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Nailing Jell-O to the Wall: Canonicity in Middle-earth

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An expanded version of a contribution to the “Fandom Responses to the Amazon Rings of Power Trailers” roundtable, Northeast Popular Culture Association, October 22, 2022.

Middle-earth is often held up as the example par excellence of a sub-created Secondary World. Mark Wolf (43) argues that the key to successful world-building is consistency, defined to be “the degree to which world details are plausible, feasible, and without contradiction.” Consistency clearly demands careful planning and attention to detail, which is far easier when an author is intentionally writing a single series of works from beginning to end in chronological order. That is NOT the story of Middle-earth, however. Tolkien first published the middle section, no pun intended, *The Hobbit*, which was not initially connected with the grand mythology he had already been writing and rewriting for several decades, but was instead grandfathered in later. While he tried to interest his publishers in the Silmarillion mythology after the success of *The Hobbit*, they instead famously asked for more Hobbit tales, leading to *The Lord of the Rings*. This necessitated retconning (Wolf 213) the famed riddle scene between Bilbo Baggins and Gollum in *The Hobbit* for the second edition in order to align it more closely with the details of Bilbo’s possession of the One Ring in *The Lord of the Rings* (Rateliff 732–40). So which version of the tale is the ‘right’ one?

In reviewing fan criticism of the Amazon series *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*, one of the often seen complaints is that the showrunners are not staying true to Tolkien ‘canon.’ But this begs the question, what, precisely, *is* Tolkien ‘canon?’ The *Tolkien Gateway* website defines ‘canon’ as a

term to refer to consistent ‘absolute truth’ in literature, religion and fiction, in contrast to apocryphal tales of ‘lesser’ significance and value. Many sophisticated works of fiction have some canon that refers to the corpus of the officially-released works and aims to internal consistency....

In an understatement of epic proportions, they note “It is difficult to speak of what is ‘true’ in the context of J.R.R. Tolkien’s legendarium, or which texts should be considered part of the canon.” *Tolkien Gateway* takes the stance that

As only *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*, and *The Road Goes Ever On* were published during Tolkien’s lifetime, only those works should be considered “true” canon with respect to Tolkien’s publication history.

However, they acknowledge that

The Hobbit was revised twice, and *The Lord of The Rings* once. There is no general consistency across all of these books, although the most agreement between sources may be found with the second (1950) edition of *The Hobbit*, the first (1954-5) edition of *The Lord of The Rings*, and *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* and *The Road Goes Ever On*. Further complicating matters is Tolkien's commentary in the Appendices of *The Lord of The Rings*, where he posits the work itself as being a translation of mythology written down in the world of Arda, subject to errors and other inaccuracies of those fictional characters who "wrote" the material Tolkien is "translating." Similarly, *The Hobbit* is said to be a translation of a memoir written by Bilbo Baggins, and it is commonly thought that a degree of unreliable narration is intentionally presented at different parts of the story.

In contrast, the official policy of *The Lord of the Rings Wiki* is that "‘canon’ is defined as anything pertaining to Middle-earth that was written/invented by J.R.R. Tolkien, coherent with the material of his major publications *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*." The published *Silmarillion* is considered problematic by many sources, as in its posthumously published form it had been pieced together by Christopher Tolkien, from often contradictory versions of individual tales written and revised over decades, to create some semblance of a self-consistent grand history of the First Age. As just one example, there are contradictory statements concerning Gil-galad's paternity within the published notes, essays, and drafts (*PoME* 349-51). In the essay "‘A Continuing and Evolving Creation’: Distractions in the Later History of Middle-earth," Wayne Hammond (27) paraphrases a listserv post as noting "there are Tolkien's *latest* thoughts, his *best* thoughts, and his *published* thoughts, and these are not necessarily the same," although Christopher had to decipher his father's intent from among these.

