

Faculté de philosophie, arts et lettres

The Passing of the Elves and the Dominion of Men

An Analysis of Tolkien's Work in the Light of Ecocriticism and the 'Interpretatio Mediaevalia'

Auteur : William Dufour
Promoteur : Prof. Guido Latré
Année académique 2019-2020
Master [120] en langues et lettres modernes, orientation germaniques, à finalité approfondie

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Tolkien and the Medieval Paradox - *An Introduction*

Today, it is generally accepted, rightly or wrongly, that our world has entered a new era: the Anthropocene. This term refers to “the present, in many ways human-dominated, geological epoch, supplementing the Holocene—the warm period of the past 10–12 millennia” (Crutzen cited in Moore 2017: 26). While the Anthropocene is said to have begun towards the end of the nineteenth century, in the wake of the industrialisation of the West, reaching its climax only recently with the global industrialisation and globalisation of the world economy, it is however suggested that its origin might be found earlier in time. There are indeed some, according to Heide Estes in the introduction to her book *Anglo-Saxon Literary Landscapes*, who would “point to other watershed dates, as for instance the beginnings of the cultivation of plants or grains” (2019: 29). Thus, from an agricultural and purely materialist perspective, the origins of this period of human dominance can be found prior to the industrial age. Heide Estes, however, goes beyond the materialist perspective and dives into a more ideological one, arguing that

it is not the Industrial Revolution that caused us to think of our environment in terms of ‘natural resources’ for human consumption, but the *pre-existing idea* that humans could use the natural world, including other humans, in pursuit of their own needs and desires, that enabled the Industrial Revolution and subsequent commercial, colonial, and political enterprises the effects of which include environmental degradation and climate change as well as social inequalities. (ibid.: 34) [my emphasis]

To presuppose that there were such pre-existing ideas of human dominance over nature lies at the foundation of her work, whose purpose is to analyse Anglo-Saxon literature in the light of ecocriticism. Consequently, her analysis goes hand in hand with the conviction that the study of the Middle Ages makes it possible to better understand the stakes of the modern world (ibid.: 10).

Estes’ argument could be said to concur with that of American historian Lynn White Jr., who argues that religion and philosophy are key features in order to understand the relation the human beings developed with the environment, with the surrounding nature or, more broadly, the nonhuman. This argument first appeared in a lecture he gave in 1966 in Washington, later on put on paper and subsequently reedited

in the collection of essays under the supervision of Harold Fromm and Cheryll Glotfelty's *The ecocriticism reader: landmarks in literary ecology*. Whites argued the following: "What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion" (1996: 9).

This assertion explains the fact that White placed the beginning of today's ecological crisis in relation to the expansion of Christianity, as he asked himself: "What did Christianity tell people about their relations with the environment?" (ibid.). According to some, he directly accused Christianity, namely through "the ecological culpability of a biblically inspired attitude of dominion over nature, the environmental impact of anthropocentrism, and the degree to which Christianity has laid the foundations for the development of science and technology" (Riley 2014: 241).

Therefore, following White's argument, one could see the medieval period as a key epoch that could help us to understand the perception humans have about nature in modern society. This period in time saw the development of Christianity from the late Antiquity onwards and that of Humanism which began to expand in the minds of Western intellectuals during the late Middle Ages, namely during the Renaissance. One could see these developments as the enthronement of human beings, as they were placed at the centre of the universe, at the centre of concern, at least philosophically, and thus no longer a mere actor in a universe that they can neither master nor comprehend. It was the beginning of an Anthropocene of the mind, before humans truly began to shape the world permanently, even though it can be argued that during the Middle Ages humans already began to use the forces of nature in order to provide power for many types of machinery (White 1996: 6), but, of course, not with the same intensity as during our modern industrial age.

White's paper became "a source of continuous debate and controversy in the field of religion and ecology" (Riley 2014: 240), as it voices significant accusations on Christianity. It is, according to some, the consequence of a misunderstanding (ibid.). But despite the fact that not everyone agreed with White's argument, it can be said that "he implicitly set the theoretical agenda for a future environmental philosophy" (Callicott 1990: 65) and that his then thought-provoking thesis has induced a new breath

in the human sciences, as well as in Christian and ecological research in general. In brief, what White achieved was to remind us that:

[b]road patterns of human behavior do not arise in an intellectual vacuum, [...]. Adequately to understand the environmental crisis, we must first exhume and critically evaluate the ideas of nature, human nature, and the proper relationship between people and nature embedded in our inherited world view. They provide a theater for our actions, an archetypal image or ideal of what it means to be human, and the associated values that we human beings aspire to realize. (ibid.)

White's argumentation is not new altogether, as one can see examples of criticism against the general Christian-inspired thought that nature is given to us by God. Such early criticism of the Christian mindset can be already found in John Muir's thinking, being himself part of a broader tradition of thinkers (ibid.: 67-71). He is mostly known for "his strong advocacy for preserving wilderness", which made him one of the key figures responsible for the intellectual tradition that arose in the midst of the twentieth century, which later ushered the way for ecocriticism (Dickerson & Evans 2006: ix).

This notwithstanding, and despite the fact that the Middle Ages are considered by some as being responsible for the ecological crisis, one can however observe the significant presence of the medieval period in literature, whose representation might be described as idealised, at least to some extent. Regarding the Middle Ages in post-medieval literatures, one can indeed find a "retrogressive" look at the past, an attitude embodied by the Medieval Revival which can be seen as the precursor of the Romantic Movement. (Agrawal 1990: 1), also "known as 'the Return to Nature'" (ibid.: xi). This will eventually led to an idealisation of the Medieval Period (ibid.: xiii). This period in time, which was later analysed as a period of transition from the ancient world to our modern world, as seen with White Jr., was however not seen as a revolutionary period, but rather as a stabilising element, even as a refuge from a world that changed drastically around writers and poets, especially within the scope of Romanticism, where one would speak about the "superior nobility of the past" (Drabble 2000: 872). In this idealisation of the medieval period, writers searched for a feeling of "nostalgia and [...] opposition to an unpoetical modern civilization" (ibid.). From Romanticism onwards, the feeling of nostalgia endured, such as with the Pre-Raphaelites, a brotherhood of various artists who rejected "the ugliness of modern life and dress" (ibid.: 813). This came with a more acute observation of nature and even its protection, such as with the

author William Morris, who became an influential figure in the field of fantasy literature (Clute & Grant 1999: 664ff.). What Morris contributed the most to this literary genre was to create a “frankly imaginary otherworld as location for [fantasy] narratives” (Drabble 2000: 350) while “presenting a unified fantasy geography” (Clute & Grant 1999: 665), thus putting an significant emphasis on land itself.

Fantasy itself as a genre is said to explore this “yearning for more natural and colourful environments” (Drabble 2000: 351), as it often depicts pre-industrialised worlds. As a result, this genre was described as being escapist in a derogatory sense (Clute & Grant 1999: 321), inasmuch as it would provide a secondary medieval-like world which is idealised in order to recover from the depredations committed in the real world.

However, this would appear to form a paradox, considering the fact that fantasy writers would choose this period, which can be seen by some as the origin of the ecological crisis, as the setting for their presumably escapist narratives,.

This paradox seems even greater, should one consider the work of the English writer and scholar J. R. R. Tolkien, whose fantasy novel, *The Lord of the Rings*, was seen as a “juvenile” escapist piece of writing (Agøy in Drout 2007: 463). Beside the fact that “Tolkien was, to put it mildly, not fortunate in his critics” (Shippey 2001: 147), and without denigrating its literary quality, one cannot ignore the escapist component that perspires throughout the novel, especially through the depiction of idealised landscapes. For instance, there are places such as the Shire, home of the Hobbits, or Lothlórien, one of the homes of the Elves, which can be respectively described, in a simplistic manner, as an idealised British-like countryside and an enchanted forest. This escapist function of fantasy has even been discussed by Tolkien in his scholarly work. However, he argued that one must not confuse “the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter” (1983: 148). This statement was discussed by Patrick Curry in his book *Defending Middle-earth*, saying that “[t]he prison [...] is enforced modernity, whose human casualties alone now number in many millions, while for animals and the natural world the holocaust is still continuing” (2004: 46). Should one follow this logic, the work of Tolkien and fantasy in general are a medium through which one can escape the vicissitudes of the present age, this prison in Curry’s sense. Tolkien’s work could

therefore be described as escapist, inasmuch as it allows the reader to escape and recover from the destruction of nature that can be seen in our modern world.

Nevertheless, if one were to observe Tolkien's work much more closely, *The Lord of the Rings* is all in all a story about a long defeat, which, for that matter, is the same for the whole fictitious world that Tolkien created – his legendarium –, as Shippey writes that “[t]he whole history of Middle-earth seems to show that good is attained only at vast expense while evil recuperated almost at will” (2001: 148). Furthermore, Patrick Curry, after discussing the meaning of Tolkienesque escapism, argues that “*The Lord of The Rings* is hardly escapist within its own context, either, centred as it is around a war, struggle, hardship and suffering” (2004: 46-7). Thad Burkhart, in a thesis he wrote on Tolkien's ecology in relation to educational considerations, follows the same argument when stating that “[i]n a sad and nostalgic sense, it is about the demise of the Elven dominated Third Age of Middle-earth as it gives way to the world of Men¹ and the growing gap between humanity and nature that dominated the Fourth Age of Arda” (2015: 66-7). Furthermore, Thomas Honegger, in his essay *The Passing of the Elves and the Arrival of Modernity: Tolkien's 'Mythical Method'*, insists on the transitional aspect of Tolkien's legendarium, arguing that the Third Age, during which *The Lord of the Rings* is set, works as a “Axial Age”, in the words of German-Swiss philosopher Karl Jaspers, in which “the sacred seems remote” (2006: 225). This refers also to the liminal aspect of Tolkien's work, which insists on the transition between different states, either physical or ideological (see Dickerson & Evans 2006: 147-9). Taking these statements into consideration, it is then possible to argue that Tolkien's medieval world is, on the contrary, not an idealised one.

This would refute the simplistic image of fantasy as a mere escapist tool that idealises the medieval period for consolatory purposes, honourable though as it may be. It would also bring Tolkien back to the preliminary observation that was made at the

¹ The use of ‘Men’ with a capital ‘M’ refers to the human race as used by Tolkien in his writings. From a contemporary perspective, one could see such a use of the term as outdated and even sexist, and rightly so. In this dissertation, when referring to human beings as a species, we will use the expression ‘the human’, used in a substantial number of ecocritical studies. This notwithstanding, regarding gender, and especially his relation towards women, it is argued that “Tolkien was a child of the late Victorian era, and although as the years passed he adapted to changing customs and mores – in some respects, such as his objections to colonialism and his support for women students, he was in the vanguard, in other less so – he was a man of his time, and should be seen as such, rather than judged solely by twenty-first-century standards. There is, nevertheless, an element of Tolkien criticism which applies current (and ultimately ephemeral) notions of political correctness and feminist theory” (Hammond & Scull 2017: 1440).

beginning of this introduction, namely that the Middle Ages were partly ‘responsible’ for the outburst of our contemporary ecological crisis.

One could easily compare such observations with Burkhart’s statement, cited previously, who describes Tolkien’s novel as a tale of demise which witnesses the disappearance of the world of the Elves for the benefit of mankind. This tale of the passing of the Elves – and simultaneously of the birth of the world of Men – can be interpreted as the progressive implementation of an anthropocentric world, in which the human has lost its previous relation with the nonhuman. This also implies that Tolkien’s depiction of the Middle Ages, despite being fictitious and obviously taking liberties regarding the historical materials, as it is not made to reflect a particular place and time of Western history, conveys something that can be retrieved from the general history of this period. Therefore, it can be said that in Tolkien’s world, one can see the reflection of an ideological shift, especially concerning the relationship between nature and human beings. The question that can be raised is whether these two observations can be thoroughly related, which would then mean to gather two major perspectives that are extensively used when assessing the work of Tolkien, namely ecocriticism and medieval studies.

The purpose of this dissertation is then to relate Tolkien’s world with the medieval period, in order to compare the philosophical and material transitions that occur during that period – which affected the ecological state of our modern world – with the transitions and changes that can be observed throughout the different stages and periods of Tolkien’s Middle-earth. In short, this study will put an emphasis on the liminal, transitional aspect of Tolkien’s world, as emphasised by Honegger (2006), in relation with medieval-related materials that also conveys a transitional tone.

In order to conduct this comparison, the subsequent parts of this dissertation will explore various themes and texts. The comparison as such will put Tolkien’s work, as well as critical assessments of his work, in relation to medieval-related materials – be it studies about the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, or even texts from the medieval period itself –, while focussing simultaneously on philosophy and theology, as well as on the depiction of the environment. This approach would then concur with White’s suggestion that religion – and subsequently philosophy – is crucial to understand the relation between humans and their environment during a precise period, even though it

has been argued that Tolkien would not agree with White's thesis in overall (cf. Dickerson & Evans 2011: 53-66, 252-3).

But before entering the core of the subject, the first chapter serves as an introduction to both Tolkien the scholar and the author, which end with a brief state of the art. The second chapter raises a few theoretical notions in order to better situate this dissertation within its intellectual milieu, and by doing so assembling ecocriticism and medieval studies within the analysis of Tolkien's fiction. Using this combination of perspectives, the subsequent chapters of this dissertation focusses on distinct themes which combines an ecocritical and medievalist perspective, trying also to follow a historical aspect which spans from the pagan age to what is called the Anthropocene. Following this scheme, the third chapter thus begins with the transition from paganism to Christianity in *Beowulf*, as well as the traces of this transition in Tolkien's work. The fourth chapter proceeds with the victory of monotheism from a theological perspective, with an emphasis on the conception of creation and the chain of beings in both the Middle Ages and Middle-earth. By doing so, this chapter will also investigate to what degree the spiritual and the material are separated from one another. While the fourth chapter takes a more conceptual approach, the fifth chapter puts an emphasis on the state of forests in order to deal with the passing of the Elves and fairies in both Tolkien's work and Chaucer's poetry. The sixth chapter deals primarily with the Dominion of Men in Tolkien's work, in comparison with eras and epochs from Western History, using concepts such as the Renaissance and the Anthropocene. As the latter is a rather modern notion, the sixth chapter makes also a link between Tolkien's medievalness and modernity, bringing thus back together the "Tree of Tales", as Tolkien puts it (see Tolkien 1983: 120) with its medieval roots.

Chapter I - An Introduction to Tolkien

Before giving some theoretical notions, the purpose of this section is to provide information about J. R. R. Tolkien through three components. Firstly, there will be an emphasis on the academic work of Tolkien, who was an Oxford Professor specialised in medieval literature, especially English Literature during the Old-English and Middle-English periods. Secondly, this section will survey the work of Tolkien as a writer of fiction, mostly through the brief review of his literary influences and work, whose general critical assessment will be mentioned in the third section of this chapter, within a brief description of the state of the art.

I.1. Tolkien the Scholar²

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was an English academic born in 1892 in Bloemfontein, South Africa, who became quite quickly involved with the prestigious English university at Oxford, which is said to have become in 1911 “the first real home since the death of his mother six years earlier” (Fry in Drout 2007: 489; Carpenter 2000: 55). The university proved indeed to be of significant importance in Tolkien’s life, as he developed there his taste for Germanic languages and other European languages, such as Welsh and Finnish, eventually leading him to abandon classes on classical philology and literature which failed to interest him completely (ibid.), making then a shift from classical studies to English philology (ibid.: 490). During his years as a student, he perfected his knowledge of Old English and other Germanic languages, and received first-class honours before the Great War began, after which he returned to Oxford to teach – with an intermission in Leeds. There, he became eventually a professor in 1925 (ibid.: 492). Due to the fact that Tolkien taught a lot and that his work as a writer took a significant amount of time, his academic career did not reach the expectations that some people from his entourage at the university had for him (ibid.: 493-4), which does not mean that his academic career was all for naught, as he did contribute to the discipline in

² Much of this section follows the entry wrote by Michele Fry about Oxford that is to be found in the *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia* (Drout 2007: 489-99), which seems to follow fairly closely Tolkien’s biography written by Humphrey Carpenter (2000).

which he thrived and through which he developed his constructed languages and fictitious legends.

To put it in a nutshell, Tolkien's scholarly contributions consists mainly of analyses of the literature of the olden days, such as editions of Chaucer's texts and reflections on the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*, about which he wrote an essay which was originally a lecture given in 1936 and which is said to be "one of Tolkien's best-known scholarly papers" (ibid.). He also held a lecture on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, another major work of the English literature of the medieval period, but the academic work for which he is best known beside the *Beowulf*-essay is *On Fairy-Stories*, which was also a lecture that became subsequently published in an written essay-form (ibid.). In the latter, he developed the notion of Fairy-stories, which tends to become a valuable source as it explores the genre that one would today name *fantasy*, and it can also be seen as the expression of Tolkien's own poetics. For instance, one can learn that Tolkien thought that "a successful writer of fairy-stories creates a secondary world entered by the mind of the reader, and once inside it, whatever is revealed there is true since it is in accord with the laws of the secondary world" (Fry in Drout 2007: 494).

Beside considerations regarding his own writing, one of his major contributions to the academic field is the interest he put on the meaning of ancient texts. According to him, these texts are not only traces of an earlier form of language, but manifest also literary prowess which demand more than a linguistic interest, an opinion said to have been met rather enthusiastically at the time (Hammond & Scull 2017: 134). Regarding *Beowulf*, Tolkien had a great interest in the very nature of the poet itself, who according to the analysis developed in his essay "had created an illusion of historical truth using his art, or to put it another way, the poet used his instinctive historical sense for poetic and artistic ends" (Fry in Drout 2007: 494), an attitude that could be said to be present in Tolkien's work as a writer, which will be discussed in the following section.

I.2. Tolkien the Writer

While the scholarly aspect of Tolkien has been briefly investigated, this section will discuss the work and writing process of J. R. R. Tolkien. As an introduction, there will first an emphasis on the earlier pieces of writing and the mythology which he built while compiling his texts. Secondly, there will be some considerations regarding

Tolkien's most known published work, which would then lead to a brief section that mentions some of the aspects of the academic work done on Tolkien, in regard with the subject of this dissertation.

I.2.1. Tolkien's Earlier Writings and Mythology

From his early adulthood till his death, Tolkien never stopped to develop what constitutes today his *legendarium*, i.e. a word that he himself coined in order to name the whole body of texts, legends and imaginary maps.

Tolkien's stories and legends that share a mythological quality arose originally from his constructed languages, "[s]ince the existence of these languages was a *raison d'être* for the whole mythology" (Carpenter 2000: 95). Only afterwards did he develop an internal history that would explain their respective evolution (Hostetter in Drout 2007: 334), thus "intended to provide a historical and poetic context for [his] private languages" (Chance: 2001: 2). In a letter, Tolkien wrote the following concerning the relation between his philosophical and creative interests: "The invention of language is the foundation. The 'stories' were made rather to provide a world for the languages than the reverse. To me a name comes first and the story follows" (*Letters*: 219)³.

Nevertheless, one must not reduce Tolkien's work to the linguistic level, just as he refused to reduce medieval literature to the sole study of language, as one might say, regarding the relationship between the *legendarium* and his constructed languages, that "both activities proved of equal importance, and each reinforced the other" (Hammond & Scull 2017: 632). One must therefore not reduce Tolkien's stories as the mere side-product of some philological frivolity, but rather as the consequence of an aesthetic mind which sought to provide depth to its materials. Such intertwinement between the philological, the poetical, and the historical is to be considered as another proof of Tolkien's perfectionism (see Burkhart 2015:187).

Another motivation for Tolkien, when he was developing his mythology, was his regret that England did not have a corpus of legends of its own, although he did recognise that there were some materials ascribed as being of British ascent, "but nothing English, save impoverished chap-book stuff" (*Letters*: 144). It might sound odd that a professor of Anglo-Saxon and more broadly medieval literature and language,

³ All quotes from *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* (2006a) will be cited thusly.

well versed in the texts of the olden days, argued that the mythical and literary English materials does not suffice, but it could be a consequence of the fact that Tolkien was acquainted with a lot of mythological materials from other European cultures, such as Norse and Finish mythologies, the both having influenced him greatly in his writing and his development (Chance 2001: 185; *Letters*: 144; see also Hammond & Scull 2017: 857-64). This however did not prevent him from taking elements from old and Middle English literature, thus making “truly a tribute to England” with these materials (Chance 2001: viii).

Furthermore, the Great War, during which Tolkien fought at the Battle of the Somme in 1916, seemed to have worked as an impetus for his writing, as “[h]e commenced actual writing of that lengthy prose text towards the end of 1916 or the beginning of 1917” (Hammond & Scull 2017: 1156), which would eventually become *The Book of Lost Tales*; and indeed, an episode of Tolkien’s life often cited is that when he caught a fever in the trenches (Carpenter 2000: 88), putting him out of the fights, he began to write segment of tales, pouring from his traumatic experience (ibid.: 94).

Therefore, one could argue that his taste for mythology grew only stronger with the war, as if it was his response against the pessimistic and disillusioned attitude of that time – though he was not immune to that (cf. Hammond & Scull 2017: 1401) –, that is “for Tolkien, this spark [in order to rekindle the post-war world] resided in the mythopoeic realm of faerie” (Slack 2006: 119). But his career as a writer did not come from these early texts, but rather from later writings, which became his most celebrated works.

1.2.2. *The Hobbit*

All I remember about the start of *The Hobbit* is sitting correcting School certificate papers in the everlasting weariness of that annual task forced on impecunious academics with children. On a blank leaf I scrawled: ‘In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.’ (*Letters*: 215)

Thus began Tolkien’s literary career. The origin of the conception of *The Hobbit*, Tolkien’s first novel published in 1937, is far more famous than the genesis of its much more substantial successor, *The Lord of the Rings*. The story is that Tolkien was once correcting papers and that suddenly he came by a blank page on which he wrote the first lines of the novel, which again will be more famous than the opening lines of *The Lord*

of the Rings. This will be perceived as a surprise by his fellow academics, some regarding his novels almost as a childish frivolity (Hammond & Scull 2017: 278), which would perhaps be the cause of the ‘snobbish’ attitude that the academia once expressed in response to his literary work.

The story itself recounts the journey of a Hobbit, a halfling, to the Lonely Mountain, participating in a quest to retrieve a royal gem from an ancient dwarf-kingdom then occupied by a fire-breathing dragon, so that Thorín Oakenshield might claim his kingdom back and chase the dragon out of the mountain. An important episode of the novel is Bilbo’s encounter with a wretched creature bearing the name of Gollum, in a cave where he finds a magic ring that permits him to become invisible.

The story is light in its essence, being mostly conceived for children and young adolescent, as Tolkien intended it (*Letters*: 298). However, it did not prevent to be sometimes considered by some academic critics as being superior to *The Lord of the Rings*, with for instance Harold Bloom, the editor of *Bloom’s Modern Critical Views: J.R.R. Tolkien* (2008). He praises the precursor to *The Lord of the Rings* for being less convoluted and more funny, while also emphasising the nature of the main protagonist himself: “Bilbo Baggins, though an admirable hobbit, is fortunately more a well-meaning burglar than he is a hero. I think we are fond of him because he is a hobbit to whom things happen” (1).

