-Ciryatan of Númenor built and maintained a large royal fleet that brought great wealth from Middle-earth (Tolkien, 2014a, 284).<sup>9</sup> In 'The Port of Lond Daer', one of Tolkien's essays in *UToNM*, Tolkien writes that '[t]he devastation wrought by the Númenóreans was incalculable. For long years [the lands of Middle-earth] were their chief source of timber, not only for their ship-yards at Lond Daer and elsewhere, but also for Númenor itself' (341). It suggests that there was a much greater demand of wood after Aldarion's death, and that the skill of sustainable forestry was lost. While Aldarion himself was not the cause of destruction, the works he began were.

In addition to the Númenóreans' growth in demand for wood and timber, there was war in Middle-earth. Sauron invaded Eriador in the year 1695 of the Second Age and 'ravaged the lands' (308). In the period leading up to and during the war, he encouraged forest-dwellers in Eriador to ambush the Númenóreans and their havens (340-1). The Númenóreans retaliated with ruthless cutting of trees. Sauron's 'raiders [also] made much havoc on the fringe of the forests, setting fire in the woods and burning many of the great wood-stores of the Númenóreans' (341). By this point the great woodland had become several forests and woods, seemingly separated, and by the time Sauron was driven out of Eriador in 1700 of the Second Age, the land 'lay largely in ruins' and 'most of the old forests had been destroyed' (342).

These are the events that would have taken the greatest toll on the forest. The end of the Second Age saw the fall of Númenor, and in the beginning of the Third Age descendants of the Númenóreans established Arnor in Middle-earth.

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<sup>9</sup> This is also referenced in Tolkien's essay 'Of Dwarves and Men' in *The History of Middle-earth* (Tolkien, 1996), where Tolkien notes that the exploitation of the forests of Middle-earth was a primary cause of tension between the Númenóreans and the forest-dwellers of Middle-earth.

Arnor became divided into three kingdoms, of which one was Cardolan, which covered the Shire and the Old Forest. Little is said of this period with regards to forestry, except that the Númenórean descendants, the Dúnedain of Cardolan, settled in the area surrounding the Old Forest. Since the Númenóreans were notorious for their destructive forestry, it would not be surprising if that practice was continued in Cardolan. If it was, Tolkien does not seem to have mentioned it.<sup>10</sup> Curiously, when forces of Angmar attacked in the year 1409 of the Third Age, a ‘remnant of the faithful among the Dúnedain of Cardolan also held out in Tyrn Gorthad (the [Barrow-downs]), or took refuge in the Forest behind’ (Tolkien, 1992, 1077). The ‘Forest behind’ was undoubtedly the Old Forest. If the Dúnedain felt safe enough in the Old Forest to take refuge there, it speaks volumes of their relations with it. However, it seems more likely that they simply believed it safer there than to face the attacking forces. Tolkien does not make it explicit, but if the Dúnedain of Cardolan continued the forestry practice of the Númenóreans, the sustained harm to the Old Forest must have spanned approximately 5100 years. Afterwards, Barrow-wights settled in the Barrow-downs, infecting the area with darkness (1078). Any sentient being receiving such harm over a proportionate amount of time would have to be strong indeed not to receive lasting wounds.

The final point to consider is the conflict between the Hobbits and the Old Forest, which *Tolkien Gateway* (2012) stipulate took place between the years 2340 and 3018 of the Third Age. Of this event, Merry says that the trees ‘attacked the Hedge: they came and planted themselves right by it, and leaned over it’, and that the Hobbits retaliated by cutting down ‘hundreds of trees’, making ‘a great bonfire in the Forest’, and burning ‘all the ground in a long strip east of the Hedge’ (Tolkien, 1992, 125). Merry presents the Old Forest’s attack on the Hedge as unprovoked. However, considering the Hobbits’ culture of objectifying nature, it seems more likely that the Old Forest saw their agricultural life-style as a threat, and that the Hobbits simply did not realise. The burning, however, might have made the Old Forest perceive the Hobbits as permanent enemies.

Much of this potential background seems to connect with the Old Forest’s corruptness and defensive nature. The trees are ‘filled with a hatred of things that go free upon the earth, gnawing, biting, breaking, hacking, burning: destroyers and usurpers’ (145). There have been forest-dwellers that break and burn. Hobbits that burn. Númenóreans that hack. The ‘gnawing’ and ‘biting’ could be from

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<sup>10</sup> He does, however, mention through Faramir that there are woodwrights in Gondor, where Númenóreans also settled (Tolkien, 1992, 721), which makes it plausible that the northern counterpart also continued some form of woodcraft that might have had some demand on surrounding woodlands.

either of the wars, when Orcs were sent into the land, but the tools of any of the Men or Hobbits through the Ages could also be said to gnaw or bite. '[D]estroyers and usurpers' could, again, refer to anyone who seized and claimed the land for themselves and caused destructions. The ambiguities blacken all parties involved. The Men's actions during the war with Sauron were so brutal that the writing occasionally makes it impossible to tell them apart from the actions of the Orcs, even though the Orcs did Sauron's bidding and Sauron is one of Tolkien's few blatantly evil characters. Taking this potential background into consideration, it is not surprising that the Old Forest does not discriminate in their hatred towards the 'things that go free upon the earth'.

### **CONCLUSION: A Return to the Field and Final Weeding**

It is well documented that Tolkien loved trees and forests, and depicted them as forces of good. I have here first shown that he accorded them voices, if only in evocative and connotative descriptions. I have then gone on to show why the Old Forest and Withywindle valley might have reacted defensively, which was how Tolkien let the trees 'punish those that wrong[ed] them'. Finally I have examined posthumously published material that has explained the defensiveness and malevolence.

As we have seen, it is not, as Flieger argues, a question of the Old Forest's malevolence towards the Hobbits and what that might say of Tolkien himself. I have based the discussion on the assumption that Tolkien intended his works to appear as translations of texts originally written in some distant past, and while Tolkien's opinions occasionally shine through, this has been in the manner of a translator, and it has been shown that the conflict between the Hobbits and the Old Forest is one of two incompatible cultures. Throughout *LotR* there are vague implications of a devastating deforestation that has left only outposts such as the Old Forest. If we are to accept the potential background derived from *UToNM*, we shall also have to accept that there is reason in the Old Forest's malevolence towards anything that walks freely upon the earth, and that the malevolence is seen in *LotR* in the form of corruption and a defensive nature that seeks to harm the Hobbits. In his attempt to take 'the part of trees', as well as show the Old Forest through the eyes of the Hobbits (who Tolkien no doubt loved), Tolkien made the conflict inevitable. It is no longer a question of Tolkien's personal beliefs, but of two opposing parties that both believe themselves to be the injured one.

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