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Second Age, Middle Age

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Second Age, Middle Age

Cover Page Footnote

A first (much shorter) version of this article was presented as a paper at the 18th Tolkien Seminar of the Deutsche Tolkien Gesellschaft (German Tolkien Society) at the Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena in 2022. I would particularly like to thank Prof. Thomas Honegger, Jonas Mertens, Jonathan Naumann, Prof. Robert Tally, Allan Turner, and Renee Vink for their feedback. Suggestions from the anonymous reviewers of the Journal of Tolkien Research vastly improved my essay.

The Second Age of Tolkien's *legendarium* is currently in vogue. The William Morrow imprint of HarperCollins Publishers recently released *The Fall of Númenor*, a chronological or annalistic account of the Second Age edited by Brian Sibley. *The Fall of Númenor* does not introduce any new and unpublished documents, but rather assembles and reorganizes material relating to the Second Age published in *The Lord of the Rings* (especially the appendices), *The Silmarillion*, *Unfinished Tales*, various volumes of *The History of Middle-Earth*, and *The Nature of Middle-Earth*. As the title suggests, the volume mostly focuses on Númenor rather than Middle-earth, though of course the exploits of the Númenóreans in Middle-earth mean that there are a number of stories about and references to that continent. At the same time, Amazon Prime Video released the first season (eight episodes) of the series *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*. As most Tolkien fans know, this series has very little to do with *The Lord of the Rings*—though there are some characters who are involved in the War of the Rings at the end of the Third Age, e.g., Elrond, Galadriel, and Sauron. But *The Rings of Power* is set in the Second Age, in Númenor and in Middle-earth, and features some figures from that time mentioned in Tolkien's writings, e.g., Gil-Galad, Celebrimbor, Durin III and IV, Ar-Pharazôn, Míriel, Isildur, and Elendil. There are also freely invented characters such as a sister for Isildur named Eärien; a leader of the Uruk called Adar; a number of Elves; an entire group of proto-Hobbits; and a mysterious individual who falls from the sky. The plot of the first season of *The Rings of Power* centered around Galadriel's search for Sauron, Sauron's emergence, the discovery of *mithril* by the dwarves, the production of rings of power by Celebrimbor and others, and the travails of the band of proto-Hobbits—all in the Second Age. This recent popularity of the Second Age, whether in Tolkien's own words in *The Fall of Númenor* or in the imagination of the showrunners of *The Rings of Power*, raises the question of what the significance of this period is for Tolkien's *legendarium* as a whole.

With *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*, the major published narratives in Tolkien's *legendarium* are set in the First and the Third Ages respectively. In contrast, the Second Age only has one major completed story, the "Akallabêth" or Fall (or Downfall) of Númenor, which Tolkien himself never published in fully developed form. For that reason among others, many scholars either ignore the Second Age entirely or dismiss it without much consideration. For instance, Toby Widdicombe writes in *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Guide for the Perplexed* that "conceptually that [Second] age was always too tightly bound up with the Atlantis story" (95)—at the very least ignoring the Noachian echoes¹—and asserts

¹ As Marie Barnfield explains, the Númenor legend incorporates influence at least from Greek legend (Atlantis), Israel (in Númenor's religion), ancient Egypt (culture), and Celtic myth (in the foundered kingdom, the link between the health of the king and the country, and the physical

that the story is “hackneyed” (95). In *The Road to Middle-Earth*, Tom Shippey reduces the Second Age to “that of Númenor” (226). In writing about the “Akallabêth,” Brian Rosebury praises “[t]he simplicity and grandeur of its themes” (107), but he concludes that there is an “unfulfilled promise” (108) in the material on the Second Age in *The Silmarillion* as well as *Unfinished Tales*. Even when Peter Grybauskas recognizes the “sprawling allusive web” of the Second Age and calls the Last Alliance “an untold tale essential to plot and theme” (26), he is contextualizing the era and story for *The Lord of the Rings* rather than analyzing the Second Age for its own sake.