1.2.3. *The Lord of the Rings*

Tolkien’s subsequent novels, which were published in the years 1954-5, originally conceived as a single novel which was however to be divided in three due to paper shortage at that time, were profoundly different in their essence, as it is argued by Harold Bloom, in the same introduction in which he professes his preference for *The Hobbit*. Tolkien’s trilogy, a seemingly ponderous tome of 600.000 words which the professor begun in 1936 (*Letters*: 160), is indeed described by Bloom as “long and complicated”, “fated to become only an intricate period piece”, with a hero, Frodo Baggins, less relatable and likeable than his uncle (Bloom 2008: 1-2).

Notwithstanding that, this piece of fantasy fiction seems to penetrate even further in the abyss of anthropocentricity. *The Hobbit* is already an anthropocentric tale, as it does not recount the tales of divine beings caught in an apocalyptic battle, but it

tells the story of a human-like hobbit whose adventures through the wilderness we follow. However, *The Lord of the Rings* goes even further, inasmuch as it is a story in which we see small beings, there again Hobbits, caught in a battle which, despite its apocalyptic and Manichaean tone, tends to lean more or less on the historical and the political sphere. We enter now in the Dominion of Men, an era of human ruling which is installed at the end of the intrigue, which also means the end of the ancient world of the Elves, as foretold by the wizard Gandalf: “For the time comes of the Dominion of Men, and the Elder Kindred shall fade or depart” (*LOTR*: 1272)⁴.

This historical dimension of *The Lord of the Rings* is linked to the interesting fact that Tolkien sees his work not as a piece of fiction, but as an agglomerate of historical documents, a peculiarity that was pointed out by his biographer Humphrey Carpenter during a visit to the professor:

He explains it [an error that he had to correct before the new edition of *The Lord of the Rings*] all in great detail, talking about his book not as a work of fiction but as a chronicle of actual events; he seems to see himself not as an author who has made a slight error that must now be corrected or explained away, but as a historian who must cast light on an obscurity in a historical document. (2000: 8)

Tolkien himself explored this thought in the foreword to the novel, describing his writing process as if it was the work of a translator of an ancient document, listing some of the choices he had to make, sketching briefly the history of the said document, making it as an example of pseudo-translation (Ruud 2011: 570; Turner in Drout 2007: 330). The concept of pseudo-translation is a literary process according to which authors present their original work as a document that they had translated, often from a mysterious source. Many pseudo-translations are to be found amongst medieval-inspired works, such as the gothic novel *The Castle Of Otranto* published in 1765 by Horace Walpole, which could be said to reflect the presumably ancientness of the text, and which, regarding Tolkien, could be ascribed to the mythical, medieval, and pseudo-historical quality of his creative writings.

Overall, *The Lord of the Rings* centres itself on the quest to destroy the one ring of the Dark Lord Sauron, the last of the generals of the Satan-like Morgoth, the fallen angel that can be sometimes regarded as the source of all evil within Middle-earth. In a

⁴ All quotes from *The Lord of the Rings*, 50th Anniversary Edition (2004) will be cited thusly.

sense, this story complete the cycle of all Tolkien's legends, inasmuch as it contains the last battle between the incarnate forms of evil and the human, mostly represented by Elves, Men, Dwarves, and Hobbits. This work inscribes itself much more in the context of Tolkien's legendarium, at least compared to *The Hobbit*, as it makes clear references to the expanded universe in which the story is set, contributing to the mythical depth of the work, an aspect that can be seen as an advantage as well as a deterrent for the readers. The novel also revolves around the Passing of the Elves, who now are leaving Middle-earth, ushering the world in an era that will be known as The Dominion of Men, with for instance the enthronement of Aragorn as king of a new united kingdom of Men. This concludes Tolkien's legends, as the Dominion of Men represents Men's entering into History, as Tolkien explains it in some of his letters (*Letters*: 207, 252).

The Lord of the Rings was Tolkien's last major work that came out during his lifetime, as he did not publish *The Silmarillion*, a compendium recounting the whole fictitious history of Middle-earth, which was posthumously edited by his son Christopher four years after the author's death. It could seem odd that Tolkien did not publish anything substantial after *The Lord of the Rings*. Concerning that matter, Tom Shippey (2005) notes different reasons, such as a pernicious procrastination that slowed the progression of his work (258). This nonetheless did not prevent Tolkien's literary work to preserve its fame within the literary landscape – which was nonetheless rekindled with Peter Jackson's film adaptation –, making also its way within the academic sphere, though not without a few difficulties.

I.3. Criticism on Tolkien: a Brief State of the Art

A substantial number of studies, books and articles were written about Tolkien's life and work, especially about his most famous piece of writing *The Lord of the Rings* (published as a trilogy in the years 1954 and 1955) and his legendarium, i.e. the expanded universe in which all his legends are set. In the first years after the publishing of the trilogy, it was analysed in a rather conventional manner, even though the critics had difficulty with this work that was quite different from the general taste of the post-war literary intelligentsia. Indeed, the academic world seem to have neglected to speak about Tolkien, seeing it as a work of popular fiction, and the few writings about him often came from America, where popular fictions seems to have been more accepted by

university scholars (Hammond & Scull 2016: 282-283). It is only relatively ‘recently’ that critics began to analyse Tolkien’s books in depth and in regards to modernism (Honegger 2005: 47) and that the author has been generally accepted by the so called “high academic culture” (Chance 2003: 2), although there were a non-neglectable number of studies that had been written from the seventies onwards, alongside the posthumous publication of Tolkien materials edited by his son Christopher, such as *The History of Middle-earth*, which is composed of twelve volumes that were published between 1983 and 1996.

Today, his work could be described as ‘academic-friendly’, inasmuch as the printed editions of his novels, especially *The Lord of the Rings*, are often coupled with a comprehensive index. There are also entire encyclopaedias dedicated to his life and work, alongside reader’s companions which analyses his work thematically, which therefore could be said to facilitate and even encourage academic work about him.

Regarding the analysis of his work, the inherent ecological aspect of Tolkien’s fiction was very rapidly emphasised, as the trilogy of *The Lord of the Rings* was well received amongst the leftist pacifists in America during the sixties (Besson 2007: 171). Within the academic scope, there is Dickerson and Evan’s monography *Ents, Elves and Eriador* (2006), which is seen as a “pioneering work” as it analyses Tolkien’s work, while using the theories of ecocriticism, making an additional link between his love of nature and his Catholic faith (Burkhart 2015: 19-20). Another important work in regard to Tolkien with an ecological perspective is Patrick Curry’s *Defending Middle-earth*, first published in 1997 and augmented in 2004, which provides a comprehensive overview of what might be an ecocritical study of Tolkien, though less thorough and academically satisfying than Dickerson and Evans’ work, even though both works manifest a rather committed pro-environmental attitude which calls for the recovery of a transcendental state between the human and the nonhuman, as well as a clear tendency to celebrate his life and work.

The relevance of Tolkien’s medievalness was expressed as well at a fairly early stage, notably with Jane Chance’s monography *Tolkien's Art: A "Mythology for England"*, originally published in 1979 (and revised in 2001) and Tom Shippey’s *The Road to Middle-Earth*, published in 1982 (revised in 2005), which was described as “an excellent example of the ‘interpretatio mediaevalia’ and as “one of the best Tolkien

studies in general” (Honegger 2005: 53). This tendency would continue with for instance the collection of essays *Tolkien the Medievalist*, edited by Jane Chance and first published in 2003, in which this kind of interpretation is applied to most of Tolkien’s writings.

Another element that can be taken from the work of the critics is the transitional aspect of Tolkien’s work, though not as important as the ecocritical or medievalist perspectives, but significantly relevant to this study. There is for instance Thomas Honegger’s *The Passing of the Elves and the Arrival of Modernity: Tolkien’s ‘Mythical Method’* (Honegger & Weinreich 2006: 211-32) which mentions the fact that “[t]hings change with the ‘fall’ of the Elves” (ibid.225). In his essay, he compares Tolkien’s work with that of modernist authors such as James Joyce or T. S. Eliot, arguing that:

Tolkien, too, employs a ‘mythical method’ to come to terms with the challenges of modernity, yet his use of ‘mythical matter’ aims at smoothing the break without glossing over the feeling of loss and sorrow. Tolkien endeavours to come to terms with ‘modernity’ by means of providing the lost context(s) to the fragments of modern existence so that he - and his readers - arrive in modernity not via ironic disenchantment but by commemorating of what has been lost. (211)

As can be seen, a lot has been written on Tolkien and on his work in general, be it from an ecological or a medievalist perspective, which facilitates the combination of them, as well as the general analysis proposed in this dissertation. In the next section, an emphasis will be put on some theoretical notions in order to better comprehend the full scale of this dissertation.

Chapter II - Theoretical Notions

In order to better understand the argument that will be expanded in this dissertation, one must understand the theoretical considerations that will be exploited therein. This master dissertation will be articulated around two main theoretical points of view, namely ecocriticism and medievalism, or rather the ‘interpretatio mediaevalia’ as expressed by Honegger, as it is the purpose of this dissertation to analyse the perception of nature in relation in Tolkien’s work in relation to the medieval materials with which he was well acquainted. But before that, one should also expand on literary fantasy as such, as it is the genre in which Tolkien’s novels are now categorised. Afterwards, an attempt of a definition of ecocriticism will be given, followed by a description of the ‘interpretatio mediaevalia’ and considerations regarding Tolkien’s medievalness, thus outlining the basics for the arguments developed in this dissertation.

II.1. On Fantasy as a Literary Genre

The particularity of Tolkien is that he represents by himself a whole genre, namely fantasy, but he also is much different in comparison to other writers that belong to this literary tradition. But in order to support this assertion, one must first understand what fantasy is and how it has been described by scholars.

When referred to a literary tradition, the term *fantasy* is a broad one and it is therefore not easy to give a short and concise definition. It is perhaps mostly due to the fact that its origins are unclear, as one could situate the beginning of fantasy towards the second half of the nineteenth century, with its golden age beginning a century later with author such as Robert E. Howard, mostly known for his famous character Conan the Barbarian, and also Tolkien, with his trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* which is even today one of the most popular works of fantasy fiction alongside perhaps *Harry Potter*. Notwithstanding, one could also trace the roots of fantasy back from ancient folktales, mythological ones as well, and also literature from the medieval period or the Renaissance, such as *Beowulf* or Shakespeare’s plays (Drabble 2000: 350). This opacity concerning its origin might have contributed to the fact that fantasy is seen as “one of the most ambiguous notions in literary criticism” (Zipes 2000: 150).

Despite its porous meaning, a *fantasy text* is described in the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* as

“a self coherent narrative. When set in this world, it tells a story which is impossible to the world as we perceive it [...]; when set in an otherworld, that otherworld will be impossible, though stories set there may be possible in its terms” (Clute & Grant 1999: 337-338).

The vagueness of the definition is due to the fact that fantasy itself is not a precise term, which is recognised in the encyclopaedia mentioned above. As a matter of fact, many texts and genres are being ascribed as being works of fantasy, ranging from fantastic to science-fiction literature (ibid.). Also, fantasy elements may be used in texts that would not normally be described as fantasy fiction. One must also pay attention to the fact that prior the seventeenth century and the rise of empirical science, it was complicated to distinguish what was possible or not, such as with myths, which, to the minds of the period from which they arose, were considered to tell a certain truth, and it is also difficult to assert what the author believed to be possible or not (ibid.). In the same encyclopaedia, interesting is the fact that there are two main types of fantasy, namely *fantasy* itself and *genre fantasy*, the latter being seen as the one much more present on the market and less appreciated by the authors of the encyclopaedia, mainly for the fact that there are stories which use an otherworlds and fantasy elements in order to tell a story which is not a fantasy plot itself, but rather a plot that can be used in other types of fiction (ibid.: 339), such as for instance political intrigues. Genre fantasy is then “not at heart fantasy at all, but a comforting revisitation of cosy venues, creating an effect that is almost anti-fantasy”, inasmuch as it does not offer new possibilities of imagination, which is normally the purpose of fantasy itself (ibid.: 396).

Whereas Tolkien is seen in the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* as a writer that genuinely wrote *real* fantasy narratives, he is described in the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* as a “maverick”, an outsider, who nevertheless is seen as “the greatest influence within the fantasy genre” (Drabble 2000: 351). Here, the *Oxford Companion* takes a more descriptive stance in its attempt to define fantasy, as it sees the genre fantasy as its most prominent form, especially on the market, while the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* takes a more normative approach in saying what fantasy ought to be, explicitly saying what is and what is not a ‘proper’ piece of fantasy fiction.

Beside the fact that there are various types of appreciations on what fantasy is and represents, one must also consider the fact that fantasy is a much heterogeneous genre, and it is perhaps the reason why there is no real consensus on the definition, unlike science-fiction.

Nevertheless, Tolkien does stand in a particular place amongst fantasy, be he considered as a maverick or not, as his novels distinguish themselves from the tradition that arose in the United States with the emergence of fantasy weekly magazines, such as *Weird Tales*. Indeed, Tolkien made his own path, perhaps more in Morris' tradition, inasmuch as he drew his inspirations from Northern folktales and mythology. Tolkien went even further by creating his own mythology, "creating a consistent and coherent whole instead of a scattering suggestive of fragments" (ibid.). An important trait of his work, which he brought to the genre itself due to his influence on many writers, was a greater attention to ecological questions (ibid.), although it was much present amongst precursors such as William Morris.

But what did Tolkien himself think about his work and its place within the genre? It is possible to assume that Tolkien might have written about the area of literature in which his work can be placed, as Tolkien himself was an academic. However, one might assume that as a medievalist it is unlikely that Tolkien wrote about the contemporary literary tradition that is now being described as fantasy. However, Tolkien did write an essay that tried to deal with what we might call fantasy. This essay is called *On Fairy-Stories*, and "was originally an Andrew Lang lecture given on 8 March 1939" (Tolkien 1983: 3), that is, before he wrote *The Lord of the Rings*, but still after *The Hobbit*.

At the beginning of this essay, he acknowledges the fact that it is "a rash adventure" to speak about fairy-stories, as "Faërie is a perilous land" (ibid., 109). This corresponds to the fact that fantasy itself is not easy to be described as a whole. Nevertheless, he does try to situate the origins of the genre. A central feature discussed in his essay is the land of Faërie, i.e. the imaginative place where a significant number of early fantasy fictions take place. This Faërie can also be described as "an otherworld perhaps linked to ours, though access is seldom physical in the normal sense" (Clute & Grant 1999: 328). While trying to define it, he also discusses the origins of the fairy tale. Besides the obvious one – to him – that comes out of the external story of humans

themselves, such as *invention*, *diffusion* and *inheritance*, Tolkien places the origin of the fairy tale in language itself, in the possibilities it offers, through the fact that it transforms the human subject into what he calls a “sub-creator” (Tolkien 1983: 122). He then deals with the myths as forebears to the fairy tale, and the tales become to him the “relics of ancient customs once practiced in daily life, or of beliefs once held as beliefs and not as ‘fancies’” (ibid.: 128).

The importance Tolkien gives to the myth can be clearly seen throughout his work, and more precisely within the peculiarities that distinguish him from other authors that are said to belong to the same literary genre. In *Defending Middle-earth, Tolkien: Myth and Modernity*, Patrick Curry tries to situate Tolkien within the broader genre of fantasy, alongside accusing the critics of ignoring Tolkien’s works, and he finds a distinctive aspect in Tolkien’s fiction, namely the “mythic mode of imagination”, which is said never to have been surpassed by any other author (Curry 2004: 132-133), an aspect also discussed in Honegger’s *The Passing of the Elves and the Arrival of Modernity: Tolkien’s ‘Mythical Method’* (Honegger & Weinreich 2006: 211-32).

Regarding his pieces of writing, *The Hobbit* could be described as a fairy tale, even “a sustained fairytale in the purest sense” (Clute & Grant 1999: 333). It is not the case for *The Lord of the Rings*, which had been described rather as a “medieval romance” (ibid.), besides being an example of fantasy fiction. It seems however that *The Lord of the Rings* does contain elements of the fairy tale that Tolkien denotes in his essay, such as the concept of the *eucatastrophe*, which resembles the Christian consolation, or even the resurrection of Christ, Tolkien himself being a fervent Catholic (see Tolkien 1983: 155-7).

All these considerations seem then to point back at the entry on fantasy which can be found in Drabble’s *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, as Tolkien can indeed be seen as an outsider, almost as an anomaly amongst other works of fantasy, especially due to the mythic dimension and his alleged ability to challenge imagination which distances him from the more historical-like fantasy fictions that seems to be the norm. This assertion however seems to be driven by preferences of taste, and a more descriptive approach would suggest that Tolkien is merely one of the representatives of a subsection of the genre. It is however not an exaggeration to affirm that he did

influence the genre rather significantly, as, regardless the type of definition used to define fantasy fiction, be it descriptive or prescriptive, Tolkien is often taken as a reference point used to situate other writers of the genre, as argued by Tom Shippey:

Tolkien revitalized fantasy; he made it respectable; he created an appetite for it in both readers and publishers; he brought fairy tale and myth back from the literary margins; he “raised the bar” for fantasy writers. His influence has been so powerful and so pervasive that for many authors the problem has been not to follow him but to disengage from him, to find their own voices, something often achieved only at length, by steadily writing the Tolkien influence out of their systems. (Drout 2007: 381-2)

II.2. On Ecocriticism

Just as it is difficult to define a literary genre, to define a whole area within literary studies is not an easy task, and indeed, a sole definition of ecocriticism does not seem to exist, and it would be more advised to speak about various types of ecocriticism, just as there are many ways with which one author can investigate the relations between the human and the nonhuman in general. Regarding its diversity, the ecocritic Lawrence Buell stresses the fact that ecocriticism “has a history *both* of strong position-taking by individual spokespersons *and* of reluctance to insist on a single normative, programmatic definition of its rightful scope, method, and stakes” (2011: 88).

But before trying to give an accurate definition of ecocriticism, if such thing existed, there should be first an emphasis on the etymology of the term. The word “ecocriticism” is composed of two distinct elements, namely “eco” and “criticism”. The element “eco”, which is also used in other words such as “ecology”, “economy”, and so forth, is, according to the *Online Etymology Dictionary*, a “word-forming element referring to the environment and man's relation to it, abstracted from ecology, ecological; attested from 1969,” and is derived from the Greek word *oikos*, meaning “house, dwelling-place, habitation”. Criticism is, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “[t]he art of estimating the qualities and character of literary or artistic work.” From the etymology of the word, one could suggest that ecocriticism is the analysis of a literary or artistic work in relation with the *oikos*, the house, i.e. the earth, or nature, which could be considered as our primal house, the primal dwelling place of human beings.

In *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*, the following definition is given at the beginning of the entry ‘ecocriticism’:

Ecocriticism, also known as literary ecology or environmental literary studies, is a field of criticism that emerged in the late twentieth century as a slightly delayed response in the humanities to the global emergence of the environmental movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Together with environmental philosophy and environmental history, and to some extent studies of place, space, and landscape, it forms the core of what in the early twenty-first century is an emerging cross-disciplinary field of environmental humanities. That spectrum of studies subverts twentieth-century paradigms of discrete liberal arts institutional divisions, in resistance to the growth of more quantitative-based professional and interdisciplinary programs in policy, planning, and environmental sciences. As such, while ecocriticism may seem a bridge between the “two cultures” of academia, it can in some ways also represent an attempted resurgence of a qualitative tradition of liberal arts, based often in an implicit critique of scientific complicity in massive degradation of the world’s physical environment during the past two centuries. (Barbera & Payne 2010: 205-206)

What seems to be the main point of this definition is the fact that this discipline tries to blend different theoretical points of view and that it favours a qualitative analysis of a given text. In the following parts of the entry dedicated to ecocriticism, important is the fact that it relies on “complex definition of “nature”” (ibid.). Relevant to this dissertation is also the fact that this discipline opens itself towards non-modern literature highlights, such as for instance literary works from the Anglo-Saxon age (ibid.: 207). The analysis of such periods of literary history would then allow to better understand the way of thinking that dominated the West, as the entry ends thusly:

From a *longue durée* perspective, the developing field of ecocriticism highlights the potential both for further reassessment of Western intellectual and social history in a global context, and for new coalitions on environmental and related issues between different non-modern worldviews globally. Through its distinctive focus and meld of theoretical approaches, ecocriticism suggests that the great watershed in the construction of nature by Western culture was neither so much the Renaissance nor the spread of Christianity, but the normatizing of a reality of individual human interiority from the twelfth-century Renaissance onward. In developments of the era of the Crusades and Scholasticism, it suggests, lie the emergence of what became global modernity, which can be seen as having a more direct complicity than previously often

assumed with the medieval in Western European culture as the latter morphed into global capitalism and scientism. (ibid.: 209)

Such a “reassessment of Western intellectual and social history” can be found in White Jr.’s considerations on the origins of today’s ecological crisis, which seems, according to him, to find its roots in the medieval period, especially within the transition from animism to Christianity (1996: 8ff.). Within this era of transformation, the Renaissance of the twelfth century seems to have held an important place, as it was said regarding the transition from early-medieval to late-medieval views that happened with the Twelfth Century Renaissance that:

[t]hat same transition inevitably involved changes in the way Creation or physical nature (identified with the human body) was viewed, as medieval Western cosmology formed. In fact, the body can be extrapolated to nature in Louth’s statement, in describing a transition “from seeing nature as microcosm reflecting in itself a cosmic story, to seeing nature as interpreter of human inwardness,” from integrating the Other to objectifying it. (Chance & Siewers 2005: 141)

This idea of reassessment does not only imply a new analysis of the history of mankind, but also a new analysis of literature and culture in general, thus opening innovative paths which would allow a fresh look on society and its intrications.

From a diachronical perspective, ecocriticism is said to have been marked by two decisive stages regarding its methods and its themes, designated as “the two waves” (Buell 2011: 88). The first wave focused on the relation between the human and the nonhuman and on scientific considerations regarding the environment, with also some emphasis on the need for the recovery of a form of transcendence, especially embodied by ‘deep ecology’. Second-wave ecocriticism seems to be more aware of the social component as well as the historical, and it tends also to free itself from the sole study of Western contemporary texts and literatures, with for instance a “concern with issues of toxification and concern for the plight of racial minorities” (ibid.: 88-97). This seems to be the trend that continues to drive ecocriticism, according to Buell, with especially a diversification of the field of study, with for instance the “reinterpretation of texts from precontemporary eras that engage issues of anthropogenic climate change” (ibid.: 97-107). Therefore, one can see through its history that ecocriticism tends to encompass a broader point of view, perhaps in order to make up for the ecological crisis, which is

becoming more and more evident every day and whose ramifications runs deep within the fabric of society.