Christopher himself admits in his Foreword to *The Silmarillion* (viii) that "A complete consistency (either within the compass of *The Silmarillion* itself or between *The Silmarillion* and other published writings of my father's) is not to be looked for, and could only be achieved, if at all, at heavy and needless cost." He furthermore opines in a note on the version of the ruin of Doriath that he had published in *The Silmarillion* that in its crafting he had been guilty of "overstepping the bounds of the editorial function," as that section was based in large part in lengthy discussions with Guy Kay (*WoJ* 356). As Charles Noad (62-3) summarizes in "On the Construction of 'The Silmarillion'," Tolkien himself seems to have accepted near the end of his life that the grand mythology of *The Silmarillion* had become utterly untenable in that it could not be both strictly astronomically correct (have a round earth coeval with the sun and moon) and still keep some of its central beauty (especially related to the legend of the Two Trees). Tolkien therefore

accepted that much of its lore was “Mannish” in origin and could not accurately reflect the knowledge of the Elves (e.g., *MR* 370, 373, 389; *PoME* 357, 390; *Letters* 411).

However, every once in a while some online discussion board wanders in where angels fear to tread and takes up the thorny issue of Tolkien ‘canon.’ The result is predictable: a great deal of thought, yet a general lack of consensus. For example, in a 2015 discussion on the subreddit *r/tolkienfans* user ThatOneChappy raises the question “how much of the Silmarillion is canon?” In response, Astrogator opines

I find the concept of 'canon' useless with Tolkien's works. It stems from a common desire in almost any fandom to have a definitive version of the story with which use- or internet-arguments can definitively be settled (do Balrogs have wings?). This is easy in some cases, and harder in many, and Tolkien probably sits towards the end of that spectrum. There are so many iterations of the different story-threads and elements that get cut, pasted, re-used or completely abandoned and who relate to each other in different versions, contradict or mirror each other.

An anonymous poster agrees, noting

I wish more people in this sub were a little less fervent in their belief of 'one true Tolkien canon,' because it doesn't exist. Someone might consider the Silmarillion canon because it is a complete published work, others may not since it wasn't completed and published solely by Tolkien. Some may deem Tolkien's most recent drafts to be canon because they represent the most up to date information we have before Tolkien's death, others may question why any draft or letter or conversation or scrap of paper is somehow considered more legitimate than any other discarded idea simply by virtue of the fact that Tolkien died before he could discard that particular idea. It's great to disagree on these points and discuss them and defend your viewpoints. That's the whole reason this sub exists and I love it. But certain people who post here take it too far, to the point of belittling others' viewpoints and being rude. "My personal and utterly subjective viewpoints are superior to your personal and utterly subjective viewpoints regarding books about a fantasy world created by a man who has been dead for 42 years!"

In a 2004 thread on *The Tolkien Forum* on “What is considered canon” poster Niniel reflects

I think hardly anything of Tolkien's work is considered canon, because he wrote so many versions of his stories. When you read HOME, you will find at least 10 more different versions of the stories in the Sil. The only thing that counts is whether Tolkien wrote it himself; if someone makes claims based on something Tolkien didn't write himself, then his argument often is not accepted, but as long as someone's argument can be supported by claims from Tolkien's work it's okay. Most people have not read the whole of HOME, so for them the published Sil is sort of canon, but it's definitely not the version Tolkien would have published if he had published it himself.

Poster Aulë offers “the only things that can be called 100% canon are the things that JRR Tolkien had published whilst he was alive.... Of the things that he didn't publish and his son Christopher compiled (eg, *The Silmarillion*, *Unfinished Tales*, *History of Middle Earth*, etc), usually the most recently written text is used if two (or more) things contradict [sic].” On the other hand, poster Snaga cuts to the chase, offering “The idea of a ‘canon’ is bogus IMO. This is a piece of (or collection of pieces of) literature, not a religious work. You can do exactly as you please.”

Although it seems impossible to consistently define ‘canon’ in Tolkienia, there have been a number of interesting attempts to classify *levels* of canonicity. For example, *Tolkien Gateway* proposes that “When handling two or more inconsistent elements of Tolkien's Legendarium, there are at least two (sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting) rules of thumb according to which a Tolkienist can apply criticism and determine which is more valid over the other.” These are (1) Final intent and (2) Height intent. The first “follows the axiom that Tolkien's Legendarium is a work that was revisioned towards maturity and refinement, therefore later ideas are more valid than earlier ones.” In contrast, the second

considers that by the writing of the *Lord of the Rings* the Legendarium had reached its peak of maturity. Afterwards, Tolkien's personal and unpublished writings presented a "decline" and were mainly experiments with philosophical matters of Arda, which sometimes contradicted the established works. These were eventually abandoned or left unfinished.