Yet the Second Age is physically and geographically distinct from the other ages and carries its own meaning. As Widdicombe points out, “For almost all of the Second Age, much of Middle-earth looked markedly different from the Middle-earth with which the general reader of Tolkien’s work is familiar from *The Lord of the Rings*” (104). More specifically, at the beginning of the age “some islands disappear and new ones are formed, hills are leveled, and rivers take new directions” (104). In addition, the Second Age stands out because it is actually the longest: The First Age (not counting the Years of the Lamps and Trees) only has 590 years and the Third Age has 3021, but the Second Age counts 3441. In a review of *The Fall of Númenor*, Douglas Kane writes that the Second Age “is an important part of the *legendarium* in and of itself” (1). What then is the significance of this Second Age for Tolkien’s *legendarium*?

The answer I propose to this question is premised on the conviction that the true significance of the *legendarium* lies not in itself, but in its application to our world. As is well-known, Tolkien rejected the idea that there was any allegory in *The Lord of the Rings*, and indeed I would submit that there are no successful allegorical interpretations of that novel. Presumably, Tolkien would have extended his view of allegory to his entire *legendarium*. In the same foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings* where he formulated his rejection of allegory, however, Tolkien offered the idea that his story could be ‘applied’ to the real world, and a similar ‘application’ might help us understand better the significance of the Second Age (*Lord of the Rings* xxiv).

My exploration of that significance proceeds in two steps. First, in my opinion, the Second Age constitutes the Middle Ages or medieval period of Tolkien’s universe. Tolkien was a scholar of medieval language and literature, and it is quite possible that he considered this period central to any understanding of English culture and history. Whereas many scholars of his time interpreted the Middle Ages as an aberration between glorious antiquity and an even more glorious present, Tolkien himself saw it as the most important period of history, or at least

structure of the island). In spite of her subtitle “Númenor and the Second Age,” however, Barnfield hardly discusses the Second Age as such.

European history. If we ‘apply’ this understanding to the *legendarium*, it seems to me that the Second Age becomes the pivot around which all of Middle-earth moves.

The second step of my answer to the question above has two parts. On the one hand, I argue, Tolkien sees the Second Age as central because, like the Middle Ages on our earth to which he devoted his academic career, it looks backwards and forwards in a unique way that helps us understand our own time better while anchoring our present in a distant past.² As Grybauskas explains, here “[t]he author himself is in search of [...] source and import” (28). On the other hand, in my interpretation, the Second Age can never fulfill Tolkien’s desire to give his *legendarium* and universe a center and meaning. Instead, it mostly consists of an absent center, and the few stories that exist demonstrate the decline and failure that are actually truly representative of the human condition. As Rosebury puts it, Tolkien here presents a “dark, disillusioned view of human experience” (108). While the First Age and the Third Age end with a kind of redemption in the victories over Morgoth and Sauron respectively, the climax of the Second Age offers little optimism or hope for improvement. The stories show the failure and corruption of humanity both in their content, like the moral and geological fall of Númenor, and in their form, i.e., the fact that so many of them are fragmentary and unfinished.

In a way, then, I am presenting a deconstructive interpretation here: I am looking at what the text and the critics marginalize, and I focus on what is *not* there rather than what *is* there. My argument proceeds in three main sections: I examine Tolkien’s assessment of the Middle Ages in our world in his correspondence and scholarly work; I investigate the place of the Second Age in several large frameworks or overviews that Tolkien constructed over the decades for his entire *legendarium*; and I analyze the significance of the few more or less developed narratives we have from the Second Age.

Middle Ages

The Middle Ages in our world are generally defined as beginning with the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 CE after a glorious past in antiquity. At the later end, the period moves into the Reformation, the Early Modern Period, or the Enlightenment—a new period of glory. According to Chris Wickham, the Middle Ages were often treated by historians as transitional and dismissible, “a long period of random violence, ignorance and superstition” (4). Many scholars were and are mostly interested in what followed the period, but as Wickham cautions: “History is not teleological: that is to say historical development does not go *to*; it goes *from*” (1). In addition, the adjective ‘medieval’ “was a negative word from the start, and has often remained one” (Wickham 3). The Middle Ages were sometimes also

² I am not arguing that Tolkien consciously constructed his *legendarium* with this meaning in mind, only that this constitutes a legitimate interpretation of the published material on the Second Age.

referred to as the Dark Ages, introducing another adjective that Tolkien uses frequently in his *legendarium*. In linguistic terms, the Middle Ages in England in particular encompass the two historical stages of the English language on which Tolkien spent most of his professional career: Old English (then often called Anglo-Saxon) and Middle English. Tolkien published one of his early academic essays, “Sigelwara Land,” in the journal *Medium Aevum*, which is a common Latin version of the term Middle Ages.³