Besides the critical analysis of the relation between the human and the nonhuman in culture, ecocritical thinking challenges also the dichotomy between those two concepts. It lays the basics for a new ontological definition of the human and the nonhuman, and even proposes to overcome such a dichotomy, which is sometimes argued to be the source of the ecological crisis altogether. For instance, the ecocritic William Cronon discusses in an essay⁵ the concept of ‘wilderness’, which he analyses from a diachronical perspective, insisting on the fact that the wilderness “is quite profoundly a human creation” (1996: 7). In the end of his essay, he calls for a reconfiguration of the way in which the human defines itself in relation to the nonhuman, arguing that:

If wildness can stop being (just) out there and start being (also) in here, if it can start being as humane as natural, then perhaps we can get on with the unending task of struggling to live rightly in the world – not just in the garden, not just in the wilderness, but in the home that encompasses them both. (ibid.: 25)

Such reinterpretation of the concept of the ‘wilderness’ goes hand in hand with the problem regarding ‘nature’ as a concept, as explained in Clark’s *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (2011: 5-8). The latter argues that “[e]cocriticism usually reads literary and environmental texts with these competing cultural conceptions of nature to the fore” (ibid.: 6), which corresponds to the research proposal of this dissertation, as there will be an analysis of the medieval perception of the nonhuman in comparison with that appearing in Tolkien’s fiction.

Regarding the role of the ecocritic as such, American writer and professor William Howarth, in “Some Principles of Ecocriticism”, defines him/her as “a person who judges the merits and faults of writings that depicts the effects of culture upon nature, with a view towards celebrating nature, berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action” (1996, 69). This definition places the ecocritics in two positions. They are first and foremost literary critics, whose purpose is to analyse literary texts. But secondly, they can be considered as activists, as their aim is to celebrate nature, and they are to take “political actions”. Furthermore, he describes

⁵ This essay, ‘Trouble with Wilderness: Or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature’, was discussed for the course on Contemporary Ecofiction LGERM2872 organised by Prof. Ben Debruyne (2019).

ecocriticism as being “adversarial” (ibid.) due to its strong political agenda, which can be compared to gender studies, at least to some extent, and Howarth even argues that these fields of study are closely intertwined, inasmuch as “[e]cocriticism finds its strongest advocates today in feminist and gender critics, who focus on the idea of place as defining social status” (ibid.: 81). One could even argue that the very fact of choosing an ecocritical approach constitutes a political statement as such, as it lies on the acceptance of the fact that the human exploits extensively and abusively the nonhuman.

The purpose of this master thesis is of course not to make a political statement, honourable though as it may appear, but is to link the ecological tendencies of Tolkien’s work with materials and notions related to the medieval period, as he was himself a professor of medieval literature.

II.3. Tolkien’s Medievalness and the ‘Interpretatio Mediaevalia’

The other perspective taken into account in this dissertation is a medieval-oriented one. While the previous section defined a specific discipline in the field of literary studies, i.e. ecocriticism, this section deals rather with Tolkien’s medievalness than medievalism per se, in order to consider the reasons for which it is relevant to adopt a medieval-related perspective in an analysis of Tolkien’s work.

As mentioned earlier in this dissertation, Tolkien was first and foremost an academic specialised in medieval literature and language. One of his best known contributions as an academic is the essay he wrote on the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf*. Furthermore, it has been well established that his work as a writer took a lot from the medieval materials that he studied and taught at the university, as the critics in general acknowledge “that this modern epic-romance fantasy [*The Lord of the Rings*] draws on [his] personal and professional engagement with medieval texts and religion to present narratives from a premodern, traditional past” (Chance & Siewers 2005: 1), and medieval scholars tend nowadays to use Tolkien as a bait in order to attract new students (ibid.: 4). This would argue in favour for a medievalist study of Tolkien’s work, i.e. in relation with medieval texts and cultural studies regarding the Middle Ages.

Concerning the medieval period per se, Jay Ruud describes it in the introduction to *The Encyclopaedia of Medieval Literature* (2006) as a “significant period of time

(more than 1,000 years) [...] between roughly 500 and 1500 C.E.” (v-vi). The origin of its name, i.e. the *Middle Ages*, is to be found during the Renaissance. It was used as a derogatory term which, however, could be said to ignore the considerable developments that happened at that time, i.e. “technological accomplishments such as the invention of the heavy compound plow, the adoption of the stirrup and the horseshoe, the expanded use of the water- and windmill, and the creation of movable type” (vi). More importantly to us, this period is also important from an ideological, philosophical, and theological perspective, should one consider “the primary position of Saint Augustine in Western thought, as well as the complex philosophical arguments of scholastic thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas and William of Ockham, and the invention of the scientific method by Roger Bacon in the 13th century” (ibid.). It is also said that this period witnessed the fact that “primitive myth had given way to more sophisticated religion” (ibid.), thus paving the way for a new world, a modern world, as argued by Ruud:

A modern world was coming into being 1,000 years later, characterized by a more secular and less universally religious outlook, a greater reliance on scientific thought, a more widespread use of the vernacular in literary and other texts, a more mercantile economy, and new and unprecedented connections between and among cultures, including Africa and the Americas, that had not existed before. Many of these trends, of course, had begun earlier, but the Middle Ages form the long transition from the ancient to the modern world. (ibid.)

This view of the Middle Ages would bring us closer to the research proposal presented at the beginning of this dissertation, as the medieval period is truly a time of change and evolution, and one could therefore think that it was inevitable for Tolkien to ignore this aspect of the medieval period while developing his own ‘Medium Aevum’.

This brings us to another aspect that is paramount to point out and discuss, if one is to study Tolkien in regard to medieval materials: it is the nature itself of the Middle Ages in Tolkien’s work, his medievalness. Indeed, should one compare the philosophical or representational transitions that occurred during the Middle Ages with that present within Tolkien’s legendarium, one should try to describe the type of Middle Ages that had been developed in his work.

Jane Chance writes, in the introduction to the collection of essays *Tolkien the Medievalist*, that

Tolkien from the beginning responded to his modern contexts by retelling his medieval sources and adapting his medieval scholarship to his own voice. Tolkien was, over time, influenced by his own personal medievalism, his profession as a medievalist, his relationships with other medievalists, and his own mythologizing in constructing his major fiction. (2003: 4)

Furthermore, she also argues that “his mythological retextualization in his fiction assumes a most medievalized form” (ibid.), an aspect that is explored in the third section of Chance’s collection of essays.

The question this leads to is what form Tolkien’s so-called “retextualization” assumes – that is, what form does Tolkien’s Middle Ages assume? Jane Chance, again, in the introduction to another collection of essays that she edited with Alfred K. Siewers, *Tolkien’s Modern Middle Ages*, also states that Tolkien’s “fantasy world is, in fact, a conglomerate of many periods, a kind of textual Portmeirion drawing bits and pieces from various time periods and cultures ranging from ancient Babylon to nineteenth-century England” (2005: 5-6).

This statement is given while introducing an essay written by Verlyn Flieger, which is called “A Postmodern Medievalist” and which “questions even the application of medievalism in its conventional sense to Tolkien’s work” (ibid.: 4). Indeed, Flieger stresses the ambiguity and the difficulty in characterising something ‘medieval’, as the word itself has several meanings in the English language (ibid.: 17). She then stresses the fact that although there are obviously medieval elements within *The Lord of the Rings*, and within the legendarium itself, it does not exclude the existence of non-medieval elements in Tolkien’s fantasy world, what Fliegers calls “the demonstrably non medieval forest that surrounded without obscuring these undeniably medieval trees” (ibid.: 18). This evokes a certain eclectic tone in Tolkien’s work, blended with “a deliberate mix of the realistic and the fantastic” (ibid.: 19).

This mixture of diverse elements can also be seen through the various styles that Tolkien used in his prose, especially in *The Lord of the Rings*. It contains a “high or epic style” and an “ordinary English” one (ibid.: 21-22), a prose described by Tom Shippey as being “carefully calculated” (Shippey 2005: 250). Regarding that matter, he writes that “[o]ne might say, in Aristotelian terms, that the trilogy succeeded in

harmonising its *ethos*, its *mythos*, and its *lexis*”⁶ (ibid.). And this also manifests itself in the attempt to define the genre to which *The Lord of the Rings* belongs, as it can be described as “a novel”, “a romance”, “[o]r even an epic”. He eventually states that “[i]n brief, then *The Lord of the Rings* is a romance, but one which is in continuous negotiation with, and which follows many of the conventions of, the traditional bourgeois novel” (Shippey 2001: 221-3). This shows an ambiguity and a vagueness that could be said to be characteristic of fantasy literature as such, as it is “a genre in some respects decisively modern” and that “has [...] also shown itself ready to deal with questions of the utmost contemporary importance, in particular, with the nature and origins of evil” (Drabble 2000: 350-351), despite its profuse use of medieval materials.

Beside stylistic considerations, let us consider the cosmology of Middle-earth in order to illustrate the combination of the medieval and the modern, or plainly the fictitious. As a matter of fact, Tolkien seemed to have taken elements that are similar to the medieval mindset, such as the fact that his system is strictly geocentric (Larsen 2016: 3). He furthermore invented elements which would then justify natural events, such as the course of the moon, which shows that Tolkien tried to assemble a cosmology that would befit his mythology but which would eventually explain the way humans see the sky from Arda—the Earth in Tolkien’s legendarium. Such an attitude, according to Kristine Larsen, who is much interested in Tolkien’s fictitious cosmology, “draws attention to Tolkien’s knowledge of and deep concern for (one might even go so far as to say obsession with) astronomical fact” (ibid.: 5). Larsen, who first considered Tolkien’s cosmology to be quiet medieval-like, so to say, then retracted by saying it was more complicated than that, although there are similarities which nevertheless cannot be denied, “given that Tolkien balanced ancient wonder and modern knowledge in his cosmological design” (ibid.: 1).

Thus, through the analysis of Tolkien’s fictitious cosmology, one can clearly see that Tolkien mixed various elements while he was elaborating the secondary world where his tales are set. This makes it more difficult to determine the period to which the secondary world belongs, especially given the fact that Tolkien himself describes his work as an attempt to give England its own mythology, though he did not use those exact terms (Chance 2003: 3). Speaking about the *Silmarillion*, he did however mention

⁶ Shippey translates those three as ‘setting’, ‘plot’ and ‘style’ (Shippey 2005: 250).

the idea of “a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large cosmogenic level to the level of romantic fairy-story [...] which [he] could dedicate simply: to England; to [his] country” (*Letters*: 144). This mythic dimension is thus much present in Tolkien’s work, but then tends to shift to a more historic one, as *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are much more “anthropocentric”, in Tolkien’s own words (*ibid.*: 160), as it is told in a sense from the perspective of Hobbits, which are rather human-like, at least in the way with which they perceive their world. That this anthropocentricity is blended to a mythical tone creates a vagueness regarding the period in which the novel is set, although an evolution can be observed throughout the fictitious timeline.

The epoch of the Elder Days, i.e. before the events narrated throughout the *Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, seems indeed to belong to a more distant past, with elements that Tolkien compared to antiquity, as he stated, for instance, that the Númenóreans were more like Egyptians (*ibid.*: 281). Also the Númenórean realm could be compared to the Roman Empire, inasmuch as it symbolises an ancient era often taken as a model.

In comparison, Tolkien described the Third Age, i.e. the Age at the end of which Tolkien’s novels takes place, as being a “Medium Aevum”, a middle age, as we understood it with a historical perspective. Therefore, the Dominion of Men, which came with the Fourth Age after the defeat of Sauron, could represent a kind of renaissance, as we witness “the return in majesty of the true King, to take over the Dominion of Men, inheriting all that can be transmitted of Elfdom in his high marriage with Arwen daughter of Elrond” (*ibid.*: 160). This marriage represents here the heirloom of the Elves which can be compared to the legacy of the ancients that was rediscovered through the various European renaissances. This argument will be expanded in a subsequent section of this dissertation, as it will prove to be a relevant aspect in regard to the research proposal presented in the introduction.

Still, one should not see *The Lord of the Rings* as a direct representation of Western History, as one should keep in mind the mythopoeic dimension of his work, and it is not to be considered as an allegory of History itself, although one can see echoes of it throughout Tolkien’s work. He once wrote: “I am historically minded.

Middle-earth is not an imaginary world. [...] The theatre of my tale is this earth, the one in which we now live, but the historical period is imaginary” (ibid.: 239).

To conclude, a juxtaposition of both a modern perspective such as ecocriticism and a more past-related perspective such as medievalism seems relevant when it comes to Tolkien, as

[his] medievalness and his medievalism informed and shaped his fantasy, through the collaborations he enjoyed professionally and the academic debates in which he participated at a particular moment in contemporary history, through the actual literary and mythological contexts he spent most of his life understanding, and through the modes and genres he revitalized – retextualized – in the fantastic histories of Middle-earth he created. (Chance 2003: 11)

And although his legendarium does not mirror directly the medieval period as such, it might be said that it conveys some of its characteristics, as Tolkien’s sources were primarily medieval.

Honegger, in his essay *Tolkien through the eyes of a Mediaevalist* (2005, 45-66), in which he writes about what he calls ‘interpretatio mediaevalia’, describes three levels of interpretation when analysing Tolkien’s work in regard to medieval languages and literature. First, we have “the individual parallels to and borrowings from mediaeval literatures and languages” (Honegger 2005: 54), where for instance a name is taken from a medieval source and given to a character or a place in Tolkien’s legendarium, often giving a “hint at the moral disposition of a protagonist or at his or her character according to the principle ‘nomen est omen’” (ibid.: 55). Secondly we have the adaption of motifs from medieval literature and culture, giving thus a “feeling of authenticity” (ibid.), such as the adaptation of rituals and traditions. Thirdly, we have the less obvious medieval influence, which would be the most relevant to this dissertation, as the relationship between the conception of nature in Tolkien’s work and the medieval one might not appear from the start as obvious. In his essay, Honegger illustrates this third and more ‘obscure’ way of interpretation with the perception of time in Tolkien’s work, first thought to be read in relation with the theories of J. W. Dunne (1875-1949), a British philosopher, but then put in relation with Boethius (477-524), who is a philosopher from the early medieval period, famous for his magnum opus *De Consolatione Philosophiae* (ibid.: 59-63).

The aim of this dissertation is however not based on the perception of time, but on the perception of nature, which has a central role in Tolkien's work, especially when it comes to *The Lord of the Rings*, as Tolkien's tales could be seen as "an ongoing and intensive dialogue between nature and culture" (Simonson 2016: ii, cited by Dawson 2017, 1). While using this historical-oriented perspective, which focuses on the transitions that befell the West, it will be therefore possible to analyse how far those transitions can be related to Tolkien's work in regard to the relationship between the human and the nonhuman.

Chapter III - The Memory of a Former Age: Tolkien and the *Beowulf*-poet

It was mentioned in the previous section that Tolkien's legendarium tends to evolve towards anthropocentrism in the course of its fictional chronology. This internal evolution was also said to be connected to the writing itself. Whereas *The Silmarillion* and the tales that take place during the olden days of Middle-earth involve god-like beings, *The Lord of the Rings* centres itself rather on a more anthropocentric perspective. This could concur with Lynn White's assertion that during the medieval period we saw the disappearance of paganism and the rise of Christianity, the latter viewed as "the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen" (1996: 9). In order to demonstrate that, I shall refer to the medieval epic *Beowulf*, a text that, as mentioned previously, had been analysed in detail by Tolkien, and it is even generally assumed that "[s]ubsequent criticism has built on [him] while modifying his emphases" (*Beowulf*: xxvii). The relevance of this text is thus considerable, as it is even considered to be one of Tolkien's main influences (Chance 2001: 3). The study of this text, in regard to medieval history and Tolkien's work, will thus allow us to analyse the relation between them, as well as in regard to an ecocritical perspective.

III.1. On Paganism

Before going any further in the analysis, the question of paganism is paramount in order to understand the major shift that is being identified in this dissertation, as indeed, one sees the shift from a world dominated by paganism, as well as animism, to a world dominated by a much more anthropocentric Christianity that paved the way for humanist thinking and other human-centred ideas.

In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word *pagan*⁷ is described as "[a] person not subscribing to any major or recognized religion, esp[ecially] the dominant religion of a particular society" and it is said to have been "a heathen, a non-Christian", though this last statement is rather dated and related to a precise historical period. Though it might be considered as short and imprecise, this definition has nonetheless the benefit

⁷ This definition is taken from the online version of the OED. URL: <https://www-oed-com.proxy.bib.ucl.ac.be:2443/view/Entry/135980?redirectedFrom=pagan#eid> [3rd July 2020]

of pointing at two important aspects of paganism, namely the relationship to what might be considered as the dominating religions of the globe, and also its relationship with Christianity, which befits the purpose of this paper; and one should hold on to the fact that “[p]aganism is itself a Christian term and partly its creation” (Curry 2004: 109). It means that this conception developed itself alongside the rise of Christianity as an official and universal religion. Also, one should have in mind the “disapproving” tone of the word (ibid.), which corresponds to its relation with Christianity and the other dominant religions, and also to the etymology of the word itself. Indeed, *paganism*, which derives from the adjective *pagan*, comes according to the *Online Etymology Dictionary* from the Latin *paganus*, which means a “villager, rustic; civilian, non-combatant” and the word itself seem to have been invented towards the fourth century in order for Christians to define what they encounter throughout the Roman Empire (Dowden 2000: 3). The derogatory nature of this term also comes from the fact that early Christianity was essentially “an urban phenomenon” (Siedentop 2014: 80).

And through this derogatory meaning, paganism tended often to describe beliefs that belonged to ancient times prior to civilisation as we now understand it (ibid., 1-2), though “[w]e all have our ideas of what constitutes civilisation and it is perhaps best to be clear at the outset that there is no uniform evolution of civilisation such that barbarity and paganism go hand in hand” (ibid.).

Another important feature regarding paganism is the attitude it presupposes towards the divine, or more broadly the spiritual. In a book that tries to describe paganism in Europe from the Antiquity to the Middle Ages, Ken Dowden (2000) writes the following:

Finally, it may indeed be characteristic of many modern religions, notably Christianity, to promote ‘faith’ to the extent that nowadays to be a religion is to be a ‘faith’, preferably a ‘living faith’; but students of ancient religion are well aware that paganism did not promote ‘faith’. Of course, ancient pagans believed certain things without adequate evidence, but whether they believed ‘in’ them (a peculiar piece of jargon which we derive from New Testament Greek) is another question. Paganism was not credal, but a matter of observing systems of ritual. Ritual too is a language, one which involingly defines the place of man in the world. It is no worse than credal or theological language in achieving that objective and in some ways escapes more easily the danger of asserting something which needs to be verified or died for. Paganism can

accept the beliefs and practices of others much more readily than more ideological religions. The persecution of the Christians by the Romans was not a matter of crusade or jihad and was caused by an unusual and special conflict in views of ritual and society. (2-3)

Another element that would separate paganism and Christianity is perhaps their relationship towards land. Paganism is indeed more rooted in myths and folktales, which are themselves deeply rooted in a given landscape, whereas Christianity is much more installed in the realm of the mind. Paganism also did not imply a form of human responsibility towards the environment, as “[i]n deifying natural forces and creating local gods, paganism drew attention away from crucial questions about the individual will and man’s God-given responsibility” (Siedentop 2014: 71). It did not, however, exclude the proliferation of Christian customs related to a specific space, which can be seen as remnants of the relation some societies had with land during pre-Christian times. The superposition of pagan and Christian elements would concur with the assertion expressed at the end of the introduction, namely that Tolkien’s literary work and legendarium mirrors the evolution from nature-centred paganism and animism to an anthropocentric Christianity.

Regarding the situation in England, paganism was replaced by Christianity at the beginning of the seventh century. However, paganism survived there a bit longer than on the continent due to Vikings incursions that brought back Germanic cults from Scandinavia (Dowden 2000, 11-12). For a time, historians believed that a form of paganism did survive during most of the Middle Ages amongst the common folk, but such considerations are not prominent today (Hutton 2011, 236-237). Nonetheless, some environmental activists have used theories and symbols which are related to paganism, or rather to their conception of paganism, in order to support their ecological theses. There is for instance the figure of the Green Man that came to be used as an ecological symbol (ibid.). Such an attitude can be found in the work of British environmentalist and author Paul Kingsnorth⁸, who sees the carving of green men in churches as an act of rebellion against the Christian Normans who invaded a British Island that was supposedly still much marked by paganism (Kingsnorth 2017, 180-187), a view that befits his ideas regarding British politics. Notwithstanding, a form of

⁸ The ecological thinking of Paul Kingsnorth, in relation to his novel *The Wake*, was analysed in an exam paper I wrote for the class *Contemporary Eco-Fiction* LGERM2872 given by Prof. Ben De Bruyn (2019).

syncretism did exist, albeit rather limited (Chaney 1996: 197-200). This syncretism would have been possible due to the fact that there were some resemblances between pagan and Christian conceptions at that period in time (ibid.: 209).

Regarding culture and literature, there would have been the survival of pagan-related themes, such as the old conception of heroism, which lingered on through the medieval period (Ruud 2006: ix). The epic poem *Beowulf* is said to have appeared at this context of religious syncretism, and it will be seen that it conveys a sense of both transition and conservation, a feeling that could be said to perspire through Tolkien's work.

III.2. *Beowulf's* syncretism

It is generally accepted today amongst the critics that the *Beowulf*-poet was a Christian cleric (Wentersdorf 1981: 91) who readapted pagan materials for a Christian audience around the eighth century (*Beowulf*⁹: xiv-xvi). Nevertheless, this does not mean that by the time the poem arose there were no more traces of paganism in England, as one can observe the continuance of many pagan-inspired practices in England during the Early Middle Ages. This would mean that the audience was familiar with the heathen components that perspire throughout the poem (Wentersdorf 1981: 92), although some believed that the poet only tried to "recreate that heathen world" (ibid.: 95).

Concerning the *Beowulf*-poet, Tolkien believed in such a syncretism, as can be seen in his essay concerning the epic: "And in the poem I think we may observe not confusion, a half-hearted or a muddled business, but a fusion that has occurred *at a given point* of contact between old and new, a product of thought and deep emotions" (1983: 20). Tolkien spoke of a "Norse imagination" that "was brought into touch with Christendom, and with the scriptures [as] [t]he process of 'conversion' was a long one, but some of its effects were doubtless immediate: an alchemy of change (producing ultimately the medieval) was once at work" (ibid.: 21). A lot of the elements were drawn from the pagan heritage, but always put in relation with the new Christian world. For instance, although the text features heroes and monsters belonging to a former age

⁹ This is taken from the introduction to Michael Alexander's translation of *Beowulf* (first published in 1973, Penguin Classics edition from 2001). The pages from the introduction are given in Roman numerals, whereas the extracts taken from the translated poem itself will be cited according to the lines, which are given in Arabic numerals.

of thunder-gods and fire-breathing worms, “the cosmology is largely Christian” (*Beowulf*: xxxiv).