It should be noted that these two classifications can lead two scholars or fans to take completely different pieces of information as ‘canon,’ especially when dealing with many of the interesting essays in *Morgoth's Ring*, for example. On the other hand, *The Lord of the Rings Wiki* classifies some works beyond their defined canon of *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of The Rings*, and *The Silmarillion* as “precanon” and “disputed canon.” Precanon topics include Tevildo in *The Book of Lost Tales* while disputed canon include the Mewlips in *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*.

For another point of view, consider a post on the *tolkienfans* subreddit previously discussed in which Steuard Jensen offers a detailed taxonomy of ‘canons’ as follows:

- I. Canonical ("true" canon): Tolkien's published writings, showing his vision in its final form [which he considers to consist only of *The Lord of the Rings*].
- II. Adopted Canon: Finished work incorporated into the canonical body after it was written (often after some revision), while possibly leaving inconsistent loose ends. In most cases, these are trusted just as much as "true" canon [in his opinion *The Hobbit* and *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*].
- III. Final Intent: Works or information which, while not published in his lifetime, was Tolkien's unambiguous intent at the time of his death.
- IV. Ambiguous Final Intent: Works or information for which Tolkien's intent at the time of his death was unclear (such as contradictory passages whose relative date is uncertain, or texts which while not specifically contradicted are old enough that Tolkien probably intended to rewrite them).
- V. Reconstructed: Tales assembled from Tolkien's collected writings by Christopher and his assistant(s).
- VI. Developmental: Tolkien's early drafts of a story, largely superceded [sic] by later writings or abandoned completely.

Jensen considers most tales in category and III and IV to be found in *Unfinished Tales*, *Morgoth's Ring*, *The War of the Jewels*, and *The Peoples of Middle-earth*.

Finally, we offer Michael Kane's personal taxonomy shared in a 2013 post on his blog, "In Search of Eldar Days," *Practical Canon, Academic Canon, and Ideal Canon*. The first is described as

the arm-chair level of canon and the easiest one to use and talk about. This includes the major published works, *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion*, and probably the *Children of Hurin*.... This is the canon that anyone can pick up and have a conversation about with their friends. It takes *The Silmarillion* as is.

Academic Canon is "comprised of late versions of *The Silmarillion*" as well as *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. He terms this "the canon that Tolkien enthusiasts talk about, waxing eloquently about specific versions of specific stories written at specific times," with the rather curious comment that "Most people aren't interested in this one." Kane admits that Ideal Canon doesn't exist, being "*The Silmarillion* as

Tolkien would have eventually published it. Perhaps even more accurately than [sic] that, this is the version that Tolkien would have considered to be the ‘true’ one, the events as they actually occurred with Tolkien’s human meddling,” referring back to the “Mannish” origin earlier alluded to. Kane also gives voice to the elephant in the room: why does any of this matter? As he explains,

there is SO much good stuff outside of both the Practical Canon AND the Academic Canon. We can’t know what’s in the ideal canon so in many cases, when talking about Middle Earth, its simply just good to consider ALL versions of given story. Even if a given version may not be considered accurate in some way [sic], there may still be useful insight, details, and hidden gems waiting to be discovered on a page someone else might throw out as being non-canonical.

Returning to fan discussions concerning *Rings of Power* I offer my own potentially controversial adaptation:

“I wish it need not have happened to my canon,” said Frodo. “So do I,” said Gandalf, “and so do all who live to see such adaptations. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the adaptation that is given us.”

Ultimately, each fan needs to decide for themselves what defines their personal Tolkien canon, and how wedded they are to it, especially as applied to any adaptation (including the Jackson films). Is a condensed Second Age timeline a deal-breaker, or does having two Durins alive at the same time utterly break the spell? Can the absence of Glorfindel or Tom Bombadil be forgiven, or romantic tension between an original character and Kili? If we can’t agree on what defines Tolkien canon, we certainly can’t agree on what defines a broken canon.

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