To my knowledge, Tolkien never really articulated why exactly he found the Middle Ages so fascinating and why he made them the center of his academic career, and critics have not addressed the question head-on.⁴ There are two excellent collections on Tolkien and the Middle Ages, but *Tolkien the Medievalist* only dedicates its first part to Tolkien’s own medieval scholarship (mostly in relation to other scholars and friends), while *Tolkien’s Modern Middle Ages* focuses on ‘medievalism,’ i.e., the way Tolkien and other scholars use and instrumentalize the medieval period for other purposes. As Jane Chance and Alfred Siewers point out in their introduction to the latter volume, Tolkien came from a Victorian tradition of medieval scholarship that “helped shape resistance and social responses to modernization, industrialization, and the development of modern gender and racial identities” (3)—so medieval scholarship served a contemporaneous ideological agenda rather than investigating the Middle Ages on their own terms. Nevertheless, there seems to be a scholarly consensus that, as Thomas Honegger puts it, Tolkien’s “academic work determined the way he saw himself personally and professionally” (“Tolkien,” 51).

In the absence of direct statements from Tolkien as well as pertinent scholarship, perhaps some hints as to why Tolkien was so excited about the Middle Ages can be gathered from his biography and his scholarly publications. I propose that the reasons for Tolkien’s fascination with the Middle Ages in our world suggest that the Second Age was central to his invented universe. Humphrey Carpenter writes that at Oxford, where Tolkien had enrolled to study Classics, he was soon “bored with Latin and Greek authors and was far more excited by Germanic literature” (62), though it remains unclear what form that excitement took beyond

³ In his letter to Milton Waldman (see below), Tolkien speaks of the Third Age of Middle-earth as “a Twilight Age, a Medium Aevum” (*Letters* 154), but in my assessment that passage places the time of *The Lord of the Rings* between the First Age and *our* time. Similarly, I am discounting the brief foray Tolkien made into a sequel to *The Lord of the Rings* in the Fourth Age in “The New Shadow” (*Peoples* 409-21).

⁴ Many, many critics have examined parallels and similarities between the Middle Ages and the *legendarium*, but mostly in order to illuminate the latter. To pick one classical example, Jane Chance writes: “Just as Tolkien the man in the primary world became attracted to an earlier age—the Middle Ages—instead of finding interest in the twentieth century, so Tolkien the sub-creator in the secondary world became attracted to its earlier age” (32). Chance does not speculate, however, on any reasons for the first attraction.

his academic pursuits and clubs. In 1913, Tolkien officially changed from Classics to the Honour School of English Language and Literature. The split in that name often indicated that a student focused either on comparative philology (today usually called historical linguistics) or on modern literature—a fact that Tolkien bemoaned in his “Valedictory Address” (*Monsters* 229-36). Tolkien for his part was certainly interested in languages, also studying Welsh and Finnish at the time, but additionally he read widely in literature from the linguistic periods he focused on. It is well known that one major inspiration for his entire *legendarium* was two lines from the Old English poem *Crist I* from the Exeter Book, written or compiled in the ninth or tenth century, that included the word or term ‘Earendel.’

In 1923, Tolkien wrote in a letter that “Middle English is an exciting field—almost uncharted I begin to think” (*Letters* 11), so perhaps in addition to simple excitement professional opportunities were one of his motivations. In 1937, he rejected the idea that studying Old English was “abstruse”—apparently a widespread opinion even in the 1930s—and asserted instead that its literature touches on “human concerns” (*Letters* 21). In 1944, he told his son Christopher that Old English was a “noble idiom” (*Letters* 102). Even later, in 1955, Tolkien wrote that it was “as much due to descent as to opportunity that Anglo-Saxon and Western Middle English and alliterative verse have been both a childhood attraction and my main professional sphere” (*Letters* 218). This sentence reinforces the impression that Tolkien was interested in professional opportunities, and it introduces the idea of an inherited connection to specific earlier forms of the English language.