Such an “alchemy of change”, which is said to have produced the medieval, would be the result of this progressive change that did not immediately obliterate the old ways. Regarding paganism and Christianity in medieval Europe, French historian Jacques Le Goff says the following about religions during the medieval period: “Elles sont féériques, elles témoignent de la présence au sein du christianisme médiéval de personnages et de thèmes légués par les croyances païennes combattues et plus ou moins effacées ou simplement christianisées en surface”¹⁰ (Le Goff 2005, 18). The fantastic elements tend often to originate from pagan beliefs, and such elements tend to remain present in the conception of the world, as the border between reality and unreality was said to be thin, perhaps even nonexistent, as Le Goff speaks about “un monde mixte, mêlé, qui constitue l’étoffe de la réalité naissant de l’irréalité des êtres qui séduisent l’imagination des hommes et des femmes du Moyen Âge”¹¹ (ibid., 17). This argument was also supported by French medievalist Michel Pastoureau who argued that a historian specialised in the medieval period ought to consider the imaginary as part of reality, as it was thus considered during that said period (Pastoureau 2004, 20). Thus, paganism impregnates medieval society through the fact that the boundaries of the world were more blurred, while it later became the opposite through the emergence of a world much more defined by empirical observation and rational thinking.

Using elements of pagan origins, the *Beowulf*-poet would have expanded on Christian values and conceptions, always readapting materials, be it the pantheon of Germanic deities or the monsters themselves. There is for instance Grendel, who is associated with the biblical figure of Cain, which brings the monster and the conception of sin together (Tolkien 1983: 23-26). This can be illustrated through these lines from the poem: “From Cain came down all kinds misbegotten / – ogres and elves and evil shades –” (*Beowulf*: 110-1). And the entire creative process could be regarded as a glance towards the past, while acknowledging the new. It is an epic that speaks about the “former days” (ibid.: 2), which nonetheless illustrates and promotes values of

¹⁰ They are enchanting, they bear witness to the presence within medieval Christianity of characters and themes bequeathed by pagan beliefs that were fought and more or less erased or simply Christianized on the surface.

¹¹ a mixed, mingled world, which constitutes the fabric of reality born of the unreality of the beings that seduce the imagination of the men and women of the Middle Ages

heroism. The promotion of heroism can be regarded as a more optimistic attitude, hence less bound to the past. Thus, even though one sees the “inevitable victory of death” throughout the poem (Tolkien 1983: 30), there is, however, the fact that these old materials, taken from an era which seems to die, are now being used “for a new purpose, with a wider sweep for imagination” (ibid.: 33).

III.3. Tolkien in relation to the *Beowulf*-poet

Tolkien’s legendarium embraced such syncretism, in a way, as it mixed pagan and Christian elements in order to produce this feeling of authenticity and mythic depth. In a letter, Tolkien affirms that although he is a Christian, the “‘Third Age’ was not a Christian world” (*Letters*: 220). This statement recalls the fact that Tolkien considered his fictitious world as the depiction of a long forgotten past of our own real world. Tolkien also writes that “[i]t is a monotheistic world of ‘natural theology’” (ibid.)¹², adopting thus a more allusive attitude that would befit his own dislike of allegories and his Christian faith. Furthermore, Tolkien was said to be “the master of the allusive story, relying on his deep faith in a natural theology of the imagination, in which the insights incarnate in the tale would be a vehicle of God’s grace to the reader”, an attitude that stood at the opposite of C. S. Lewis, the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, who relied more on plain allegory (Duriez in Hart & Khovacs 2007: 16).

There are, however, a few writings in which Tolkien mentions directly some form of religion in Middle-earth. There are for instance passages which deal with the Men of Númenor, who lived in an island that was then flooded, like Atlantis. In this island, there was “the summit of the mountain Meneltarma ‘Pillar of Heaven’” (*Letters*: 194, 204), the sole place of worship that can be accounted for in the whole legendarium. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the only occurrence of a form of religion is when Gondorians face the West before eating, and this event is even mentioned by Tolkien himself as being the only time he mentioned a religious practice in the whole novel (ibid.; *LOTR*: 884). On the whole, he described his legendarium as “a monotheistic but ‘sub-

¹² One should not think natural theology as a form of natural religion, as natural theology bespeaks a direct acknowledgment of God, say through the natural world; natural religion, on the contrary, seeks God with reason, in opposition to revelation (Burkard & Precht 2008: 522, 610). Nevertheless, those two terms are much alike and one can often mix both of them, so it seems, their meaning being ambiguous.

creational' mythology" (*Letters*: 235). In this sub-creative process, Tolkien creates a world separated from his own, which nonetheless remains in adequacy with his faith.

Although Tolkien's work contains Christian elements, with for instance the embodiment of Christian values or analogies to the resurrection of Jesus Christ (Curry 2004: 96-8), it can be argued that his legendarium contains pagan elements, such as animistic events and pagan-inspired feasts, or other elements that Tolkien implemented during his creative process (ibid.: 98-100). The absence of a religious cult or of a faith professed towards any deity, as modern audiences understands it, could be also seen as an evidence of an implied paganism that transpires throughout the legendarium and especially *The Lord of the Rings*. This observation can be brought into relation with Dowden's (2000) reflections on paganism which emphasise on the fact that there is no question of faith when it comes to pagan cults.

The similarity with *Beowulf* resides thus in this ambiguous religious state, where one can indeed see a clear monotheism incarnated by Eru Illúvatar, the primal deity who created the world, in an account that can be found in *The Silmarillion*, especially in the *Ainulindalë* and the *Valaquenta* (1-24). These texts could be regarded as Tolkien's adaptation of the Christian conception of the Book of the Genesis (Hammond & Scull 2017: 36-9). Tolkien develops in them a monotheistic worldview that nevertheless contains god-like figures and creatures. This carry a pagan – and one could say even an animistic – flavour which still "seems compatible with the Christian view" (Dickerson & Evans 2011: 54). Such an observation would support the fact that Tolkien's work creates a feeling of syncretism that mirrors that of the early Middle Ages, especially in relation to his own country, i.e. England.

This similarity can also be observed through the analysis of the implied author to Tolkien's work, especially that of *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*, a literary device made possible through the concept of frame narratives discussed by Verlyn Flieger in *The J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia*:

The device of frame narrative—a story within a story in which the outside or frame story provides both a context and a history for the inner narrative—is an essential structural element and an authorial conceit in Tolkien's major works: the "Silmarillion" with its multitude of storytellers and poets, *The Hobbit*, and *The Lord of the Rings*. (Drout 2007: 216)

This places Tolkien in an imaginary position as an intermediary between ancient materials and a modern audience. As mentioned earlier, Tolkien's novel might indeed be considered as pseudo-translation (Turner in Drout 2007: 330). Tolkien explains it in the prologue to *The Lord of the Rings*, especially in its last part *Note on the Shire Records* (LOTR: 18-21). In this passage, he designates the published parts of his work as a body of translated and edited fragments taken from *The Red Book of Westmarch* (ibid.). The novel is thus to be considered as a text written by Bilbo and Frodo Baggins, as well as by Samwise Gamgee, with a lot of additions made in the course of history (ibid.). The purpose of such a "compendium" (Stanton in Drout 2007: 65) is to form some sort of collective memory from the past, as Frodo says the following when he gives the book to Sam, before leaving Middle-earth: "and you will read things out of the Red Book, and keep alive the memory of the age that is gone, so that people will remember the Great Danger and so love their beloved land all the more" (LOTR: 1347).

The same can be argued in regard to the other writings of Tolkien that were not published during his lifetime. For instance, *The Silmarillion* and other legends related to it are presented by the author himself as elven legends translated and edited by 'mannish' figures (Hammond & Scull 2017: 1167-8; see *Morgoth's Ring*: 208, 370 and *The Peoples of Middle-earth*: 357, 390). Their incomplete state, due to the fact that it forever was an ongoing process, would "recall aspects of actual mythologies" (Hammond & Scull 2017: 1169). This mythic aspect of Tolkien's work could be said to mirror the "mythical mode of imagination" which Tolkien discussed in his essay on *Beowulf* (1983: 15).

In short, this imaginary intermediary position mirrors the position of the *Beowulf*-poet mentioned above, as he is to be regarded as a cleric who would have compiled this pagan elements for an audience converted to Christianity. Tolkien and the *Beowulf*-poet are thus like bridges placed between two shores, so to say, between two worlds, between two eras, and their writing reflects the passage from one shore to the other.

III.4. The Slaying of the Beast

As stated above, it can be argued that within the poem there are two elements put into contrast. Drawing back to the poem *Beowulf* itself, it has indeed been argued that

[t]he poem works off opposition: the attraction and repulsion between the positive and the negative poles can be felt in its every part – not only between God and the demons, the hero and the monsters, the true and the false thane, but in all its values, movement and imagery. (*Beowulf*: xliii).

In the poem, there are two central fights that can be said to embody such an opposition, i.e. the fight with Grendel, “God’s enemy” (ibid.: 786), and that with the Dragon. The fact that Grendel is said to be the spawn of Cain, thus making a link to sin and the devil, is accentuated with the fact that he “felt hatred and rage at hearing the song of Creation” (ibid.: xliv). Furthermore, the fight with the dragon can be regarded as the fight opposing the archangel Michael against the dragon of the Apocalypse, thus emphasising the devil-like quality of these beasts that are fought in the poem (ibid.: xlv).

Tolkien stresses also the relation between Grendel, the monster, and the conception of evil that was spread alongside the progression of Christianity through pagan lands. Therefore, Grendel can be considered as an example of a transition, i.e. that of a mythical creature that is being appropriated by the new Christian faith and worldview, as Tolkien writes:

The changes which produced (before A.D. 1066) the medieval devil are not complete in *Beowulf*, but in Grendel change and blending are, of course, already apparent. [...] Monsters of more or less human shape were naturally liable to development on contact with Christian ideas of sins and spirit of evil. (1983: 34)

The fight then between Beowulf and Grendel can be seen as a fight between the human and the nonhuman, Grendel being an incarnation of the natural world from which the human feels threatened (Estes 2017: 18). Beowulf would thus represent the human who brings order while asserting his power over the natural realm, over the nonhuman. The latter becomes an image of danger and fear as the human tends to alienate itself from the nonhuman. This alienation between the human and the nonhuman might be represented by the mead-hall that Hrothgar is said to have built, a construction where the human separated itself from the nonhuman, in which he would “share the gifts God had bestowed on him” (*Beowulf*: 70). This construction and the celebration performed in it will eventually cause Grendel’s anger and thirst for blood (ibid.: 85-109), leading thus to the rampage that sets the story into motion.

Furthermore, the fight with the beast can even be considered as the fight between Christianity and paganism, as Beowulf had been sometimes considered to

represent an image of Christ (Estes 2017: 48). This observation can be related to the previous argument, as one could say that Christianity represents the human and paganism the nonhuman, or at least a more anthropocentric worldview challenging one that is still impregnated with animism. Animistic tendencies were more and more ascribed to the *uncanny* in Western thought, i.e. “the emergence of something which was once familiar (animism) and which has been repressed and alienated from the mind” (Barbera & Payne 2010: 699). Therefore, it is possible to consider Grendel as the alienated nonhuman, a repressed animistic worldview, which returns to human society as the *uncanny*.

To see the fight with the beast as a fight between Christianity and paganism would then make a direct reference to White Jr.’s thesis, who asserts that “[b]y destroying animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood indifference to the feelings of natural objects” (1996: 10). The killing of the beast by a hero embracing early Christian values, albeit inspired by pagan heroism, could be said to represent such a destruction.

Furthermore, the killing of the beast could also be said to be often related to prosaic reasons, such as the desire to feast and conduct one’s business without being harassed by a foul monster, or such as the desire to steal the beast’s treasure, motivated by the money, which is much more related to human concerns than spiritual ones. Also, one could also see the use of the dragon as a literary effect to end the poem properly, transforming Beowulf into a true hero that dies in battle, with the beast only feeding the hero’s need for glory (Keller 1981: 228). This conception of the dragon reduces, in a way, the nonhuman for the profit of the human.

From a broader perspective, the topos of the slaying of the beast can be found in many examples throughout collective imagination, such as the dragon, which, according to Tolkien “is no idle fancy”, but “a potent creation of men’s imagination” (1983: 16). It is often shown as “the enemy of mankind”, such as in *Beowulf* (Chance 2001: 6). Jane Chance, in a study that investigates Tolkien’s medieval sources, discusses this notion of beast, especially that of the dragon, which can be seen through the lenses of Germanic traditions, though being influenced and entering in a dialogue with Christian conceptions:

In a Christian sense, the Germanic monster represents the enemy of God as well as of humankind, sin, and spiritual death. Although the poem should not be read as an allegory of the *miles Christi* who battles the Adversary with his breast-plate of righteousness and shield of faith inherited from Ephesians 6, still, the battle assumes Christian proportions. (ibid.: 16)

Indeed, the dragon-like creature can be found back in the Christian imagination, the like of which can found in the Book of Revelation, and in the whole Bible as well: “*Les têtes de dragons brisées, les serpents détruits, c’est la victoire du Christ sur le mal. Outre l’imagerie bien connue de saint Michel et de saint Georges, le Christ lui-même est parfois représenté foulant aux pieds les dragons*”¹³ (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1982: 421).

Therefore, the beasts can be said to serve as “metaphors for the devil”, a perspective that was eventually adopted in fantasy literature (Clute & Grant 1999: 295). In a more revisionist attitude, i.e. a stance that challenges the dogma that have endured within the genre itself, therefore enabling “a conscientious attempt to make standard genre tropes over, to make the condition of fantasy new” (ibid.: 810), one might see the dragon as a more benevolent force, especially through the influence of other cultures (ibid.: 295). This would lead us to reconsider the position of the dragon, and that of the beast in general, namely as the oppression of society, or the human, over the nonhuman. From an ecocritical perspective, one could consider “the last portion of Beowulf as an unconsciously prophetic allegory of global warming in its narrative of nature’s revenge on human theft of earth’s resources by the fire-breathing dragon in the third portion” (Buell 2011: 102). This refers also to the remark regarding the uncanny resulting from the repressed animistic tendency mentioned above.

In Tolkien’s work, there are a lot of instances where one sees humans vanquishing beasts that incarnate a degree of absolute evil. In *Critical Companion to J. R. R. Tolkien*, Jay Ruud argues that

Tolkien’s dragons are malicious, large, powerful, intelligent, and devious. With the dragons of medieval literature, they share the quality of avarice: They love to obtain and sit upon hoards of treasure, guarding against any intruder who might steal anything from them. (2011: 481-2).

¹³ The broken *heads of dragons*, the destroyed serpents, represent the victory of Christ over evil. In addition to the well-known imagery of St. Michael and St. George, Christ himself is sometimes depicted trampling on dragons.

A clear example can be found in *The Hobbit*, namely in the shape of the dragon Smaug, which lurks beneath the Lonely Mountain, an ancient dwarf-kingdom. The dragon in *Beowulf* can be said to have influenced Smaug, as both of them are creatures from which something is stolen, which wakes them, and which then causes a terrible catastrophe (Hammond & Scull 2017: 125; Zipes 2000: 66). The dragon hoarding its treasure can also be said to represent greed, and the appreciation of an item without even having the will to use it (Dickerson & Evans 2017: 16; Ruud 2011: 481-2; see also Burkhart 2015: 138-41). It thus transforms the conflict into a clash of values, intensifying its moral meaning (Shippey 2005: 98-106). Nevertheless, greed is also rooted within those who confronts the dragon, which is related to the purpose of the quest itself, who is rather prosaic in its essence, as explained by Thorin in the novel: “But we have never forgotten our stolen treasure. And even now [...] we still mean to get it back” (*The Hobbit*: 30; see Clute & Grant 1999: 295). The quest to kill the dragon in *The Hobbit* is also imbricated within the context of the War of the Ring, as Gandalf feared that the dragon would join Sauron (*LOTR*: 1415-6) and ultimately the killing of the dragon meant the reinstatement of the Kingdom under the Mountain (*ibid.*). The victory over the mighty beast would therefore represent the victory of the human over nature, the former reaffirming its dominance over the latter. It can also be seen as a further alienation of the human from the nonhuman, bringing thus Tolkien closer to the revisionist stance that can be seen within fantasy. The beast becomes a creature of greed, but the human succumbs to that greed, as it is the case with the dwarves in *The Hobbit* and Beowulf in the Anglo-Saxon epic: “Beowulf manifests that same pride in his own ability and greed for dragon gold as does the dragon, and although he wins the battle with the monster [...], he loses the one with himself” (Chance 2008: 62). Both the human and the nonhuman are alienated and perverted in this imbalanced relationship.

Furthermore, the dragon can also symbolise more or less “an instrument of the cruelty of fate” (Bonjour 1953: 311), i.e. an element that brings the human to its mortal state. Taking that into consideration, the killing of beast would represent an escape to such a fate, the victory of society over a seemingly omnipotent death, but the victory is partial, as the human would have lost something during the fight, as exemplified by Beowulf’s death: “The gaining of the hoard / of beautiful treasure was Beowulf’s death; / so it was that each of them attained the end / of his life’s lease” (*Beowulf*: 2839-42). It

can be said the same regarding Thorin's death in *The Hobbit*, demised in his attempt to recover what he thought to be his, expiring as King under the Mountain (*The Hobbit*: 333).

Another prominent dragon in Tolkien's legendarium is Glaurung, "[t]he chief villain of the story of Túrin" (Ruud 2011: 68), a narrative part of Tolkien's legends which was finally published as a stand-alone novel in 2007 under the title *The Children of Húrin*, edited by Christopher Tolkien. In this tale, we follow the human king Húrin being captured by the first Dark Lord Morgoth. The latter curses his children, Túrin and Niënor, who are then doomed to spread calamity wherever they go, which ends with almost everyone's death. This Glaurung, besides Morgoth, represents all that is evil within the story. His implication in the story is strong as he is the most prominent figure of evil that executes the curse cast by Morgoth. He is especially involved in the events that cause the death of Húrin's children. For instance, Glaurung is responsible of Niënor's amnesia, who then goes by the name of Níniel and marries her brother; and towards the end of the tale, while he comes to die, the dragon reveals to Niënor that they committed incest, as they did not recognise each other after years of being separated. This revelation forces eventually Niënor to commit suicide. Therefore, being the nemesis of the plot, the beast represents evil in its absolute form, which surpasses any other forms of evil that could be committed by others. Furthermore, the shape of the dragon can also be related to pure evil, as he is said to resemble a serpent, which might be a reference to the serpent of Genesis (ibid.). This evil animal also sheds light on his treacherous attitude, speaking ill in order to cause a catastrophe:

[...] For at the cry of Níniel [Niënor] Glaurung stirred for the last time, and a quiver ran through all his body; and he opened his baleful eyes a slit, and the moon gleamed in them, as gasping he spoke:

'Hail, Niënor, daughter of Húrin. We meet again ere we end. I give you joy that you have found your brother at last. And now you shall know him: a stabber in the dark, treacherous to foes, faithless to friends, and a curse unto his kin, Túrin son of Húrin!

But the worst of all his deeds you shall feel in yourself.' (*Húrin*: 243)

Glaurung destroys also an important elven fortress, Nargothrond, in which Túrin first finds shelter (Ruud 2011: 68-69; *Húrin*: 171-81). Thus, the beast is in direct opposition to humanoid's constructions, and perhaps even in opposition to all that is related to civilisation in general. This beast represents also the malice that brings sufferance to

Túrin, a man that is cursed, a man that nonetheless did evil on his own, which then cast ambiguity on the human character: “How much of what happens to Túrin is the result of Morgoth’s curse and how much is the result of his own character is a matter of some debate, and Tolkien certainly allows for both interpretations” (cf. Ruud 2011: 69). This ambiguity might suggest that human characters are master of their own fate, and that they are able to do both right and wrong, whereas the beast is doomed to bring terror and devastation, and this would correspond to the fact that the dragon symbolises the cruelty of fate, as discussed earlier.

Glaurung is not the only dragon that executes the will of the devil-like Morgoth. For instance, there is also Ancalagon the Black, “the mightiest of the dragon-host” (*Silmarillion*: 302), who is slain before the defeat of his own master, during a battle that reminds us of a biblical episode:

But Eärendil came, shining with white flame, and about Vingilot were gathered all the great birds of heaven and Thorondor was their captain, and there was a battle in the air all the day and through a dark night of doubt. Before the rising of the sun Eärendil slew Ancalagon the Black, [...], and cast him from the sky; and he fell upon the towers of Thangorodrim, and they were broken in his ruin. Then the sun rose, and the host of the Valar prevailed, and well-nigh all the dragon were destroyed; and all the pits of Morgoth were broken and unroofed, and the might of the Valar descended into the deeps of the earth. (ibid.: 302-3).

In this biblical-like battle between the forces of light and that of the shadow, the defeat of the dragons – the destruction of the beast – plays a significant role, which once again binds the beast with the forces of evil. This manifestation of the nonhuman is reduced to a devilish state, which once again can be said to refer to the uncanniness of a repressed animistic trend.

Other examples of the slaying of the beast as a topos might be found throughout Tolkien’s work, and while it does not always translate a will of the human to affirm its power over the nonhuman, it does however represent the destruction of a legacy of the past. There is for instance the famous duel between Gandalf and the Balrog, named *Durin’s Bane* (*LOTR*: 429), appearing in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. This beast could be said to represent a form of “malign sleeper”, which can be compared to a “Lovecraft-derived horror” (Clute & Grant 1999: 621), the balrog being thus a creature from the past, “[a]n evil from the Ancient World” (*LOTR*: 463). This creature is probably one of

Morgoth's creatures "that fled and hid themselves in caverns inaccessible at the roots of the earth" (*Silmarillion*: 302). With the killing of the Balrog, the ancient world is even more cast into oblivion. The beasts that once populated the Earth are now being replaced by a human world, a world that also sees the victory of the human hero and that of the one true God, now that the pagan beast lies slain on the ground.

Chapter IV - The Children of the One: The Triumph of Monotheism and Anthropocentrism

In the previous chapter, it was argued that like many other epics, the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* represents an age of historical transitions (Ruud 2011: 176), in this case between paganism and Christianity, the latter being said to have caused a separation between the human and the nonhuman. Nevertheless, one could argue that Christianity had not yet reached its alleged responsibility regarding our ecological crisis, as explained in Lynn White' Jr.'s seminal paper:

In the early Church, and always in the Greek East, nature was conceived primarily as a symbolic system through which God speaks to men: the ant is a sermon to sluggards; rising flames are the symbol of the soul's aspiration. This view of nature was essentially artistic rather than scientific. While Byzantium preserved and copied great numbers of ancient Greek scientific texts, science as we conceive it could scarcely flourish in such an ambience.

However, in the Latin West by the early thirteenth century natural theology was following a very different bent. It was ceasing to be the decoding of the physical symbol of God's communication with man and was becoming the effort to understand God's mind by discovering how his creation operates. (1996: 11)

This corresponds also to the general remark regarding the reassessment of Western history that exists within ecocriticism, as described in *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory* (Barbera & Payne 2010: 209). Through such a reassessment, the twelfth-century renaissance is said to have witnessed "the emergence of what became global modernity, which can be seen as having a more direct complicity than previously often assumed with the medieval in Western European culture as the latter morphed into global capitalism and scientism" (ibid.).

One can see thus the origin of the ecological crisis, for instance capitalism, is to be found from the twelfth century onwards, during an age which saw major developments, be it economically or philosophically. Those developments, as we shall see, will provoke the quasi-definitive expulsion of the sacred (or the spiritual) from nature, and even out from the material world.