As Honegger has noted (“Academic Writings”), Tolkien went on throughout his academic career to write extensively about two canonical texts: the Old English *Beowulf* and the Middle English *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. With regard to *Beowulf*, Tolkien wrote that the poem was successful “in creating in the minds of the poet’s contemporaries the illusion of surveying a past, pagan but noble and fraught with deep significance—a past that itself had depth and reached backward into a dark antiquity of sorrow” (*Monsters* 27). Perhaps this passage can be adapted to explain Tolkien’s fascination with the Middle Ages: they look backwards towards a significant and noble antiquity, while they also look forwards to modernity. This liminal state, being undetermined and in the middle, may have been exactly what Tolkien considered important himself. As Mark Atherton puts it (with regard to looking forwards), Tolkien “came to appreciate the connections with the language of the present day; this was English, but English in an earlier form, familiar but distant” (217). Atherton also asserts that in *Beowulf* the story, the style, and the mythical treatment of important topics such as light and dark appealed to Tolkien.

On a different level, Tolkien was interested in bringing Old and Middle English texts and knowledge about them to wider audiences through editions, translations, and presentations. As Dimitra Fimi has shown, Tolkien provided radio

programs to the BBC as early as the 1930s. In December 1953, the BBC broadcast Tolkien's translation of *Sir Gawain* in four parts (Solopova 234), and those broadcasts were repeated in September 1954 (*Letters* 444, note 148.1). According to Tolkien himself, the BBC were "clamouring for *Gawain*" (*Letters* 183). At the same time, he published an article titled "A Fourteenth-Century Romance" in the popular *Radio Times*. Looking backwards, Tolkien points out that the poem has "roots deep in the almost forgotten pagan past of north Europe, and of Ireland and Britain in particular" and that the "[t]he reshaping of the inherited material by a mind of the fourteenth century, concerned with the problems and ideals of conduct at that period, is as interesting to observe as is, say Shakespeare's in similar cases, such as *King Lear*" ("Romance" 9). Specifically, the author(s) of *Sir Gawain* were trying to rescue Old English alliterative verse from the past and using antiquated vocabulary. Looking forwards, Tolkien argues that the merits of the poem "entitle it to a hearing still, some five hundred and fifty years since it was written" ("Romance" 9).

On January 3, 1954, Tolkien gave a talk on *Sir Gawain* on the BBC, which Christopher Tolkien later used "in slightly reduced form" (*Gawain* ix) for the introduction to the published version of Tolkien's translations *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, Sir Orfeo*. Here, Tolkien praises the *Gawain* author's technical abilities, but also the construction of the hero: "in terms of literature, undoubtedly this break in the mathematical perfection of an ideal creature, inhuman in flawlessness, is a great improvement" (*Gawain* 7). According to Tolkien, "the movements of the English mind in the fourteenth century" are important because "from [them] much of our sentiment and ideals of conduct have been derived" (*Gawain* 7f.). At the same time, he wrote in his more academic lecture on *Sir Gawain*—in language similar to the popular article in the *Radio Times*—that the poem "has deep roots in the past, deeper even than its author was aware. It is made of tales often told before and elsewhere, and of elements that derive from remote times, beyond the vision or awareness of the poet: like *Beowulf*" (*Monsters* 72). Here, once again but in a different way, the Middle Ages reach into the distant past, while they also form the foundation of our modern times. In addition, as Elizabeth Solopova notes, "Middle English literature reflects beliefs that humans share the earth with other races" (236), and Tolkien took from medieval literature his representation of the Elves as forceful rather than fanciful beings.

For Michael Drout, the singular achievement of Tolkien's medieval scholarship is that, "He could bring to bear a literary sensibility that was informed by philological knowledge and at the same time use the detail and rigor of philology to understand literary works" (151). It stands to reason that Tolkien intended to create for his own world a similar age that looked backwards and forwards, through etymological significance and rhetorical construction—and make that age the center of his universe. My argument, of course, is that this was the Second Age of

Middle-earth. At the same time, I submit, Tolkien was not and could not be successful in his project to create such a center for the *legendarium*.

Frameworks and Overviews

Tolkien located the Second Age of his *legendarium* in various frameworks and overviews that suggest different kinds of meaning and spell out connections backwards and forwards to varying degrees. As Brian Sibley writes in the introduction to *The Fall of Númenor*, “readers had their first tantalizing glimpses of that past history, providing a richly tapestried backdrop to the struggle by the Free Peoples of Middle-earth against Sauron and the forces of Mordor” in *The Lord of the Rings* (xix). The first text in which readers encounter the Second Age directly (rather than in these glimpses) is the appendices to *The Lord of the Rings*, specifically Appendix B, “The Tale of Years.” According to Widdicombe, Tolkien uses this appendix as an “opportunity to stress the camaraderie among peoples (in this case elves and dwarves)” (95). In my assessment, in contrast, the appendix presents a much less positive view of the world. For instance, Tolkien’s first paragraph about the Second Age reads: “These were the dark years for Men of Middle-earth, but the years of the glory of Númenor. Of events in Middle-earth the records are few and brief, and their dates are often uncertain” (*Lord of the Rings* 1082). This paragraph immediately distinguishes two groups of humans: those in Middle-earth and those in Númenor. The two groups differ in their fates: the former experience “dark years,” the latter are at their most luminous height. In that sense, Shippey is correct in calling the Second Age “that of Númenor” (*Road* 226), but that requires erasing the history of Middle-earth. It is probably no coincidence that “Dark Ages” is often used as a synonym for the Middle Ages, so Tolkien is aligning the men of Middle-earth with the period he studied in his academic pursuits. However, Tolkien actually hardly ever talks about the Men of Middle-earth in his writings on the Second Age and only sometimes refers backwards from *The Lord of the Rings*, as to the men of Dunharrow (Grybauskas 28). Instead, he almost always focuses on Númenóreans or on Elves. In my interpretation, this is a first instance of the absence at the center of the Second Age, one which Tolkien unsuccessfully tried to fill with his story “Tal-Elmar” (see below).

The text in the appendices to *The Lord of the Rings* specifies that “records” of the Second Age are rare. Even when they exist, they are not much perused: as Grybauskas points out, Isildur’s narrative regarding the One Ring, for instance, written at the very end of the Second Age, “sat unread for three millennia” (26). Similarly, the various narratives of the Second Age emphasize again and again how many records are lost in the destruction of Númenor. That leaves open the possibility that much more happened than the events enumerated in the following barely more than one-page list of years in the appendices. For instance, the story of

Aldarion and Erendis, published in *Unfinished Tales*, is not even mentioned in that list. Indeed, there are gaps in the chronology of three, four, or even five hundred years between 40 and 442, 1200 and c. 1500, c.1800 and 2250, 2350 and 2899, all of which suggest absences. Of course, for Tolkien, records are significant, since they can be studied. In contrast, it could be argued that the absence of records either demonstrates the contingency of writing and language or symbolizes the absent transcendental signifier at the center of meaning that brings down any attempt to create stable significance—in this case, a coherent narrative of the Second Age.

Tolkien presents a similar framework in his famous letter to Milton Waldman, an editor at Longman, from around 1951. Here, Tolkien calls the Second Age his “next cycle” after the First Age and uses similar language about this being a “dark age” (*Letters* 150). He specifies that “not very much of its history is (or need be) told” (*Letters* 150). The parenthesis deserves some exploration: Did the history of the Second Age not need to be told because there were no stories, or because those stories were insignificant? In his letter, Tolkien goes on to name two stories for the Second Age: *The Rings of Power*, probably the inspiration for the title of the Amazon series, and the *Downfall of Númenor*. Tolkien allows that Sauron initially repents from his actions in the First Age and begins the Second Age “with fair motives: the reorganising and rehabilitation of the ruin of Middle-earth, ‘neglected by the gods’” (*Letters* 151)—before turning back to evil. Tolkien names three main themes for the Second Age: “The Delaying Elves that lingered in Middle-earth; Sauron’s growth to a new Dark Lord, master and god of men; and Númenor-Atlantis” (*Letters* 151). I would argue, however, that these are not really themes, but episodes, and that the real themes of the Second Age are pride, corruption, decay, and failure. Tolkien writes that the Elves are trying to avoid decay, and he mentions “an inner weakness in Men” (*Letters* 154) that in spite of Númenor’s “days of Pride and Glory” (*Letters* 155) ultimately leads to her downfall. In other words, even though Númenor temporarily experiences pride and glory, all of Middle-earth and Númenor eventually succumb to the Dark Ages.