Economically and socially speaking, the late Middle Ages were a time of significant developments, especially regarding the economic system. For instance, this

period saw what could be called “the managerial revolution [...] of the early thirteenth century”, a revolution which can be witnessed through the development of a new kind of literature “on agriculture and estate management, of which Walter of Henley’s *Husbandry* is the most famous” (Gillingham & Griffiths 2000: 78). The development of such a kind of literature could be said to reflect a more utilitarian approach to land, even though it would be exaggerated to speak about an “agricultural revolution”, as the technology available was not sufficiently advanced for such changes. Nevertheless, it can be argued that there was indeed an evolution towards much more rationality and practicality (ibid.: 70).

Regarding the situation in England, the environmentalist and author Paul Kingsnorth, who wrote the medieval historical novel *The Wake* in 2014¹⁴, tends to agree with a more radical view, as he argues that the origins of social and environmental inequalities in England are to be found from the eleventh century onwards, i.e. after the Norman Conquest of 1066 (Kingsnorth 2017: 185). Through this statement, he supports the idea of the ‘Norman Yoke’ (ibid.: 180-187), which regards the Norman conquest as a period in time similar to the European colonisation of the Americas, the Normans being the colonisers who oppress both the natives and the land. As a result, Kingsnorth depicts in his novel *The Wake* an Anglo-Saxon England conquered by wicked Normans who promote a more anthropocentric world view than that existing prior to the invasion, implying thus the application of a more utilitarian relationship with the nonhuman. This view of English history can also be found in a more academic context, as is mentioned by Heide Estes in her book *Anglo-Saxon Literary Landscape*, in which the medieval is put into relation with ecocriticism in order to better understand the current ecological state of the world (2017: 10). In her book, she stipulates that:

Norman rulers who came to England following the Conquest seem to have held ideas about landscape somewhat different from those of the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy, as suggested by the encomium poem *Durham*, celebrating the living city in contrast to the lament for the past of *The Ruin*; the *Domesday Book*’s unprecedented documentation of the lands of Anglo-Saxon England and the numbers of animals and humans they could support, suggesting an equivalence between (English) people and livestock; and the

¹⁴ This novel has been discussed in an exam paper for the class *Contemporary Eco-Fiction* LGERM2872 given by Prof. Ben De Bruyn (2019).

post-Conquest reference in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* to the negative effects of urban construction. (2017, 186).

Although this view might correspond to the English case, it seems unsatisfactory to explain the whole change of perspective within the Western world, and this view might be seen as simplistic, inasmuch as it conveys a romantic view of the Anglo-Saxon age which might befit a nationalistic ideology. For instance, Paul Kingsnorth professes nationalistic tendencies as he advocates a kind of environmental nationalism, promoting an “ecological Englishness” (2017: 212).

Thus, it can be argued that the Norman Conquest accelerated the evolution which might have been slower previously on the British Isles, but one must see it as a ramification of a global change, which furthermore roots itself in the theological and the intellectual sphere, which determined the philosophical thinking of that period and ultimately the relationship between the human and the nonhuman.

Drawing more on the intellectual level, the Medieval Period saw indeed the development of universities, especially from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries onward. It was a process that was much more prominent in the West than in other parts of the medieval world such as Byzantium and the Islamic world (Egerton 2012: 27).

The first section of this chapter will therefore insist on this intellectual development that began with the twelfth century, with scholasticism as its icon. There will be afterwards mention of the creation as it was conceived through the combination of Christianity and Greek philosophy, as those conceptions were tributary of the intellectual life. Drawing back towards Tolkien’s world, there will be an emphasis on the way with which he envisaged his own tale of creation. Finally, this section will conclude with some considerations that deals with the consequences of such conceptions concerning the creation, in regard with both the medieval period and Tolkien’s legendarium.

IV.1. The Twelfth Century Renaissance and Scholasticism

There is a debate on whether one should consider the twelfth century as a renaissance or not. This uncertainty lies primarily on the fact that, although it is well established as a period of political, economic and philosophical changes, it still did not embrace the

secularism of later renaissances, as explained in an article which deals with this debate as such:

In their later stages these changes were to create a new world and in so doing, break down the unity of the old, but they had not as yet destroyed the equilibrium. As we look back at the twelfth century, it is difficult to remember that feudal and agrarian institutions were still actively developing, with more conscious definition of their functions and principles than before, and were still being furthered rather than weakened by the expanding horizons of the age. (Sanford 1951: 641).

What perspires through this consideration of the twelfth-century renaissance is that it reasserts the notion of “unity of the old” which was broken later on. This corresponds also to the general idea which considers that the medieval world was seen as a whole by its contemporaries (Berman 1981: 50), a unique canvas which depicted the grace of God. What perspires through “the medieval world view is its sense of completeness. Man is at the centre of the universe that is bound at its outermost sphere by God, the Unmoved Mover” (ibid.), which thus implies the blend of Christianity with Greek philosophy (ibid.: 71), especially with the ideas of Plato and Aristotle. And the latter held a central position within the school of thought known as scholasticism, which goes hand in hand with the rediscovery of the texts of the Philosopher, which revealed himself to be rather influential at that period in time (Burkard & Precht 2008: 540).

One of the main philosophical schools of the medieval period was indeed scholasticism, as mentioned above. It was a school of thought which dealt primarily with theological preoccupations, as philosophy and theology were closely intertwined during the medieval period, and one of its drawbacks was to navigate towards abstraction (Le Goff 2000: 132), which also favours a way of thinking that promotes an hierarchised world which climbs towards heaven and the Unmoved Mover.

Also, as suggested in the excerpt above, one could see at that time a lot of changes regarding society in general, with for instance the burgeoning of the cities, although they did not just sprout from the void. One could speak about an “urban renaissance” that came with the development of trade with the Islamic world (ibid.: 9-10).

Furthermore, the twelfth century was also marked by “stirrings of creative thought on nature [...] when city life began to flourish and the centre of education shifted from monasteries to schools attached to cathedrals and other urban institutions”

(Cohen 2010: 77). Nonetheless, a developing natural science did not revolutionise the way human beings perceived nature and the nonhuman in general, as one could see a radicalisation of the Christian thought which stipulated that all things were given to Man, as stated in the Book of Genesis, a belief strengthened by humanistic and naturalistic thinking that was notably promoted from Chartres, one of the greatest centres of learning of the High Middle Ages (Le Goff 2000: 53-57). What perspired through this way of thinking was the belief that man was at the centre of the creation, the latter being a “fertile power” that was however altogether “organised and rational” (ibid.), although such assertion was debated amongst scholars (ibid.). Also, one should not think that the intellectuals who produced this knowledge considered themselves as radicals, as it was argued that although they called themselves “*moderni*”, they followed the way the Ancients traced for them, even picturing themselves as “dwarfs sitting on the shoulders of giants” (ibid.: 14-17). It is also argued that the fact that they follow the intellectuals of antiquity, especially Aristotle, restrained them. They were indeed conditioned by a way of thinking that no longer corresponded to the world, and we will have to wait the development of the humanities for a change, as it saw a rediscovery of ancient texts through the study of ancient languages, as well as a sharp critique that strove towards ‘human progress’.

However, this did not prevent the rise of prominent intellectual figures. For instance, one of the most important figure of the theological and philosophical thought of the Middle Ages was Thomas Aquinas, also known as Saint Thomas. He is one of the icons of scholasticism, i.e. the school of thought much attached to “abstract theoretical constructs” (Barbera & Payne 2010: 208). This prominent medieval theologian and philosopher was a Dominican friar (Kerr 2009: 9) but most importantly a Christian theologian. His is also considered as a philosopher, as his work on theology used Aristotelian logic (ibid.: 16). Aquinas is indeed said to have “adapted the Aristotelian notion of science to theology”, participating thus in the medieval “triumph of Aristotle” (Maurer 1982: 85-6), whose “logical treatises won a central place in the curriculum during the 12th cent[ury]” (Drabble 2000: 40). This adaptation became one of the foundations of his work, alongside the study of the scriptures and doctrine, as he himself considered part of his work as being a way “to set out Christian doctrine in an orderly way” (ibid.: 29). He worked and developed his thought during a time – the

thirteenth century – which is “sometimes regarded as the great age of Christendom, with everything in Western Europe controlled by the Roman Catholic Church”, but which “was, on the contrary, an age of intellectual crisis with much internal dissent” (ibid.: 1). Therefore, it can be said that it was an era propitious for changes, as mentioned above.

Important are his writings on the value of species, which was a theme approached in his most important works, such as *Summa Theologiae*, “the culmination of Scholastic philosophy, the harmony of faith and reason, and in particular the reconciliation of Christian theology with Aristotelian philosophy” (Drabble 2000: 35). These considerations on the value of species situate living beings with the aid of exegesis and logic within a hierarchy. This would afterwards greatly influence thinkers from the eighteenth century, which would eventually have a great impact on later conceptual developments (Lovejoy 1936: 76). The medieval thought of an ordered chain of beings, the *scala naturae*, climbing towards God, also justifies the pursuit of science as being a way for human beings to contemplate towards the higher steps of this divine order (Lovejoy 1936: 89). This upward glance could be seen as a form of *contemptus mundi*, inasmuch as human beings are drawn towards God and therefore progressively separated from earthly concerns (ibid.: 92). Thus, it might be seen as a paradox, as the contemplation of God’s creation implied the rigid study of the multiplicity of nature, but which nonetheless asked a detached attitude towards this show of plurality. In brief, one could argue that this hierarchal view would simultaneously induce a rigid study of the world, which would lead to modern science, as well as a view of the world which separated the human from the nonhuman.

IV.2. On Creation and the Chain of Beings

The idea of an ordered cosmos manifested itself through the chain of beings, or *scala naturae*. This notion was explored by Arthur Lovejoy in his book *The Great Chain of Being* (1936), who analyses it diachronically throughout the various periods of human history. When speaking about the Middle Ages, he first evokes the fact that God’s love first manifested itself through his “creative or generative rather than in the redemptive and providential office of deity”, which is implying “the fecundity of an Absolute” (1936: 67).

It seems that Tolkien retrieved this medieval conception of one God, whose power of creation shapes the world, even though Tolkien goes further by putting much more importance of the sub-creativity of the beings emanated from God, an attitude which concurs with the fact that he considers human beings as sub-creators, as they were shaped in God's image (Hammond & Scull 2017: 1265). In the beginning of a letter (*Letters*: 188-196), Tolkien responded to a catholic reader and mentioned in great length the sub-creative aspect of his work, an idea which is related to his Christian faith. As we can deduce from the letter, he does not see the inconvenience in writing and inventing, as it is within his prerogative as a sub-creator. He writes that sub-creation is to be thought as "a tribute to the infinity of [God's] own potential variety" (188). His work as a creative writer thus implies an exploration of the possibility that transcends from God's goodness, should we follow a religious analysis. From a less theological perspective and on a more literary scale, one can understand the concept of sub-creation as the author's attempt to create a secondary world which will have to feel coherent and consistent, thus allowing the reader's belief in what they read. This could be said to go against the concept of the reader's "willing suspension of disbelief" (Hammond & Scull 2017: 1264-5).

Tolkien thus implemented the idea of God's goodness and human responsibility through his conception of (sub-)creation. Indeed, according to Dickerson and Evans (2011), the opening lines of *The Silmarillion*, which recounts the creation of his fictitious world through the intervention of his version of the Christian God, named Eru Ilúvatar, can be seen as "a simple yet profound introduction to Tolkien's view on nature" (26). In a chapter of their book, *Ents, Elves and Eridador*, they explore Tolkien's tale of creation in comparison with the Genesis. To them, Tolkien's view of nature implies a sense of responsibility, which manifests itself in the principle of stewardship. It may be possible that the sub-creative nature of human beings, as understood by Tolkien, implied such a responsibility, as human are seen as active participants in the process of God's creation. This would concur with the strong emphasis on stewardship that can be observed throughout his work and especially in *The Lord of the Rings*. This can be seen in Dickerson and Evans's book, as it is argued "that Tolkien's environmental ethic is presented as a transcendent one. It is based on principles about creation that are implied throughout Tolkien's writings about Middle-

earth” (2011: 24). Below is the list of those five principles which can be found in Dickerson and Evans’ book:

1. The universe is the work of a divine creator.
2. The created universe is good; it has inherent worth and beauty.
3. Creation has a purpose: to bring pleasure to its creator and to those who dwell in it.
4. The created order and its inhabitant are vulnerable to evil embodied in a cosmic enemy.
5. The mission of people dwelling in the world is to acknowledge the goodness of the earth, fulfil its purpose, and assist in its restoration from evil. (ibid.)

Some of Tolkien’s conceptions of creation here represent a turn that the medieval thinking did not take, though it could have been possible, as the idea of God’s goodness could have made its way down the chain of beings, urging humans to participate in God’s creation. By contrast, the way up was privileged in the medieval way of thinking, promoting a contemplation towards God’s goodness (Lovejoy 1936: 82-4), as mentioned in the previous section. And some even argued that God’s creation was not to be imitated, such as with Saint Augustine (ibid.: 85). There would be, however, opposite opinions later on, especially towards the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance (ibid.: 86), as Lovejoy wrote that

the usual medieval preference is reversed; the higher value is given, not to the Unmoved Mover, the state in which the One is undivided and eternally at rest in its own self-sufficiency, but rather to the restless ‘active principle’, which is manifested in becoming, motion, diversification (ibid.: 93-4).

Nonetheless, Tolkien embraced the idea of the inherent goodness, as seen in the medieval period. God’s creation is indeed also to be as perfect as possible, following thus the thought of Aristotle and other Greek philosophers. As a result, the creation was thought to have been made as God intended it, and “[t]hus the diversity of creatures does not arise from diversity of merits, but was primarily intended by the prime agent” (Aquinas cited in Lovejoy 1936: 75). This justifies the *scala naturae*, which then might be extrapolated to Tolkien’s own tale of creation, which, according to Dickerson and Evans, is inherently good. This would therefore justify the order of things existing in Middle-earth.

This chain of being might be represented in the very conception of Men in the process of creation, as they are described as the Children of Eru Ilúvatar. This denomination already “impl[ies] a special relationship with their creator” (Dickerson & Evans 2011: 49). In accordance with the Christian belief, Men are also made at the image of God in Tolkien’s legendarium, as:

For the Children of Ilúvatar were conceived by him alone; and they came with the third theme, and were not in the theme which Ilúvatar propounded at the beginning, and non of the Ainur [angel-like or even secondary god-like spirits] had part in their making. Therefore when they beheld them, the more did they love them, beings things other than themselves, strange and free, *wherein they saw the mind of Ilúvatar reflected anew*, and learned yet a little more of his wisdom, which otherwise had been hidden from the Ainur. (*Silmarillion*: 7) [my emphasis]

Furthermore, Men are given gifts which seems “strange” to the other spirits of Middle-earth (ibid.: 35-36). While the Elves are paradoxically more like the angel-like Ainur and yet bound to the world and nature, Men are said to be more imperfect, as they are mortal. Yet, they are freer in the sense that when they die they will “depart soon whither the Elves know not” (ibid.), as if Men were connected to a higher purpose, of which even the wisest beings are not aware. This places the human at a higher place than the rest of the creation, which then reflects the medieval conception that places the human at the very top of the *scala naturae*, under God and the angels, which could also imply a *contemptus mundi* professed by Men, whereas the Elves are in a way bound to the physical world.

IV.3. The Human as ‘Frontier Being’

This conception seems to correspond to the idea of humans as a “frontier being”. This notion was discussed by the American philosopher W. Norris Clarke in a chapter from the collection of essay *The Creative Retrieval of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (2009: 132-151), thus revolving around that central intellectual figure of the medieval period already discussed in this dissertation. Clarke discusses the very conception of the human during the medieval period, especially through Aquinas’ theology, and he argues that the human represents a “frontier being”,

living on the edge, on the frontier, between matter and spirit, time and eternity. The diverse pulls of these apparently conflicting dimensions within a human person create

tension for it, while it freely shifts its conscious focus between these dimensions, either upward or downward, toward the pole of spirit or the pole of body. The idea of a human as a frontier being surfaced first in Plato, was further developed by the Neoplatonic tradition, and then was taken over by the Greek Christian Fathers and other early Christian thinkers, with appropriate adaptations to fit the Christian revaluation of the body. It was picked up again by medieval thinkers, quite explicitly by Saint Thomas, and then continued to pop up here and there throughout later Western thought and spirituality. (ibid.: 132).

In his essay, Clarke explores this idea of frontier being throughout the history of Western thought. He begins with Plato and his conception of the “middle being” torn between a material world and an immaterial one, with the idea that the “soul is the middle being” (ibid.133-4). Amongst Plotinus and the Neoplatonists, this concept “takes on much sharper and more explicit form” (ibid.: 134), which however is more flexible inasmuch as one can draw more on the spiritual or on the material (ibid.). Afterwards, this notion was taken by the Christian faith, through the work of theologians such as Saint Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. Through their thinking, the idea of the human as the microcosm reflecting the macrocosm was developed, which in the Christian context gave the human much more dignity, as creation was inherently good (ibid.: 135-8): “The human person now becomes even more meaningfully the centerpiece of the created universe, showing forth with ontological splendor the unity of all creation and so of its Creator” (ibid.: 144). In the medieval period, with the combination of Christian faith and Greek philosophy, the human was therefore placed at the very centre of creation.

In Tolkien’s work, the human can be seen as such a frontier being, with for instance an element that was already mentioned, namely that when they die, their spirit goes to an unknown place. There is also the fact that humans are also torn between two forces, between forces that belittles them, inasmuch as they are between right and wrong (Lee in Drout 2007: 417). Humans are the source of both good and wrong, they can accomplish great things, such as the heroes of Middle-earth, just as they can succumb to the power of evil and become its servants, such as the Ringwraiths – the Nazgûl – (ibid.), or such as Isildur who takes the Ring of Power for himself instead of destroying it (*LOTR*: 317).

The status of the human as a frontier being can also be said to be found in a more literal manner within Tolkien's legendarium, with for instance the isle of Númenor. This island was given to human tribes after they aided the Elves vanquishing the demon-like Dark Lord Morgoth, as told in a section of *The Silmarillion*, the *Akallabêth* (*Silmarillion*: 310-1). The island is placed on the western ocean, near the immortal lands, far in the West. From their island, the inhabitants of Númenor could see some parts of the immortal lands (Ruud 2011: 558). This characteristic manifests itself also through one of its other names: *Elenna*, which is said to mean "starwards", thus directed towards higher spheres, so to say. Through this conception, Númenor is therefore literally a place between the material world that is Middle-earth, and the immortal lands where the angel-like Valar dwell. It is placed between good and evil, between the lights of Valinor, the immortal lands, and Middle-earth who remains threatened by the power of Sauron (ibid.: 399). It places the Men of Númenor, the human, on an edge, literally speaking, on a frontier between geographical locations, as well as between spiritual and moral levels. This situation will however not endure, as the isle of Númenor will founder eventually, like Atlantis.

Finally, The idea of a frontier being, which then asserts the centrality of the human, is an element that shows a growing anthropocentrism, i.e. "everything in a culture that asserts or assumes that the human (Gk. *anthropos*, 'man') is at the centre – whether of the universe, the world, or the meaning of a text" (Bennett & Royle: 288). This anthropocentrism also tends to show itself within Tolkien's work, both on a physical level, as seen with the isle of Númenor, as well as on the philosophical and theological, as human are seen as the Children of the One, gifted with strange gifts as if destined to higher purposes. But although Men in Tolkien's fictitious world seem to be connected to a spiritual world, there is however a form of exclusion which became apparent, an exclusion which might also reflect the medieval mindset.

IV.4. On the Conception of Evil: A Manichaean Fight

One of the effects of the application of Greek philosophy on the Christian canvas was indeed the growing importance of the existence of a separated immaterial world, a spiritual one that corresponded to Plato's world of Ideas. As a matter of fact, "[i]n 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council of the Western Church reaffirmed the existence in the

universe of a spiritual realm of creatures distinct from human being” (Kerr 2009: 57). This conception of the world was also supported by Thomas Aquinas, as he tried to harmonise Christian doctrine such as the idea of God and angels with Aristotelian concepts such as the “unmoved mover” or the various “heavenly bodies” which set lower spheres into motion (1857: 316-347). This could be seen as a medieval affirmation of a spiritual world, which is perhaps a way to assimilate the Neoplatonist view of the world of ideas, separating thus the material and the spiritual, with, as mentioned in the previous part, the human serving as a bridge between both world – in accord with the concept of *connexio rerum*¹⁵ (Lovejoy 1936: 79). This can also be seen as a way of excluding the spiritual from the material world. Such an attitude would exclude all types of animistic conceptions of nature, as the spiritual is in this case strictly related to the immaterial.

Such a form of exclusion of the spiritual and the immaterial can be seen through the overlap between two conceptions of evil within Tolkien’s world, which can also be said to have medieval roots.

Regarding Tolkien’s work and body of legends, Tom Shippey argues that one can see two conceptions of evil: a Boethian one – the traditional medieval conception of evil as an inevitable component of creation – and a Manichaean one, which sees evil as an external force emanating from an antithesis of God’s/Illúvatar’s goodness (2005: 159-66; see also Shippey 2000: 128-35).

The Manichaean doctrine arose during the early Middle Ages amongst some Christians groups. It presupposed the idea of an antithesis to god, from which evil originates. This doctrine lasted during the whole medieval period, though it was officially considered to be a heresy, and it eventually faded as the world entered into the modern era (ibid.: 97). This conception was for a moment embraced by Saint Augustine, but he rejected it later on (Copleston 1993: 52). Further on, as Christianity evolved and defined its doctrine more sharply, Thomas Aquinas refutes the notion that there is the presence of an absolute evil that would compete with God’s goodness, an idea often defended by supposed heretics (Kerr 2009: 51). This conception of evil which perspires through Tolkien’s work also became an argument for criticising its plot,

¹⁵ The concept of *connexio rerum*, i.e. the connection between things, is itself taken from the concept of the *scala naturae*, according to which one specific species is connected to the one above and the one below in the hierarchy.

while affirming that “good and evil are represented as absolutes, without a proper sense of inner conflict within individuals” (Shippey 2005: 153).

According to the dominating conception, i.e. the Boethian one according to Shippey, evil was seen as internal and part of God’s creation, namely the absence of goodness and its opposite. This however does not mean that evil is a condition to goodness, but, as Fergus Kerr puts it: “The doctrine that any evil must always be an absence of good is an implication of the doctrine that everything is created by God and every created thing is intrinsically good” (ibid.: 6). The Boethian conception corresponds to an idea professed by the early Christian philosopher Boethius, who is mostly famous for his *De Consolatione Philosophiae*. He wrote this influential work as he was in prison, seeking then a mean for recovery, a consolation in order to cope with his misery. Within this consolatory work, according to Shippey, it is said “that there is no such thing as evil”, and “that evil cannot create itself; that it was not itself created” (ibid.: 159). Still according to the Tolkien expert, one can find this conception throughout Tolkien’s work, such as in *The Lord of The Ring* (ibid.).

The ambiguity of this duality is said to be represented through the Ring and its tempting aura (ibid.: 161-6; Shippey 2000: 135), because although the Ring represents as such an external force of evil, it does, however, cause internal evil within the heart of individuals, and it was originally created by Sauron, who is himself part of Illúvatar’s creation, albeit corrupted by Morgoth.