In his letter to Waldman, Tolkien writes that *The Rings of Power* and the *Downfall of Númenor* are “dealt with annalistically, and in two Tales or Accounts” (*Letters* 151)—the structure that Sibley adopted for *The Fall of Númenor*. These tales or accounts are perhaps the annals collected in the section “The Tale of Years of the Second Age” in *The Peoples of Middle-earth*, which mentions seven manuscripts or typescripts, T(a) and T(b) as well as T 1-5, most with additional annotations. These annals—meaning lists of years or spans with brief summaries of what happened during that time—also have significant gaps: For instance, both T1 and T4 simply list the years 2000-3000 as one entry where “Sauron’s dominion slowly extends over all Middle-earth” (*Peoples* T1, 169) and “The Númenóreans now make permanent dwellings on the shores of Middle-earth, seeking wealth and dominion; they build many havens and fortresses” (*Peoples* T4, 175). The second

sentence here in particular suggests that Tolkien's perspective is predominantly Númenórean.

Some of the gaps are filled out by "The Line of Elros: Kings of Númenor" in *Unfinished Tales*, which for instance lists Tár-Miriel, who more recently featured in Amazon's *The Rings of Power*. What Tolkien mostly fleshes out here, though, is the slow descent of the Númenórean kings, from Tar-Ciryatan, who is "greedy of wealth" (*Unfinished Tales* 221) and dies in 2029, to Tar-Atanamir, who "was the first of the Kings to refuse to lay down his life, or to renounce the scepter" and died in 2386 (*Unfinished Tales* 221), to Tar-Calmacil, during whose time before his death in 2825 "the name of the King was first spoken in Adûnaic" (*Unfinished Tales* 222), to Ar-Adûnakhôr, who took the blasphemous title "Lord of the West" before he died in 2962. At the same time, Elves are banned from Númenor, and the connection between the Elves in Valinor and those in Middle-earth grows more and more tenuous. These developments contribute to the impression that the Second Age is a time of decay and decline, both among Elves and Men.

Finally, the Second Age serves as the focal point for Tolkien's "The Lost Road" and "The Notion Club Papers," incomplete stories that use time travel as a framework (and that are reprinted in part in *The Fall of Númenor*). In "The Lost Road" (*Lost Road* 39-116) a father and a son turn out to be reincarnated over and over again with etymologically similar names, and towards the end of the surviving manuscript the twentieth-century British Alboin and Audoin Errol find themselves as Elendil and Herendil in the middle of the story of the downfall of Númenor. In "The Notion Club Papers" (*Sauron Defeated* 143-327) two Oxford dons from a literary club suspiciously similar to the Inklings have a vision or dream that includes Númenor. In other words, in the few instances where Tolkien deliberately tried to tie his *legendarium* to our world, he did so through the Second Age.

My conclusion from this brief analysis of the frameworks and overviews, then, is that Tolkien attempts to link the Second Age more closely to our time than any other period in his *legendarium*, which I interpret as him giving it a special significance. He tries to explicate that significance with the rise of Númenor and names stories he is developing. These stories look back to the First Age and forwards to the Third, for instance in the presence of Sauron. Yet ultimately the Second Age emerges as a time of decline, decay, corruption, and failure. Since these developments are not in Tolkien's plan, they cannot be developed, which he explains with the construct that they were not much recorded. That makes the Second Age dark in two senses: the developments were bad, and the record is bad. There are large gaps in the history of the Second Age, which leave it wide open to interpretation. The absence of a record, however, is not the same as an absence of significance, and in any case Tolkien did write some stories set in the Second Age, to which I turn next.

Stories

If the Second Age of Middle-earth corresponds with the Middle Ages in our world, and if Tolkien considered the Middle Ages the most important era in our world, that raises the question: Why didn't Tolkien write more stories set in the Second Age? On the one hand, it is possible that Tolkien was intentionally leaving the Second Age open so that others could insert into that period what they considered most significant about Middle-earth—as *The Rings of Power* is arguably doing. Conversely, Tolkien may have been uncertain himself about what he considered central to his imagined universe and hence uncertain about what stories to provide. In that vein, I argue that Tolkien consciously wanted to provide a positive view of humanity and a quasi-Christian teleology, but unconsciously found himself pulled back into darkness again and again—and for that reason was unable to fully develop his stories. In the process, a darker view of human nature emerged.