But it could be said that within *The Lord of the Ring*, and the legendarium, one can see an evolution of that conception of evil, though it remains ambiguous. Nevertheless, evil is almost represented as an absolute through the presence of Morgoth. This godlike figure is represented as an equal to the god-like figure of Ilúvatar, especially within the material world, as it is the case for instance of the island of Númenor, who is said to be torn between the grace of the Valar glimmering in the West and the malevolence of Morgoth – through the agency of Sauron – which lurks upon Middle-earth (Ruud 2011: 399), as mentioned earlier.

However, one could see the defeat of evil incarnate, such as the demise of Morgoth or Sauron, as a representation of the fading of the Manichaeian vision, as Tolkien puts it: “the last also in which Evil assumes a single dominant incarnate image”

(*Letters*: 154, 160). The way in which he describes evil also denotes a Manichaean perspective, as if evil was an external notion and not an inherent part of creation.

It does however not mean that Tolkien embraced a partial Manichaean form of Christianity, as although he conceived his work in relation with his deep Catholic faith. He nonetheless allowed himself to take some liberties, albeit limited (see Shippey 2000: 134), as he explains in a letter to a Catholic reader who was somewhat confused after having read *The Lord of the Rings* (see *Letters*: 187-96). In this letter, Tolkien attenuates the Manichaean aspect of his version of creation, saying eventually that evil as such cannot create, but makes only “counterfeits” (ibid.: 190-1), especially in regards with Sauron. But with Sauron’s demise, “never again (unless it be before the great End) will an Evil daemon be incarnate as a physical enemy” (ibid.: 207). Thus, in a way, the destruction of the incarnation of evil might represent the fading of the Manichaean vision, and therefore the expulsion of the spiritual from the material world.

This fading form of Manichaean doctrine could also manifest itself through the fact that Morgoth’s diluted himself within the fabric of the incarnate beings living in Middle-earth, as “[t]o gain domination over Arda, Morgoth had let most of his being pass into the *physical* constituents of the Earth – hence all things that were born on Earth and lived on by it, beasts or plants or incarnate spirits, were liable to be ‘stained’” (*Morgoth’s Ring*: 394-5). The fallen angel passes into the world and becomes part of it, and its absolute form fades as its wickedness is absorbed by everything that exists, thus symbolising the fading notion of an external absolute evil.

Finally, *The Lord of the Rings* does not end abruptly with the defeat of Sauron, but the story goes on and several problems are being dealt with, such as the coming of Saruman in the Shire (*LOTR*: 1306-55). This type of ending, which might be seen by some readers as tedious, since the chief nemesis has already been vanquished, shows that evil is not to be found only in its absolute godlike-incarnate form, but rather as part of everyday life:

Tolkien was not so naive as to believe that the defeat of a single enemy, no matter how much that enemy might embody evil, could mean that all evil had been overcome forever. Life consists of fairly constant resistance to evil in one form or another, and to assume that these characters would live “happily ever after” would be a mistake. Tolkien’s final five chapters address each of these issues. (Ruud 2011: 287)

IV.5. On Angels and Valar: Relations between Matter and Soul

In Tolkien's legendarium, another example of the exclusion of the spiritual (immaterial/sacred) from matter (material/incarnated) can also be witnessed through the growing gap that forms itself between Middle-earth and the Immortal lands of the Valar.

The Valar are spirits who can be compared to god-like figures or, in a more Christian-related sense, to Angels. At the beginning of time, as told in *The Silmarillion*, the Valar are described as active forces, which can be seen throughout the *Valaquenta*, i.e. the tale of the Valar (15-24), and in subsequent parts as well, such as the *Ainulindalë*. Their active quality can be seen through the fact that they were Ainur, i.e. primal spirits who "were among those who sang the universe into being, and then entered it to assist in the completion of the plan in the mind of Ilúvatar, the creator god" (Ruud 2011: 202). The Valar were Ainur who eventually decided willingly to enter the Earth, as "they put on the raiment of Earth and descended into it, and dwelt therein" (*Silmarillion*: 15), and as they "brought order to the seas and the land and the mountain" (ibid.: 27). They will be later called Lords by the Elves, and Gods by Men (ibid.: 15-6), names that imply an active component and power over the elements and over the individuals. They can be understood as deities who are each responsible of specific physical events, such as climate, as "all tides and seasons were at the will of the Valar" (ibid.: 78); and they participate during the elder days in the war against the fallen spirit Morgoth, or Melkor (ibid.: 27-36). Thus, they can be described as "angelic beings charged with the governance of the earth" (Ruud 2011: 206). They were also visible within the physical world (*Silmarillion*: 313), at least till the Downfall of Númenor, i.e. till the end of the Second Age.

Nonetheless, despite the awesome power displayed by the Valar, one has to keep in mind their limitations, as they "have only partial comprehension of the world they have helped to make" (cf. Flieger 2008: 124). For instance, they have only but a small knowledge of Arda's geology (see Hynes 2012: 21-36). Also, one must not forget that they originally emanated from the sole mind of the creative monotheistic deity, i.e. Eru Ilúvatar. And the latter can even be seen as "a curiously remote and, for the most part, inactive figure, uninvolved, save for one exceptional moment, in the world he has conceived" (Flieger 2008: 124).

Despite the role that they play during the first days of the world, and as the ages goes on, the Valar are progressively excluded from the material world, even the Satan-like Morgoth, and they “are no longer the only force capable of changing the Earth’s fabric” (Hynes 2012: 26). Tolkien himself wrote that “[t]he Valar ‘fade’ and become more impotent, precisely in proportion as the shape and constitution of things becomes more defined and settled” (*Morgoth’s Ring*: 401). In *The Lord of the Rings*, whose plot takes place towards the end of the timeline developed by Tolkien, the Valar are only to be understood as some distant, immaterial spiritual powers whose presence is not to be witnessed. After the world was said to be made round after the Downfall of Númenor, the Valar are indeed understood as passive powers, as they dwell in Valinor – detached from the material world –, “where [...] [they] watch the unfolding of the story of the world” (*Silmarillion*: 338). However, there are hints which suggested that they might hold a degree of influence on the world, perhaps not on the physical world itself, but rather on the conscience of some living beings. For instance, such an influence can be seen with Gollum’s riddle being observed by “the Authorities” (the Valar), who emit an opinion on the fact that he made a promise to Bilbo, forcing from within the wretched creature to honour his promise and let Bilbo live (*LOTR*: 15). Nevertheless, their powers are limited, as can be seen later on in *The Lord of The Rings*. In the course of the intrigue, the resourceful elven lord Elrond evokes the fact that the Valar cannot do anything regarding the Ring of Sauron, as “they who dwell beyond the Sea [the Valar] would not receive it [the Ring]: for good or ill it belongs to Middle-earth; it is for us who still dwell here to deal with it” (ibid.: 347).

The Valar, however, retained some form of active power through the presence of the five Istari, i.e. the five wizards amongst whom there are Saruman and Gandalf (Ruud 2011: 208-9). Those wizards will play a significant role through the whole history of Middle-earth, especially Gandalf, who can be seen as one of the main enemies to Sauron. Their power is however strictly limited by the Authorities, as they

had been expressly charged by the Valar not to subjugate the races of Middle-earth and not to match Sauron’s power with a direct challenge of their own. Therefore, Saruman’s deliberate intent is to violate the specific directives of the Valar, and both to dominate Middle-earth and to contest Sauron’s power with his own. It is no wonder that Gandalf eschews him (ibid.: 209).

But as the story unfolds, the power of the wizards fades. Saruman becomes corrupted by Sauron. In contrast, Gandalf remains true to its original purpose, “embody[ing] the power and influence of the Valar” (ibid.: 244), but he eventually departs Middle-earth after the defeat of Sauron, leaving for the Immortal Lands in the company of the Elves (see *LOTR*: 1348).

Speaking of which, the Elves can be described as living beings who are more significantly related to nature and to the spiritual world, due to the fact that they can chose to return to the Immortal Lands (*Silmarillion*: 36). This connection to nature could be regarded as an animistic trend that tries effortless to join the material and the immaterial together, a trend which, however, fades, as much of the Elves are leaving Middle-earth at the end of the Third Age. This announces a new era in which such a connection between matter and soul would be deemed impossible, or at least less promising, as the last species that connects these two aspects of the world is none but mankind itself, which would, according to Tolkien, forget this connection.

Chapter V - Chaucer and the Passing of the Elves

The severed connection between the material and the spiritual and this rise of anthropocentric considerations, conveyed through Christian texts and exegesis significantly inspired by Greek philosophy, would lead, as White Jr. suggested, to the destruction of animism, i.e. this conception that sees elements of the nonhuman inhabited in a way by spirits. The fading of animism would have, as Christopher Manes explains in an essay appearing in Fromm and Glotfelty's *Ecocritic Reader*, made nature silent (1996: 15-29), or at least would have produced a situation of separation between the human and the nonhuman.

Regarding Tolkien's work, it was suggested that such separation goes hand in hand with the 'Passing of the Elves', as explained by Thomas Honegger in an essay called *The Passing of the Elves and the Arrival of Modernity: Tolkien's 'Mythical Method'* (2006: 211-32). In this essay, he insists on this progressive separation as expressed in the previous chapter, while evoking the concept of 'axial age' originally developed by German-Swiss philosopher Karl Jaspers:

Yet neither is it a world where God or the gods are still in direct communication with Elves or men. [...] They [legends collected in *The Silmarillion*] show Elves and 'gods' (Valar) in direct contact and the divine would pervade their daily lives. Things change with the 'fall' of the Elves - at least for those caught up in the consequences of the rape of the Silmarils and the kinslaying of Alqualondë. The Valar largely break off their contact with Middle-earth and it is only once that they, moved by Eärendil's plea, intervene directly and in person at the end of the First Age (War of Wrath). The final rupture, then, happens with the drowning of Númenor and the reshaping of the earth from disc to globe. The Third Age is very much an 'Axial Age' in so far as the sacred seems remote, even alien, and the supreme reality (read 'Valinor') impossibly difficult to access. [...] Individual conscience and morality take centre stage and rituals lose in importance. (ibid.: 225)

Drawing to the medieval period, such fall of the elves might be found within the work of Geoffrey Chaucer (ca. 1343-1400), one of the most prominent poets from the Middle English period, considered as the "father of English Literature" (Ruud 2006: x; *CT*:

xxiv). He is mostly famous for his magnum opus *The Canterbury Tales*¹⁶, argued to be “a poem of its time” (CT: xi)¹⁷, which then allows us to consider it as relevant regarding the medieval conception of nature.

This section will thus begin with a section dedicated to the ‘father of English literature’, in order to investigate the degree of separateness between the human and the nonhuman within the field of medieval literature and during the medieval period in general. In short, this will allow us to have a better understanding regarding the relationship between human beings and nature. Furthermore, there will be an emphasis on forests and deforestation during the medieval period and in Tolkien’s fictitious world, which, from a cultural and literary perspective, would lead to the passing of fairies and Elves that can be seen in both Chaucer’s poetry and Tolkien’s work.

V.1. Chaucer and Middle English Nature

In an article called ‘Ecochaucer’, Sarah Stanbury (2004) analyses Chaucer’s work from an ecocritical perspective, especially in regard to the relation between the human and the nonhuman, the latter often referred as nature or as what one might think when speaking about nature. By doing so, she tries to define what nature meant in the Middle English context, putting it in contrast to subsequent conceptions of nature that can be observed throughout the ages:

Intellectual historians have most often described the nature of the Middle Ages and of antiquity, in construct, as an ethical principle of force or motion, vice-regent under God in an orderly hierarchy of rule. With modernity nature became disenchanted, taking on the persona, as R. G. Collingwood argues; or in the nineteenth century of a longed-for lost *jouissance*, the place of desire and of innocence so hauntingly evoked in the Romantic imagination; and somewhat later, of wilderness, the appetite and violence of Tennyson’s (and perhaps even Wild Kingdom’s) ‘nature red in tooth and claw’. With the advent of modernity nature transformed from a force over the earth’s climate, geology, and living forms to a resource that could be exploited or worshipped. Nature became a territory, a place or thing that could be exploited for our own designs. (4)

¹⁶ Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* was discussed at length during the class *English literature of the Older Period: The Canterbury Tales* LGERM2824 given by Prof. Guido Latré (2018).

¹⁷ The acronym CT corresponds to David Wright’s translation edited by Oxford University Press. The pages taken of the introduction are given in Roman numerals.

The question that is at hand now is whether Chaucer is to be found on the medieval side of the debate or on that of the Renaissance, as he is said to have been “writing at the end of the Middle Ages” (ibid.), some even “taking the position that Chaucer holds a disenchanted or skeptical view of a purely beneficent nature” (ibid.: 6). Stanbury seems to situate Chaucer between both sides, inasmuch as he sees nature “[a]s a personified feminine deity or life force”, which is not entirely benevolent nor is her apparent agency uniformly effective” (ibid.: 6).

Furthermore, while speaking about the way in which Chaucer wrote about the human and the nonhuman, Stanbury explores the role of the metaphor, a literary device used a lot by Chaucer, and she argues that this way of making analogies allows the union of the human and the nonhuman, thus “fulfil[ling] ecocriticism’s mandate of unsettling the binary law that splits nature from culture, human from nonhuman” (ibid.: 7). This however might produce a backlash, inasmuch as this principle of analogy through metaphor would “validate the status quo. Analogy of the human with the nonhuman can give the human social orderings the veneer of a divinely ordained or essentialized law”, even though Chaucer would do that “playfully” (ibid.: 7-8). He leans therefore rather on the satire and mockery, which nonetheless always serves a rather prosaic purpose which would be centred on human affairs, such as the questioning of social categories (ibid.: 10). Stanbury condenses this thought in saying that nature, which often appears as a “farm and garden”, is the “domain of human cultivation” (ibid.7).

An example of this ambiguity in Chaucer can be found in the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, where one witnesses an opening that evokes nature, before coming down to the world of human beings. One could therefore see it as a union of both the human and the nonhuman, as we can see, according to Stanbury, that analogies are made between natural order and human hierarchy (2004: 8). This, however, still indicates that the natural world serves only the purpose of the world of Men. Furthermore, a clear cut between those two worlds can be seen, especially through the layout of the Prologue itself. That cutting effect is performed with the use of “Thanne”, which, still according to Stanbury, “marks a shift from nature to people” (ibid.: 11). This effect is accentuated by the parenthesis which would then limit nature’s effect only on copulating birds and not on the humans going on a pilgrimage. Nevertheless,

Stanbury makes a last remark, as she insists on the fact that the parenthesis were a late addition from 19th editors who would not suffer to see a natural world put in relation with religious behaviours thus eroticised (ibid.: 11-2). Nature does have an effect on the human, even though one might see it as idealised and reductionist, as nature is seen as a libidinous force whose sole purpose is to initiate human actions.

Stanbury finishes her paper while addressing the question of responsibility towards nature, i.e. the stewardship of nature that might be expressed through Chaucer's work. She claims that through Chaucer, one does not see a sense of responsibility originating from the fact that humans are Nature's guardians. She rather sees nature as a topos that Chaucer would have used in order to perform a type of social critique *avant la lettre*, and she prefers to see nature as a performing force with control over human *eros* and even the design of the human social fabric (ibid.: 12-3), a notion that is, however, still reductive in a way.

In contrast to Chaucer, Tolkien can be said without much hesitation to have significantly insisted on the concept of responsibility, especially regarding the concept of stewardship (Elder cited by Dickerson & Evans 2011: x-xii). Matthew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans significantly discussed this theme in their ecocritical analysis of Tolkien's work *Ents, Elves and Eriador: The Environmental Vision of J.R.R. Tolkien*. This study revolves around the notion of stewardship, especially regarding management and cultivation, arguing that "[j]ust as his legendarium provides a complex ecology involving feraculture, horticulture, and agriculture, so his model of stewardship is deep, complex, and profoundly illuminated in his writings" (ibid.: 45). This stewardship is said to be rooted in his myth of creation, which then brings back to the Christian notion of stewardship (ibid.: 52). Throughout the study, this sense of stewardship is analysed through various modes of cultivation and tending to the lands of Middle-earth, which is seen by the authors as the reflection of Tolkien's environmental ideas. Be it as it may, this vision is still anthropocentric, inasmuch as Tolkien addresses almost exclusively the exploitation of land, and the concept of stewardship could be said to imply that the human is the master of the nonhuman – even though one may argue that it could not be otherwise, as how can a human-like society be *unanthropocentric*? Notwithstanding, nature is still and always the domain of human cultivation, as it is the case with Chaucer's nature. And Tolkien's attitude, which then appears in the aforementioned

study, could then much resemble that of Chaucer's, who is said to have understood the "politics of nature" (Kiser cited in Nardizzi 2013: 114), even though Chaucer was said to be much more interested in the social consequences, as mentioned earlier.

Also, Tolkien's nature is much personified, just as it is the case with Chaucer, as argued by Stanbury (2004: 10), and even though Tolkien does not include a feminised deity that would allegorically embody Nature as a life force, he does, however, include personifications of natural elements, such as, for instance, the Ents, who are no less than anthropomorphised trees that act like "shepherds of the trees" or "tree-herds" (*LOTR*: 609).

There is, however, an individual that might be said to represent nature, and that is Tom Bombadil, as suggested by Dickerson and Evans (2011: 19). The same can be argued for his wife Goldberry (*ibid.*: 20), who might be compared to a naiad. Their marriage thus personifies a cosmic marriage between earth and water, or the earth and the skies, as implied by Dickerson and Evans (*ibid.*), though they do not use these exact terms. It was also asserted that "their role in Nature involves the maintenance of the existing order, their songs often praise the Middle-earth equivalent of the medieval Chain of Being" (Chance 2001: 156). This statement concurs with Chaucer's conception of nature as a representation of natural order beyond the human, even though Bombadil's and Goldberry's praise of the chain of being is not one that would justify social hierarchy.

Notwithstanding, this represents a sharp anthropomorphic attitude, an attitude which could also be said to have been employed with the Elves, as one could see them as natural spirits that are much involved with the politics of Middle-earth. This natural personification could be explained with the fact that the Elves are bound to the world itself. Their existence lies on a union coupled with "a great love for the beauty of the earth" (Dickerson & Evans 2011: 35), whereas humans are destined to go in a mysterious location when they die, thus linking their fate with a higher spiritual purpose, which could be seen as an adaptation from Christian beliefs. Also, it could be said to mirror the fact that humans see themselves as destined for greater things than the insignificant material world, should one extrapolate on that matter.

Much of these personifications of nature are, however, fading. The Elves are indeed leaving Middle-earth towards the end of the Third Age, ushering the world into

the Dominion of Men. Also, the tree-like Ents are doomed to disappear (Ruud 2011: 491), and even though they had an active role in *The Lord of the Rings*, such as their attack on Isengard, from where the wicked Saruman served the Dark Lord Sauron, it is considered by themselves as “the last march of the ents” (*LOTR*: 634). These fading personifications could be analysed as the disappearance of animistic tendencies that came with the rise of a Christian-like world view, as argued by White Jr. in his seminal essay. These fading icons, so to say, are also much related to the state of their environment, which is in a similar condition, as the human pushes the nonhuman out of their spiritual lives as well as out of their physical ones.

V.2. The Hewing of the Forest: On Medieval and Middle-earth’s Forests

One can find a passage within medieval literature that associates the destruction of an environment with the disappearance of spirits, namely in Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*, which is part of *The Canterbury Tales*. Although this tale recounts events that are set in classical antiquity, it nevertheless expresses this analogy that can be made between the destruction of the environment and the fading state of the spiritual world, which goes as the following in the text:

But how the fyr was maked up on highte,
And eek the names how the treës highte,
As ook, firre, birch, asp, alder, holm, popler,
Wilow, elm, plane, ash, box, chasteyn, lind, laurer,
Mapul, thorn, beech, hasel, ew, whippeltree,
How they weren feld, shal nat be told for me;
Ne how the goddes ronnen up and doun,
Disherited of hir habitacioun,
In which they woneden in reste and pees,
Nymphes, Faunes, and Amadrides;
Ne how the bestes and the briddes alle
Fledden for fere, whan the wode was falle;
(Chaucer 1900: 2919-2930)¹⁸

Through the destruction of nature, one can see the disappearance of the old pagan Gods and of other mythical creatures. The question is whether one should analyse this as the

¹⁸ The numbers refer to the lines, not the page number.

mere fact that the spiritual flee from destruction, or whether one can analyse it a bit further, considering it as a general remark of Chaucer, evoking then here a disenchantment of the environment, where nature is made silent and dead through its destruction for the sole purpose of human needs. And finally, one sees here again that the former days are represented as being populated by wondrous beings, even though their dwelling places are doomed to be destroyed.

In *Greenery: Ecocritical readings of late medieval English literature*, Gillian Rudd analyses the position of trees in Chaucer's work, and particularly in *The Knight's Tale*, already mentioned above. In this tale written by Chaucer, one can witness a rather anthropocentric depiction of nature and of the forest (2007: 50), the woods being the "backdrop to human affairs", and animals being used mostly in metaphors in order to describe human attitudes (ibid.). In this tale, there is a deep opposition between the human and the nonhuman, especially regarding woodlands, as can be seen in the excerpt above, which shows that the natural environment is "doomed to be buried beneath the built environment of humankind" (ibid. 61) and that the forests are destroyed symbolically and physically (ibid.: 63). As a result from this exploitative attitude, one can see spells of retaliations from nature, which can be analysed as ecologist warnings, at least from our modern perspective (ibid.: 64). This can be seen with the march of the Ents in Tolkien's work, which was mentioned above. However, nature can serve as a refuge, although it is a fearsome place, at it is used as a shelter by some characters in Chaucer's tale (ibid.: 65). This, however, does not mean that Chaucer idealises nature, as Rudd argues that he does not use a "romanticized" and "benign" view of nature (ibid. 74). Through this analysis, Rudd argues that Chaucer manifested a contemporary attitude towards the nonhuman (ibid.: 87), one that is however still restricting, as he saw the forest from a very practical perspective, while noticing its exploitation which might have dire consequences.

This brings us to the very condition of the medieval forest. In an article from the *Journal of Historical Geography* which focuses on "global deforestation in the deep past" (Williams 2000), it is argued that "The Middle Ages [...] encapsulated an active and energetic world in which humankind began to make conscious and purposeful decisions about land use and population densities" (36). These decisions are said to have been coupled with the Christian belief of human mandate of domination over the

natural environment (ibid.). This would have been caused by the development of new kinds of technologies and the growth in human population, leading to a situation in which forested areas were significantly reduced (ibid.: 37-9). This would have been intensified around the twelfth century (ibid.: 40), which would explained the societal and ideological change that have been mentioned earlier, a correlation that could be said to be supported in the article, as it concludes the section dedicated to Europe with the argument that “[i]n that long process of global expansion [which led Europe to colonise a significant part of the world after 1500] the forest and the wealth released from it played a central part” (ibid.).

The condition of the forests in Tolkien’s Middle-earth is not different, though it is complicated to produce such a detailed analysis regarding a fictitious land. Nevertheless, in an essay from the *Cartographic Journal* of the *British Cartographic Society*, in a special issue dedicated to “cartographies of fictional worlds” (Habermann & Kuhn 2011: 263-73), such an analysis is conducted, using geographical tools intersected with literary and cultural materials. As a result, the essay aims at recreating a geographically accurate map of Middle-earth which is further analysed with the aid of excerpts from Tolkien’s literary works. Regarding the woodlands, the essay mentions a so-called “forest problem of Middle-earth” (ibid.: 267-71), arguing that the land suffered an important amount of degradations (ibid.: 270). These degradations are not only caused by the powers of Evil mainly incarnated by Sauron and Morgoth, but also by human activities and even Hobbits, which would explain the violent attitudes of trees towards the Hobbits as they cross the Old forest in *The Fellowship of the Ring* (ibid.: 271; see *LOTR*: 140-94). Trees are under a state of “marginalisation [...], although they still retain some of their power” (Habermann & Kuhn 2011: 271). The remaining power of the forests manifests itself through the fear they may provoke, as it is the case with places such as the Old Forest and Fangorn (ibid.). The former is a forest that borders the eastern borders of the Shire, i.e. the dwelling place of the Hobbits, the latter being a forest neighbouring the dwelling place of Saruman, from which he serves Sauron. The forest is even thought by some to be “quite as dangerous as Black Riders” (*LOTR*: 140), a place where the trees would treat others as “strangers” (ibid.: 144), which implies a distance, a separate state. This separateness can be said have been caused by Hobbits’ land management: “But the hobbits came and cut down hundreds of trees, and made a

great bonfire in the Forest, and burned all the ground in a long strip east of the Hedge. After that the trees gave up the attack, but they became very unfriendly” (ibid. 145). A similar observation is conducted in the novel by Tom Bombadil, who explains to the Hobbits why the trees act unfriendly towards them:

As they listened, they began to understand the lives of the Forest, apart from themselves, indeed to feel themselves as the strangers where all others things were at home. Moving constantly in and out of his talk was Old Man Willow, and Frodo learned now enough to content him, indeed more than enough, for it was not comfortable lore. Tom’s words laid bare the hearts of trees and their thoughts, which were often dark and strange, and filled with a hatred of things that go free upon the earth, gnawing, biting, breaking, hacking, burning: destroyers and usurpers. It was not called the Old Forest without reason, for it was indeed ancient, a survivor of vast forgotten woods; and in it there lived yet, ageing no quicker than the hills, the fathers of the fathers of trees, remembering times when they were lords. (LOTR: 170; see also Habermann & Kuhn 2011: 271)

The malice of the trees came from abusive use and destruction, such as it is the case with the Forest of Fangorn, here being an element that worked for the advantage in the quest to destroy Sauron’s enemy: “In the process of his unconstrained arms buildup, Saruman had destroyed parts of Fangorn Forest and thus, unexpectedly, had aroused the wrath of the E[nts]” (Ruud 2011: 515).

One could also cite Mirkwood, which was once a called Greenwood the Great, but which then became corrupted by the Power of Sauron (ibid.: 542-3), thus becoming one of the chief obstacles within the plot of *The Hobbit*. It is a place swarming with giant spiders and close to the tower of the Necromancer (*Hobbit*: 161), who is none other than Sauron himself. Forests can thus be negative places, but this negativity is often due to the abusive behaviour by human-like individuals.

Forests can nonetheless be places of refuge, for instance for members of the Fellowship in *The Lord of the Rings*, such as the woods of Lothlórien. However, despite being a place of refuge for the Elves in general (Ruud 2011: 533), as they “indeed still dwell here in the darkening world” (LOTR: 439), and also for the Fellowship after their passing through the mines of Moria, the woods of Lórien are, nonetheless, associated with fear. For instance, the Men of Gondor associates these woods with negative connotations, as Boromir explained: “And now we must enter the Golden Wood, you

say. But of that perilous land we have heard in Gondor, and it is said that few come out who once go in; and of that few none have escaped unscathed” (ibid.: 440). This ambivalence between security and threat could be said to correspond to that in Chaucer’s *The Knight’s Tale* “when Palamon decides to hide out during the day, having ignobly escaped from prison” (Rudd 2007: 53). Here, the wood becomes Palamon’s refuge although it maintains an oppressive quality, notably through anthropomorphic metaphors which suggests that the forest spies on him (ibid.).

Nature, through the presence of forests, retains power over people, but it is, however, meant to pass, as expressed in some lines sung by Frodo as he and his companions are crossing the Old Forest. He first desires to express the hope of getting quickly to the other sides, but the tone quickly becomes melancholic, as

his voice sank to a murmur.

*O! Wanderers in the shadowed land
despair not! For though dark they stand,
all woods there must be end at last,
and see the open sun go past:
the setting sun, the rising sun,
the day’s end, or the day begun.
For east or west all wood must fail...*

Fail - even as he said the word his voice sank into silence. The air seemed heavy and the making of words wearisome. (*LOTR*: 147)

This melancholic tone corresponds also to the general state of elven woods that are about to be deserted, as towards the end of the Third Age, the Elves sail westwards to the Undying Lands of Valinor, an information that the hobbits learned as they are in Lothlorien (Drout 2007: 395): “If you succeed, then our power is diminished, and Lothlórien will fade, and the tides of Time will sweep it away. We must depart into the West, or dwindle to a rustic folk of dell and cave, slowly to forget and to be forgotten” (*LOTR*: 475). These words are expressed by Galadriel, the elven queen ruling over the woods. She also says to Sam that “you may remember Galadriel, and catch a glimpse far off Lórien, that you have seen only in our winter. For our Spring and our Summer are gone by, and they will never be seen on earth again save in memory” (ibid.: 489).

Even Legolas, the elf-character in the Fellowship, reckons that “beneath the Sun all things must wear to an end at last” (ibid.: 506), making an echo to Frodo’s melancholic song mentioned above.

Therefore, in both Chaucer’s and Tolkien’s work, one can witness the destruction of nature, which eventually causes the disappearance of fairies, elves, and other wondrous beings. This also creates a melancholic glance towards a more wondrous past, as explained in the next section.

V.3. The Passing of an Age: On Chaucer’s Fairies and Tolkien’s Elves

The world of enchanted forests seems then to belong to the past, which could already be seen in the excerpt taken from Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*. This can be seen throughout his work, especially in his depiction of the otherworld, i.e. a concept that could be used for the medieval period when referring to “the world of the fairies” (Byrne 2016: 5):

Should, for instance, the past be thought of as an otherworld? After all, the observation that marvels and wonders were more common in previous times than the present is not unusual in medieval writing, famously providing the point of departure for Chaucer in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*. (ibid.: 6)

In the beginning of the said tale, the narrator deplores that the elves (or *fairies*) of the ancient time of King Arthur had given place to priests (*limitours* and *holy freres*) chanting through a world made silenced by their prayers:

In th’olde dayes of the King Arthour,
Of which that Britouns speken greet honour,
Al was this land fulfild of faïrye:
The elf-queene with hir joly compaignye
Daunced ful ofte in many a greene mede –
This was the olde opinion as I rede;
I speke of many hundred yeres ago.
But now can no man see none elves mo,
For now the grete charitee and prayeres
Of limitours, and othere holy freres,
That serchen every land and every streem,
As thikke as motes in the sonne-beem,
Blessing halles, chambres, kichenes, bowres,
Citees, burghes, castels, hye towres,

Thropes, bernes, shipnes, dayeries—
 This maketh that ther been no faïries.
 For ther as wont to walken was an elf
 Ther walketh now the limitour himself,
 In undermeles and in morweninges,
 And saith his Matins and his holy thinges,
 As he gooth in his limitacioun.
 Wommen may go sauflly yp and down:
 In every bussh or under every tree
 There is noon other incubus but he,
 and he ne wol doon hem but dishonour.

(*Norton Anthology, Seventh Edition, Volume one*, 272-3)¹⁹

Chaucer's tale could be said to represent here the direct consequence of the implementation of Judaeo-Christian monotheism, which "demands a single and universal God, which in turn requires a priesthood of licensed interpreters of His will" (Curry 2004: 108). This allusion is, however, indirect, as Chaucer's chief argument expressed here is that priests abuse sexually women in the bushes. Nonetheless, beyond this satirical comment which recounts a grim reality, one can still acknowledge the fact that an age has passed, and that the fairies have left a world now free to be conquered by human beings. This would concur with White's notion of the *genius loci*, the spirit associated with a given place, which is erased through "[m]an effective monopoly on spirit" (1996: 10). The suppression of these genius loci are mainly caused by Christianity in the Western context, as White Jr. also argues that "[f]or nearly 2 millennia Christian missionaries have been chopping down sacred groves, which are idolatrous because they assume spirit in nature" (ibid.: 12). The past age, also vehiculated through the image of the sacred grove, i.e. that of an enchanted wood, then functions as a notion which encapsulates this idea of wonder and spirituality beyond the human realm.

Regarding Tolkien's work, it has already been mentioned that his novels, beside focussing on Frodo's quest to destroy the One Ring of the Dark Lord Sauron, recount the end of an age, or as Habermann & Kuhn describes it in their essay: "The novel relates the end of the Third Age of Middle-earth which is also the end of magic, of

¹⁹ I thank Prof. Latré for having found this analogy between Tolkien's Elves and Chaucer's fairies, especially regarding this precise passage from *The Canterbury Tales*.

wizards and the elves and their forest culture, and the new age belongs to men (and hobbits)” (2011: 272). As the story unfolds, the age of Elves becomes a past age replaced by an era of human domination, expressed with the notion of Dominion of Men, which has already been mentioned several time in this dissertation – but which will be explored more extensively in the next chapter.

Towards the end of *The Return of the King*, the last instalment of the trilogy, most of the Elves are leaving Middle-earth, going back to the Undying Land where they think they belong to, putting thus an end to the Time of the Elves, hence ushering in the Dominion of Men. A passage of the book which speaks of the ‘Passing of the Elves’ can be found towards the end of the novel, as the hobbits are accompanying the Elves destined to go beyond the sea, with amongst them Frodo and Gandalf:

Then Elrond and Galadriel rode on; for the Third Age was over, and the Days of the Rings were passed, and an end was come of the story and song of those times. With them went many Elves of the High Kindred who would no longer stay in Middle-earth; and among them, filled with a sadness that was yet blessed and without bitterness, rode Sam, and Frodo, and Bilbo, and the Elves delighted to honour them.

Though they rode through the midst of the Shire all the evening and all the night, none saw them pass, save the wild creatures; or here and there some wanderer in the dark who saw a swift shimmer under the trees, or a light and shadow through the grass as the Moon went westward. (*LOTR*: 1347)

In this excerpt, one can feel the end of an era, an era where nature was not silent. The Elves themselves begin to be no longer perceived, as if they were becoming invisible. They march almost unnoticed to the West, where they will fall into oblivion, at least to Men.

This mirrors in a way the “banishment of the fairies” that can be perceived in English literature, as discusses in *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales* edited by Jack Zipes (2000). This banishment is said to go hand in hand with the progressing loss of interest regarding older chivalry tales, as can be seen in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, in which the fairies are shown as “bygones, belonging to King Arthur's day” (67). And during the Renaissance onwards, especially during the Elizabethan Age, one can see that English fairies are practically gone, alongside Arthurian legends, with for instance Spencer’s *The Fairie Queene* which displays “no native English

fairies in it” (ibid.: 68), or perhaps even Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, in which the famous playwright “created a new species of fairy, and in doing so, he brought about the destruction of the fairies of English folklore”, erasing their reputation as “malevolent spirits” (ibid.: 69). The fairies became less potent in a way, despite the fact that the Elizabethan era is described as “a golden age of fairy lore” (ibid.: 461), a remark that *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Stories* takes from a study conducted by K. M. Briggs, in which is said that:

Briggs hints at, but does not elaborate upon, the tenor of humanism and humanists who, like Marlowe’s *Dr Faustus*, were intrigued by opportunities to tinker with the supernatural. The alchemical and necromantic interests of such scholars are but further evidence of a growing fascination with the human power to affect, even to command, the universe. In such an atmosphere, fairies, sprites, and elves were more innocent familiars than devils, while nymphs and nature spirits evoked ancient Greek and Roman beliefs harmonious with the taste for the classical past. (ibid.)

Medieval fairies were then being replaced towards the end of the medieval period, whereas in Middle-earth they sailed to the West, leaving the forest almost as silent. Furthermore, the interest that was drawn towards the supernatural then seemed to be much related with the obsession of power over the nonhuman professed by the scholars of the Renaissance, an interest that seems to be reduced to the world of books. Tolkien’s Elves came to a similar fate, in a way, inasmuch as they are leaving Middle-earth, becoming elements that can only be found in books and annals.

This could make echo to the fact that Tolkien’s often saw his book as being part of the legendarium itself. *The Lord of The Rings*, *The Hobbit*, *The Silmarillion*, and the other texts that Tolkien wrote, are indeed tales in which the Elves play a great part, and they are not bereft of their powers and their potential as can be the fairies during the end of the medieval period, but they are related to a mythical world which gives way to a historical reality dominated by Men, as “Middle-earth is left with the new dispensation (the Fourth Age) which is the historical world as we already know it, and the disruptive intrusions of the mythic are exiled, defeated, or subsumed into history” (Hunter 2008: 148). The mythical quality of the story of the Elves could also be said to diminish the power, or the intensity, of the elves, inasmuch as

transformation of experience into myth can trivialize rather than intensify it, with the hobbit tendency to reduce all historical events from the outside world into legendary

narratives characterized as a juvenile refusal to face reality which the Fourth Age rectifies with ‘several libraries that contained many historical books and records’ [(LOTR: 18)]. (ibid.: 145)

While losing their intensity, while diminishing, as the elven queen Galadriel puts it (LOTR: 475), the world of the Elves becomes silent, as suggested at the beginning of this chapter, referring to Christopher Manes’ argument (1996: 15). They leave the world to Tolkien’s Men in his novels, and the woods to the *limitours* in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*.

And to conclude, one can see that the “stewardship of Men” would not be the same as the Elves, the latter being more caring, the former being anthropocentric, a fate that was even expressed by Tolkien, especially through the writing itself and the narrative perspective that differ from the Elf-centred attitude that can be seen in tales set in an earlier stage of the fictitious timeline (*Letters*: 160). This age of Men will also be different and perhaps less respectful towards the nonhuman, as Tolkien himself seems rather pessimistic regarding the growing anthropocentricity, as “a restlessness would appear about then, owing to the (it seems) inevitable boredom of Men with the good” (ibid.: 419), and such pessimistic view is also professed in the novel itself. For instance, in the last dialogue between the members of the fellowship and the Ents – shepherds of the forest –, Treebeard mentions the fact that there were “too many Men there in these days” (LOTR: 1284; see also Dickerson & Evans 143-4), thus implying that the Age of Men would not be seen as positive regarding nature than that of the Elves.

Chapter VI - The Renaissance of the Fourth Age and the Dominion of Men

The Age of Men in Tolkien's Middle-earth begins the victory of the human-like forces over the armies of the Dark Lord Sauron. His *Lord of the Rings* ends indeed with the defeat of Sauron, which in a way can be seen as the banishment of the magical into oblivion. This would then amplify the banishment of the magical and of the enchanted already represented with the aforementioned departing of the Elves from the shores of Middle-Earth and the progressive exclusion of the angel-like Valar, thus ushering the world into a new era, namely the *Dominion of Men*.

One could see this new era as a renaissance, inasmuch as it follows an era described by Tolkien as a "Medium Ævum", a middle age, echoing the fact that Tolkien's legendarium mirrors the transition from a medieval period still impregnated with hints of paganism to an anthropocentric world, somewhat renaissance-like, dominated by humanistic thinking. The purpose of this section is to discuss this period that is said to have witnessed the western world undergoing drastic changes, paving the way for modern thinking that allowed the exploitation of the nonhuman, even though many changes were already happening, as seen in previous chapters.

Before analysing in depth the ins and outs of this transition in regards to Tolkien's work, one should first consider the Renaissance as such, i.e. this period of Western history that is said to have followed a middle age. There will be also an analysis of the central figure of the Dominion of Men in Tolkien's work, namely Aragorn, who can be seen as a Renaissance-like political figure, though not in its entirety, before analysing textual elements that depicted this dominion. This chapter will conclude with an analysis of the consequence of such a human dominion, with for instance the concepts of disenchantment and the Anthropocene. Through the analysis of these relatively modern concepts, it will be then possible to relate Tolkien's medievalness, expressed in regard with the Renaissance, to his modernity.

VI.1. The European Renaissance

As a general remark, one cannot ignore the fact that the Renaissance itself, speaking about the transitory period between 1400 and 1600, is not solely responsible for the drastic change in Western thinking, as there are indeed several periods throughout the history of Europe that are being called renaissance by scholars from various fields, such as the Carolingian Renaissance, which is one of the most known renaissances that have shaped and defined Western civilisation beside the Renaissance that came from Italy afterwards. There is also the Twelfth-Century Renaissance, which has already been dealt with previously, and which shows that significant changes were already burgeoning, that is, far earlier than only from the Renaissance onwards. Furthermore, the concept of Renaissance itself, which is relatively a recent one, tended to change since its creation in the 19th century, in the wake of the work of French historian Michelet, and its location and duration changed tremendously, evolving from a strictly French phenomenon of the 16th century to a more broader concept that even surpasses the boundaries of the Western world (Brotton 2006: 9-18).

It is generally accepted that the Renaissance is the period of transition between the Middle Ages and the modern period. To give a general definition of Renaissance, or at least what most people understand under that term, let us consider the following excerpt taken from *The Renaissance: A Very Short Introduction* by Jerry Brotton, part of the Oxford collection *Very Short Introductions*:

Today, there is a popular consensus that the term ‘Renaissance’ refers to a profound and enduring upheaval and transformation in culture, politics, art, and society in Europe between the years 1400 and 1600. The word describes both a period in history and a more general ideal of cultural renewal. The term comes from the French for ‘rebirth’. Since the 19th century it has been used to describe the period in European history when the rebirth of intellectual and artistic appreciation of Graeco-Roman culture gave rise to the modern individual as well as the social and cultural institutions that define so many people in the western world today. (ibid.: 9)

The last sentence raises something that is quite interesting, namely the fact that the Renaissance saw the foundations of our modern society being installed, which corresponds to the general historical definition of the term, which describes it “as the transition from the mediaeval to the modern world” (Sanford 1951: 635).

Therefore, a defining element that seems to be found by many Renaissance scholars is that it lies at the very foundation of our modern world, be it from a positive or from a negative perspective, such as with thinkers that challenged the legacy of the Renaissance and its humanism, which, according to them, would have eventually made possible the atrocities that were committed during the twentieth century (ibid.: 17). Such pessimistic considerations regarding the consequences of the Renaissance and its spiritual offspring, such as the period of the Enlightenment, would agree with the reflections made by Lynn White Jr. and Christopher Manes who both trace the origin of our modern ecological crisis back in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, as mentioned several times in this dissertation.

Furthermore, what is often pointed out when dealing with the Renaissance is the concept of humanism. Concerning humanism, it is described in the *Metzler Lexikon Philosophie* as a way of thinking that unsurprisingly centres itself on the human. It can also be considered as a philosophical school that emphasises the study of old languages and history, i.e. the humanities, hence humanism, which takes part in the process of creating the ‘universal man’ (Burkard & Prechtel 2008: 248).

Humanist thinking is often said to have countered the scholastic tradition, perhaps not on its defining idea and theology, as it was seen that scholastic-inspired theologians already placed the human at the centre of the universe, but rather regarding its intellectual tools and methods. Late scholasticism was indeed said to have become an obscure school of thought obsessed with a convoluted way of writing, being thus rather focused on the form rather than the content. Yet, scholasticism survived in some areas, for instance in Spain, but was reduced to a “distorted” form compared to the work of Aquinas (Maurer 1962: 347).

One could also argue that humanism paved the way for a more anthropocentric worldview, even though it had been argued that the Renaissance, “which began with the conviction of the dignity of man and the greatness of his powers, was rapidly coming to the conclusion that he is incapable of reaching truth in philosophy” (ibid.: 346), thus waiting for a philosophical revolution which would be made only possible by Descartes (ibid.). And one might also attenuate the role that the Renaissance played in the development of the modern subject, as a continuity can be observed between the Middle Ages and the modern world (cf. Siedentop 2014: 333-48).

Also, from an ecocritical perspective, the Renaissance can be seen as the continuation of the medieval period, as it is said that it played a part in making nature, and the nonhuman in general, silent, as argued by Christopher Manes:

our particular idiom, a pastiche of medieval hermeneutics and Renaissance humanism, with its faith in reason, intellect and progress, has created a realm of silences, a world of “not said” called nature, obscured in global claims of eternal truth about human difference, rationality and transcendence[...]. (Fromm & Glotfelty 1996: 16)

The philosophical outcomes of hermeneutics, i.e. the interpretation of the Bible through exegesis, which was already explored in previous chapters, seemed to have been radicalised by Renaissance humanism, especially regarding the medieval interpretation of the Bible in regard to the relationship between the human and the nonhuman:

“[w]hen the Renaissance inherited the *scala naturae*, however, a new configuration of thought that would eventually be called humanism converted it from a symbol of human restraint in the face of a perfect order to an emblem of human superiority over the natural world” (ibid.: 20).

Notwithstanding that, the Renaissance seems to have made the ‘new man’ possible, changing their relation to the nonhuman, as it was argued that

[t]he individual’s relationship to his/her mind, body, and environment were all transformed as a result of renewed scientific collaboration in the pursuit of practical problem-solving, exchanges of ideas between cultures, and the impact of new technologies. (Brotton 2006: 98)

Therefore, the Renaissance could be seen as an period that saw “the rise of science and speculative thought” (ibid.), a period that brought paradoxically both scepticism and optimism, leading thus to a deep trust in science, consecrating the birth of the new human, completely severed from his spiritual and natural surroundings.

VI.2. The Renaissance Politics of Middle-earth

Regarding Tolkien’s narratives, it can be said that such ‘new man’ can be found in the presence of Aragorn, inasmuch as he represents a way for human societies to rebirth, to regain their ancient power, prestige, and glory. He even calls by himself *Envinyatur*, which is said to mean *renewer*, when he enters the House of Healings after having defeated Sauron’s army at the Siege of Minas Tirith (*LOTR*: 1129; see Drout 2007: 23).

This rebirth is none other than the Dominion of Men, which indeed starts with the reign of Aragorn.

Aragorn is a man first presented as a ranger friend of Gandalf. He is then revealed to be Isildur's heir, i.e. the one who can reclaim the throne of Gondor, thus reinstating the dynasty that previously brought prosperity to the human world. One can argue that he represents the classic epic hero such as Beowulf (Ruud 2011: 205; Drout 2007: 22), as he seems not to hesitate in front of any danger. He is, nonetheless, not the central piece in the defeat of Sauron, as it is Frodo who eventually causes his demise. This could be seen as the growing importance of people of smaller importance, although Frodo is an aristocratic hobbit, but still it shows that history is no longer the sole dominion of great kings or heroes in the traditional sense, and it could also be seen as the growing importance of the bourgeoisie during the late medieval period. There is also the importance of Sam, who, like Frodo, shows that the novel is more centred on the idea of "an 'everyman' character, whose adventures demonstrate the heroic potential in the most normal individuals when they are confronted with extreme circumstances" (ibid.), which also corresponds to "the tradition of the medieval Mystery Plays" (Drout 2007: 98).