By my count, there are about six more or less significant narratives set in the Second Age.⁵ The most extensive story, and really the only completed story, is the “Akallabêth” or “The Downfall of Númenor.” This was originally published in *The Silmarillion* (309-38), and various earlier versions are available in the section “The Drowning of Anadûnê” in *Sauron Defeated* (329-440) as well as the section “The History of the Akallabêth” from *The Peoples of Middle-earth* (140-65). Then there are three narratives in “Part Two: The Second Age” in *Unfinished Tales* (163-267). These include the geographical and somewhat anthropological “Description of the Island of Númenor” and the annalistic “The Line of Elros: Kings of Númenor.” “Galadriel and Celeborn” consists of various parts and passages from various periods in Tolkien’s life, but there is no sustained narration. “Aldarion and Erendis” is the lengthiest story from the Second Age (apart from the “Akallabêth”), but disappointingly lacks a developed ending. Finally, Tolkien’s fragment “Tal-Elmar,” published in *The Peoples of Middle-earth* (422-38), is set in the Second Age. Still, Grybauskas is correct when he writes that the Second Age “in many regards remains only ‘sketched,’ never assuming the same depth and breadth of the legends of the Elder Days” (27). What then is the significance of these stories?

The “Description of the Island of Númenor” and “The Line of Elros” are both rather short at 8-10 pages. The “Description” characterizes the geology and geography of Númenor, and there is some incidental information on the nature, agriculture, economy, infrastructure, art, and religion of the island. The description

⁵ I refer to the original publications here rather than *The Fall of Númenor* because some of the stories are split up into different sections there, because not all of “The Lost Road” and “The Notion Club Papers” is included, and because “Tal-Elmar” is missing entirely. There are also several sections in *The Nature of Middle-Earth* that describe the aging of the Númenóreans, the anthropology and zoology of Númenor, and the end of the island, but in my assessment they make no major contributions to understanding the significance of the Second Age.

may be important because Númenor is geographically at the center of Arda in this age, halfway between Middle-earth to the east and Valinor to the west, as the Second Age forms the chronological center of the *legendarium*. “Elros,” as I discussed earlier, simply lists every king and queen of Númenor, with a brief description of their reign. Both of these texts flesh out the Second Age, at least with regard to Númenor, in areas that none of the other stories cover. In my assessment, they represent attempts on Tolkien’s part to connect the era to what preceded and followed it by way of geography and heritage. Neither of them, however, sheds much light on the significance of the Second Age.

“The History of Galadriel and Celeborn” is more interesting in the context of the present argument because it reaches backwards and forwards in time, one of the main points of interest that Tolkien articulated for the Middle Ages in our world and in his frameworks and overviews of the *legendarium*. Galadriel’s story starts in the First Age, where she is apparently rather proud and strong-willed, though in most versions presented here at least she resists Fëanor. Notably, at the end of the First Age, “she refused the pardon of the Valar for all who had fought” (*Unfinished Tales* 230 f.) against Morgoth. On the other (temporal) end, Galadriel’s involvement in the War of the Rings, her rule over Lothlórien, and her resistance to the temptation of the One Ring are well-known. The story “Galadriel and Celeborn” mentions some of these details, but mostly it focuses on the movements of the couple in the Second Age. Here, I would argue, we see another possible significance of the Second Age: it is a time when individuals such as Galadriel can assess their past actions and determine what kind of person (or Elf, or Dwarf, or Hobbit) they want to be in the future. This is not to say that the Second Age is only important for beings that live across the ages, but rather that it reminds us (when we apply it to our world), perhaps more than narratives from the First or Third Ages, that we are responsible for our own decisions and actions and can plot the course and meaning of our own lives. Interestingly, though, Tolkien was never able to give this arguably most positive story of the Second Age—a love story with a happy ending and a political tale with at least intermittent success—a completed form. I would speculate that the reason for this failure was that the story simply did not fit with the darker image of the human condition that was emerging in the texts about the Second Age.

“Aldarion and Erendis” is fascinating because it traces some of the development of Númenórean imperialism and colonialism in Middle-earth. In fact, most critics who deal with “Aldarion and Erendis,” such as Elizabeth Hoiem and Alastair Whyte, focus on its postcolonial aspects. But more importantly for the present argument, the story offers perhaps the most developed characters (in the modern literary sense) in all of Tolkien’s *legendarium*. The male protagonist is driven by ambition and passion, but he is not an evil person; the female protagonist is three-dimensional in a way that might come as a surprise to many readers of

Tolkien. At the same time, the implicit feminism of the story may have disturbed Tolkien. If the story pointed forwards, it may have been towards what Tolkien probably would have considered the disturbing trends of women's suffrage and empowerment in his twentieth century. For that reason, conceivably, he was unable to complete a story highlighting these developments. Along similar lines, the story (at least in my interpretation) portrays how two individuals who are both well-meaning in their own way turn out to be incompatible, with sad consequences for both, not to mention their country. Once again, human darkness surfaces in a way that Tolkien consciously or unconsciously wanted to avoid.

"Tal-Elmar" addresses similar topics, but from a different and much more confusing perspective. This is a story that only exists in an even more fragmentary state than "Galadriel and Celeborn" or "Aldarion and Erendis," since there is neither a clear plot nor an ending. Instead, what is important for the present argument is the dizzying layering of peoples and events. There are at least three layers of colonialism in this story (the conquest of the wild men by the people of Agar; the wars between the people of Agar and the people from the east; and the impending invasion by the Númenóreans) with the four peoples involved. The situation is even more complicated, though, in that the eponymous hero and his grandmother seem to be mystically connected to Númenor, with Tal-Elmar speaking what Tolkien would in some linguistic writing call his 'native tongue,' i.e., a language anchored in his hereditary memory.⁶ Here, the Second Age demonstrates the absence of a true center: each character in "Tal-Elmar" seems to have an identity, but in every case that identity is challenged or undermined by revelations about the historical context, by decisions they make, or by events in the story. Arguably, Tolkien is here suggesting that the Second Age shows us that we never stand on firm ground.

Similarly, the story of Númenor could be understood as the absent center of the Second Age, and of Tolkien's entire *legendarium*. As Verlyn Flieger explains, the story of Númenor "redirected three important elements in the *legendarium*, notably the cosmology that shaped it, the theology that grew out of that cosmology, and the narrative structure that supported them both" (*Fairy-Tale* 214). At the same time, Tolkien was never quite able to sort and develop these elements of cosmology, theology, and narrative to his satisfaction, so the story remained unfinished or at least unpublished. As a matter of fact, the story almost seems like a red herring or dead end, since at the end of the Second Age, of course, the island disappears. In other words, Númenor is only an illusory anchor for the *legendarium*. This could be interpreted as the absence in the middle of Tolkien's mythology that sets in motion the *différance* or supplementation throughout the *legendarium*. That in turn might explain Tolkien's uncertainty about how to get to Númenor, for instance

⁶ Tolkien explores this concept in his essay "English and Welsh" (*Monsters* 162-97).

through time travel in “The Lost Road” or reincarnation in the “The Notion Club Papers.” It is interesting, though, that at least in one plan for “The Lost Road,” the fall of Númenor was supposed to be the end of the story (Flieger, *Time* 67). In other words, the Second Age here did not end with the victory of the Last Alliance over Sauron, but with the final corruption and destruction of Men, at least the Men who were supposed to be superior to the rest of Mannish creation. In my interpretation, this suggests that Tolkien saw the Second Age as demonstrating that the true nature of Men was to be morally bankrupt, easily corruptible by each other and even more easily by an evil power such as Sauron. This might be another explanation for why there are no more stories about the Second Age: it would have been more difficult for Tolkien to write about the dark side of humanity than compose more hopeful stories such as the victory over Morgoth in the First Age or the destruction of Sauron in the Third.

Conclusion

In my assessment, then, Tolkien’s view of the Middle Ages in our world, his various frames for the mythology of his *legendarium*, and the contents as well as fragmentary and unfinished nature of his stories point to a double conclusion regarding the significance of the Second Age. For one, it seems that Tolkien was trying to put the Second Age at the center of his universe so that it could connect the First and Third Ages, both of which present quasi-Christian stories that end with sacrifice, but also hope and improvement. But secondly, Tolkien was never able to develop his time frame and stories fully because ultimately the Second Age always exposed the failure, decline, and corruption at the center of the human experience, which Tolkien as a Catholic Christian could not fully accept or countenance. In other words, the Second Age presents the dark heart of the *legendarium*—not a pleasant conclusion, but one we need to face.

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