This however does not undermine Aragorn's importance, as he "br[ought] peace and prosperity to the reunited kingdoms of Gondor and Arnor" after the War of the Rings (Ruud 2011: 293), and as

a part of the quest has always been the restoration of the Númenórean kings: Since it was Isildur who refused to destroy the ring upon Sauron's first defeat at the end of the Second age—a failure that ultimately allowed for Sauron's return and the failure of Gondor's line. (ibid.: 287)

The quest being fulfilled towards the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, it can be said that Aragorn embodies the rebirth of the realm, having thus secured the restoration of the Númenórean heritage.

One could also see Aragorn as an educated man who brings back the knowledge of the Ancients, as he has been educated in Rivendell by Master Elrond himself, bringing back the old texts, such as it was the case during the Renaissance, or during the multiple renaissances that happened in the course of the medieval period. An element that symbolises the relation with the past of Middle-earth is that during Aragorn's coronation, the white tree of the Gondor blooms once more (*LOTR*: 1273), the latter

being “a descendant of the Two Trees of Valinor, and Aragorn’s planting of it evokes the memory of Yavanna’s primeval planting in the long-pas mythic period” (Dickerson & Evans 2006, 7). A poem in the novel indicated that “*the Tree that was withered shall be renewed, / and he[Aragorn] shall plant it in the high places, / and the City shall be blessed*”²⁰ (LOTR: 1262). And it would be safe to assume that the coming of elven lords to Minas Tirith, the City of the King, towards the end of the story, could be regarded as a symbol of such rekindled glorious past, now partially resurrected under the ruling of Aragorn, who himself married Elrond’s daughter, thus uniting himself with the daughter of the person that is considered as the most intelligent and resourceful in all Middle-earth. In the *Hobbit*, Elrond appears indeed “as a loremaster” (Drout 2007: 149) to whom even Gandalf comes to ask for some advice; and in *The Lord of the Rings*, he “tells the history of the One Ring and of his part in the Last Alliance as herald of Galgalad [and] he helps choose the members of the Fellowship” (ibid.).

Aragorn’s romance with Arwen resembles also the legend of Beren and Lúthien, who are themselves Arwen’s ancestors. Therefore, it creates a link with the glorious past of Middle-earth, as “[i]n her union with the resurrected Beren, Lúthien joins the two kindreds of Elves and Men and founds the line of the Númenórean Kings in whom Tolkien invests the hope and the future of Middle-earth” (ibid.: 396), the Númenóreans having ushered an age of “wealth, wisdom, and glory” (*Letters*: 154).

Furthermore, here is what Tolkien wrote about this union that seals the end of the Third age, “a Medium Aevium” or a “decayed Middle Age”, which leads then to the Fourth Age and the Dominion of Men: “the return in majesty of the true King, to take over the Dominion of Men, inheriting all that can be transmitted of Elfdom in his high Marriage with Arwen daughter of Elrond, as well as the lineal royalty of Númenor” (ibid.: 160). Thus, being between two world, namely the world of Men and that of the Elves, Aragorn causes a Renaissance, especially through his bloodline, his education and his marriage.

Also, his ability to heal people using elvish knowledge, as mentioned above, stresses once more this legacy that Aragorn carries on with him. The healing can also be drawn back to medieval belief, which lasted throughout the Renaissance and even later

²⁰ The italics were used in the book, as it is taken from a song that an eagle sings in order to announce Aragorn’s victory over Sauron.

in History, according to which the king could heal his subject from the scrofula, or the 'King's Evil' (Ruud 2011: 280; Drout 2007: 266).

There are however limitations regarding this analysis, as one can argue that Aragorn resembles more the medieval hero, whose quest is only motivated by his love for Arwen, following thus a topos taken from the medieval romance (cf. Ruud 2011: 205). It could even be regarded as the representation of the Thomistic ideal of the virtuous king (cf. Drout 2007: 22). Also, he is not to be understood as a Machiavellian prince, who is perhaps the best example of the ideal Renaissance ruler, or rather the most representative of it.

There is, however, the presence of such Machiavellian characters in the novel, that is, persons who are much motivated by the pursuit of power by any means, such as for instance Saruman, who represents in a way "the skilled modern politician [who] disguis[es] the wrong cause in fair words" (Ruud 2011: 208). This idea is also supported by Tom Shippey, who writes that "Saruman, indeed, talks exactly like too many politicians. It is impossible to work out exactly what he means because of the abstract nature of his speech [...]. His message is in any case one of compromise and calculation" (2000: 75), before citing these decisive lines pronounced by the cunning wizard:

"We can bide our time, we can keep our thoughts in our hearts, deploring maybe evils done by the way, but approving the high and ultimate purpose: Knowledge, Rule, Order; all things that we have so far striven in vain to accomplish, hindered rather than helped by our weak or idle friends. There need not be, nor would not be, any real change in our designs, only in our means." (*LOTR*: 338)

Saruman is, however, defeated, such as is the power of Sauron. Aragorn becomes instead the most powerful ruler of the post-Sauron Middle-earth. But the treason of Saruman is not to be considered as an exception, as it is said in the novel that "such falls and betrayals, alas, have happened before" (ibid.: 345) and "Saruman's treason had shaken [Gandalf's] faith" in others (ibid.: 341). It is however argued that this Machiavellian view is challenged throughout the novel (cf. Drout 2007: 22), although it does not mean that it might not become prevalent later, just as one can see that the destruction of nature becomes more and more prominent in the novel, despite being heavily criticised by Tolkien throughout his narrative.

Thus, this development could be seen as the consequences of the transition from the mythical to the historical sphere and of the growing anthropocentricity which, besides focussing on human affairs, also allows a new type of politics, as Renaissance Humanism can be said by some not to be “the idealized celebration of humaneness that it often claimed to be, but has a hard core of pragmatism” (Brotton 2006: 57)

This pragmatic aspect can be observed through the fact that many characters are motivated by political aspirations, and even Aragorn can be said to be inspired by the possibility of restoring a kingdom while simultaneously becoming its absolute leader. The absolute aspect of his power as king can be witnessed in the way with which he assumes almost all of the legal duties during a trial, “act[ing] as judge, jury, prosecutor and defense attorney, all wrapped up in one” (Kane 2012: 47). Naturally, Aragorn is not to be seen as a Machiavellian prince only motivated by power, as it would more correct to compare him to a typical romance figure from the medieval period, but, as a general remark, one can see that the pursuit of power, that is, the politics of Middle-earth, alongside more prosaic pursuits, drive the story. It is then not only the battle between right and wrong that motivates the character to partake in the quest to destroy Sauron’s power, but also practical reasons that lean on the political sphere.

Such considerations can be related to the fact that *The Lord of the Rings* covers the transition from the mythical to the historical, as already mentioned in previous chapters. Aragorn’s renaissance is a step into history, more precisely the history of human civilisation, bereft of its enchantment, as the Elves are passing into the West. This disenchantment can also be observed in Aragorn’s union with Arwen. She is an Elf who renounces her immortality, thus severing the connection with the enchanted past. The sole connection that remains with the elder days is only the one that secures the newly established political power of Aragorn, namely the blood of the ancient kings of Númenor that runs through his veins. Therefore, even the past seems to have been deprived of its former enchanted essence while serving a prosaic purpose.

VI.3. The Dominion of Men in Text: *The New Shadow*

The Fourth Age can thus be described as a period during which Men enter their age, an era which see them being completely severed from the enchanted past of Middle-earth. It represents an era during which the human becomes possessor of nature, and yet

disconnected from it, as one could say that the act of possession presupposes a separate state between the possessor and the possessed item, should one, for instance, follow the anarchist position as professed by French philosopher and economist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who justifies that private property is based on the assumption according to which the human is separated from the nonhuman, an illusion according to anarchist philosophy (see Colson 2001: 120-1, 244-6).

Being bereft of most of its fantasy-related elements, it could be said that Tolkien's legendarium truly ends with the Fourth Age and the Dominion of Men. And as a matter of fact, Tolkien did not continue to venture further on the Fourth Age. This is probably due to the fact that he found that what he wrote about it conveyed a depressing tone and that he was not much inspired about it, perhaps because it felt unfit to the legendarium, since it dealt with an era after the departing of the Elves from Middle-earth. It can also be argued that it is due to the fact that he considered the Dominion of Men, which starts with the Fourth Age, as the beginning of History as such (*Letters* 207: 252), leaving thus the mythical process. He was reluctant to continue to go forward in Middle-earth' timeline, thus "avoid[ing] the Fourth Age history that would have had to explore the direct connections between Middle-earth and our present world that he insisted upon throughout his writing." (Hunter 2008: 152).

As mentioned above, Tolkien did, however, write some segments set during the Fourth Age, as an attempt of a sequel to *The Lord of the Rings*. In a letter, Tolkien indicates the reason why he did not desire to go further:

I did begin a story placed about 100 years after the Downfall, but it proved both sinister and depressing. Since we are dealing with Men, it is inevitable that we should be concerned with the most regrettable feature of their nature: their quick satiety with good. So that the people of Gondor in times of peace, justice and prosperity, would become discontented and restless – while the dynasts descended from Aragorn would become just kings and governors – like Denethor or worse. I found that even so early there was an outcrop of revolutionary plots, about a centre of secret Satanistic religion; while Gondorian boys were playing at being Orcs and going around doing damage. I could have written a 'thriller' about the plot and its discovery and overthrow – but it would have been just that. Not worth doing. (*Letters*: 344)

In this letter, it is possible to see the reasons for which Tolkien did not want to continue to write this sequel. Some of the elements expressed above exemplify some of the arguments mentioned earlier in this chapter.

For instance, one can see the corruption of politics, or at least its changing nature, as Tolkien describes Aragorn's successors becoming more and more like Denethor, the former steward of Gondor who wanted the ring for himself in order to counter Sauron. It was previously demonstrated that Saruman represented the Machiavellian mind, but it could be argued that Denethor does also represents such a mind, having been already compared to Saruman in regards with his relation to power (Ruud 2011: 275). Most obvious is the fact he wants to use the One Ring as a mean to counter Sauron, albeit a measure of last resort. This can then be seen as a sign that Denethor is willing to do whatever he could do in order to secure his place and the power he has, as "he believes himself to be Gondor's true ruler, resenting the need for a king to return" (ibid.). But while Denethor and Saruman represent a more modern attitude towards politics, i.e. that which is anchored in the pragmatic side, they are however examples of bad stewardship, or at least an abusive one, especially compared to Gandalf (ibid.; see also Dickerson & Evans 2006: 56).

Another element of this letter which can be linked to what was previously explained is the fact that Tolkien saw nothing that was truly worthy of being told, writing that "[he] could have written a 'thriller' about the plot and its discovery and overthrow – but it would have been just that. Not worth doing" (*Letters*: 344). This shows that the legendarium itself has lost of its substance, of its sense, in the sense that there is nothing left for Tolkien to tell. He was indeed primarily writing the tale of a world transitioning from myth to history, and that tale ended with the defeat of Sauron and the beginning of the Fourth Age.

This text itself, which bears the name *The New Shadow*, can be found in Chapter XVI of the twelfth volume of *The History of Middle-earth* edited by Christopher Tolkien (*The Peoples of Middle-earth*: 409-21). It deals primarily with a discussion between two men regarding "the roots of evil in men" (Hammond & Scull 2017: 848; see *The Peoples of Middle-earth*: 411). In this text, there is much discussion about stewardship, almost in a form of a philosophical dialogue, as one of the men, Saelon, asks whether it is lawful for a man to hew a tree, to what the other, Borlas, replies: "You

spoke of the judgement of the trees in these matters. But trees are not judges. The children of the one are the masters. My judgement as one of them you know already” (*The Peoples of Middle-earth*: 413); he goes on saying however that men ought to dispose of them “with reverence” (ibid.). Beside the interesting remark regarding the hewing of trees, which makes an echo to the issues discussed in the fifth chapter, there is also mention of the fact that evil resides deep within the heart of Men. It is then discussed of what seems to be a mysterious cult, but the tale finishes abruptly before it even truly began.

Interesting is the subsequent remark wrote by Tolkien’s son, Christopher, who argues on the fact why this sequel was not continued, even though he saw it as a regret. He indeed asserts, like his father, that there was no tale worth to tell, as “the vast structure of story [...] came to its true end with the Downfall of Sauron” (ibid.: 418), and Tolkien even stated that Sauron was “the first of the many of the concentrations of Evil into definite power-points that they would have to combat, as it was also the last of those in ‘mythological’ personalized (but non-human) form” (*Morgoth’s Ring*: 404). The mythological is put behind the world of Men, and the memory of Sauron, this last mythological beast, so to say, is no more than a mere scent (*The Peoples of Middle-earth*: 418).

Another important point that should be drawn from this text is to be found within the dialogue about the roots of evil, as the old man Borlas discusses the stewardship of Men. While evoking this matter, he mentions the fact that it is the will of God which dictates that Men can dispose of nature with restraint (ibid.: 13), but then, as evil boils within them, they tend to act with cruelty towards the natural world, behaving like “Orcs” (ibid.: 13). In a way, this dialogue could be said to represent the risk that human stewardship might entail for the nonhuman. And this would reflect the evolution from the Late Middle Ages onwards till our modern age, with the dominating idea that the human can use the nonhuman for its own needs, a worldview which is said to have led to our ecological crisis, as discussed earlier in this dissertation.

But beyond the considerations expressed towards the hewing of trees, already discussed earlier, one can see the depressing note this attempt of a sequel manifests. The defeat of Sauron, which marks the banishment of the sacred from the material world,

and the reign of Aragorn, whose purpose was to restore the strength of the realm of humans, came to give birth to this feeling of anxiety and melancholy.

This feeling could be said to represent, in a way, “the darker side of the Renaissance”, as expressed by Brotton in his *Very Short Introduction* on the Renaissance. He argues on the fact that the achievements which made the Renaissance possible were also the source of dramatic consequences, which would eventually provoke instability throughout Europe: “This relationship between achievement and the anxiety it creates is one of the characteristic features of the Renaissance” (2006: 4).

Therefore, in Tolkien’s work, it is demonstrated that Aragorn’s achievement, though not made in vain, would, nonetheless, not prevent the seed of evil to grow once more in the heart of individuals. This could eventually induce the same feeling of anxiety as expressed in relation with the Renaissance. It shows that, despite the victory of what seems to be the light, in the sense of knowledge and progress in the case of the Renaissance, or the forces of good in the case of Tolkien’s fiction, or even the seed of what is to become the spirit of the Enlightenment, there is yet a feeling of uncertainty that takes hold of the world. This creates as well a sense of fatality, for it seems that no matter the achievements the human is capable of, there is always room for ignorance and brutality, which will provoke serious damage to the nonhuman.

VI.4. The Fourth Age as an Age of Disenchantment

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, it can also be seen that the last age featured in the legendarium corresponds to an age of disenchantment, inasmuch as the enchanted elements are passing into myth and into the past, as Middle-earth is now entering History. And it seems as if Middle-earth reemerges from an age during which time seemed to have stopped (Hunter 2008: 145). Although there is a definite timeline in Tolkien’s fictional world, divided into specific ages and epochs, which could be seen as a self-sufficient history in itself, and despite the fact that the political entities change drastically from the first age to the fourth, there is however a feeling of suspension, especially regarding technology, which characterises races rather than epochs (see Drout 2007: 637-8). This is mostly due to the mythic quality of the work, which was also argued to walk on a thread, as it was further argued that the myth in Tolkien’s novels works on a contradiction, i.e. “myth as a ‘timeless’” narrative without traceable

origins versus time-bound, contingent forms of narrative” (ibid.). However, this mythic quality is understood by the author as something that one has to let go (ibid.). And his work could be seen as a tale which demands the reader to eventually accept historical changes as such (ibid.: 157).

One of these historical changes, which comes with the Fourth Age, is this feeling of disenchantment. This feeling can be said to have been caused by the exclusion of the mythical, the spiritual so to say, from Middle-earth, and through the transition to a world dominated by humans, i.e. to a more anthropocentric world. Therefore, the novel could be said to be a counter-movement against such disenchantment (see Ni 2015: 100ff.), an attitude often described as escapist.

It has already been seen in the introduction that Tolkien’s work, and fantasy in general, have been described as such. This assertion was often expressed with a derogatory tone (Clute & Grant 1999: 321), which was also used against the literature of the romantic period (Drabble 2000: 873). Not surprisingly, Tolkien’s works was not immune against such accusations, even though it inspired generations of ecological protesters through its obvious ecological discourse (Curry in Drout 2007: 165). Tolkien himself dealt with the idea of escapism, especially regarding the relation between the author/reader and the real world. This can be seen in his essay on fairy-stories, in which he explores the meaning of fantasy as he understood it, arguing that:

“Fantasy [here more understood as imagination itself, not the literary genre] is a natural activity. It certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of science. [...] For creative reason is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it.” (Tolkien 1983: 144)

In this excerpt, it can be seen that Tolkien asserted that imagination is not devoid of reason and purpose, and to use it does not necessarily imply a will to escape the reality in which the readers find themselves. He also regarded the act of escape provided by fantasy as an act of rebellion against the ugliness of the world (ibid.: 148) or, in other words, as the refusal of submitting to resignation. In doing so, he accused the critics, who often saw this presumably escapist attitude as a key feature of an author that they deemed as “juvenile” (Agøy in Drout 2007: 463), of “confusing, not always by sincere error, the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter” (Tolkien 1983: 148).

The ugliness of the world, against which Tolkien celebrates fantasy, is caused by a mechanised world which Tolkien loathed. In front of this spoliation of nature and of fantasy, he then strongly insisted on the need for *recovery*:

“We should look at green again, and be startled anew (but not blinded) by the blue and yellow and red. We should meet the centaur and the dragon, and then perhaps suddenly behold, like the ancient shepherds, sheep, and dogs, and horses – and wolves. This recovery fairy-stories help us to make. In that sense only a taste for them make us, or keep us, childish” (ibid.: 146).

Tolkien then urges us to act as “ancient shepherds”, making a link to the past, and such is the purpose of this attempt to recover what was lost. But this act of recovery also implies an attempt to free oneself “from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity – from possessiveness” (ibid.; see also Hammond & Scull 2017: 1064-6).

This mention to possessiveness could be said then to be a reference to the fact that modern human societies subjugate nature, be it from a materialistic or a philosophical point of view, the latter being much more deeply rooted in the history of Western thinking, a history marked by a profound “transformation of the human mind” (Berman 1981: 16). This history was also described as a story of “progressive disenchantment”, which was provoked by such transformation (ibid.). This can be viewed as an echo to the fact that Tolkien’s work could be seen as a story “about the demise of the Elven dominated Third Age of Middle-earth as it gives way to the world of men and the growing gap between humanity and nature that dominates the Fourth Age of Arda” (Burkhart 2015: 66-67). Such demise would call for the need of a reenchantment, in order to allow the existence of “a cosmos once more our own” (Berman 1981: 24), which then goes back to Tolkien’s concept of fantasy as a mean to recovery from this disenchantment.

American historian and social critic Morris Berman, specialised in Western cultural and intellectual history, discusses this concept of disenchantment, which can be traced back to German sociologist Max Weber (*Entzauberung der Welt*), or even further to German poet Friedrich Schiller (*Entgötterung der Welt, entgötterte Natur*) (ibid.: 69). Should one observe more closely the German words used when referring to the concept of disenchantment, one can clearly see on the one hand the rejection of magic ‘*Zauber*’ or, on the other hand, the passing of the ancient gods ‘*Götter*’, as professed by Schiller.

Schillers's term can be retrieved from the poem *Die Götter Griechenlands* 'The Gods of Greece', which expresses "the death of the gods". This can be seen as a variant of the "death of God" made famous by the German philosopher Nietzsche (Josephson-Storm 2017: 76), and the poem itself is said to have been referred to amongst many thinkers that dealt with the concept of "despiritualization" (ibid.: 77). In this poem²¹, while the title refers to a specific geographical unit, i.e. Greece, Schiller "explores the primordial condition of humanity, the point of maximal naturalness. It is only about Greece inasmuch as Greece signifies the de-alienated human condition", thus manifesting a general "interest in universal history" (ibid.: 79). The poem thus is said to recount the various ages of the world, from an innocent enchanted past to a disenchanted godless modern world, making an echo to another poem of Schiller which divides this transition in four ages (ibid.: 80-1), which could be compared with Tolkien's division of his legendarium into Four Ages.

This notwithstanding, the poem centres itself on the notion of a "entgötterte Natur", i.e. a godless nature made so by the mechanisation of the world (ibid.: 83). Disenchantment resides in this mechanisation, which silences the environment. As explained earlier, this could be seen as one of the effects of Renaissance humanism, and perhaps even an effect of Christianity altogether, although the role of Christianity regarding the process of disenchantment might be considered as debatable (ibid.: 84). Notwithstanding that, one can clearly see the parallels between Schiller's poem and Tolkien work, as the latter could be seen as an expression of this future *entgötterte Natur*, inasmuch as it can be viewed as a long tale recounting the passing of the Valar and the Elves into oblivion, or rather into a mythic state separated from the human world.

Furthermore, the process of disenchantment was also linked to the critique of Enlightenment. The Enlightenment is indeed sometimes referred as a period which allowed a rational view over nature that would then allow a domination and exploitation of nature altogether. This is a theory that was mostly supported in the post-war period, especially through the work of the *Frankfurter Schule* and its leading figures Adorno

²¹ The analysis of the poem follows roughly the section "The Eclipse of the Gods: Friedrich Schiller" from Jason A. Josephson-Storm's book *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity and the Birth of Modern Science* (2017: 76-85).

und Horkeimer, as argued in Henning Ottman's *Geschichte des Politischen Denkens* (Volume 4/2):

Aufklärung wird definiert als Beseitigung von Furcht und als »Entzauberung der Welt« [...]. Max Webers Begriff für die Rationalisierung der modernen Welt kehrt wieder. Dominant ist das Motiv der »instrumentellen Vernunft«, der technischen Beherrschung und Unterwerfung der Natur. Die Aufklärung wird mit dieser geradezu gleichgesetzt. Wie in »Eclipse of Reason« resultiert die Unterwerfung der äußeren Natur in der Unterdrückung der inneren. Statt die Subjekte zu befreien, führt die Naturbeherrschung zu immer neuem Naturzwang.²² (Ottmann 2012: 70)

With this conception, one could see the Enlightenment as the origin of our ecological crisis, especially in regard with the disenchantment of the world.

However, while Morris Berman regards the Scientific Revolution as the primary cause of the feeling of disenchantment that dominates the Western world (1981: 17-23), and the medieval period as an age during which nature was considered as "alive, organic" (ibid.: 50), he does, however, denote the fact that its origins are much more deeply rooted in History: namely in Greek philosophy and Judaeo-Christian monotheism (ibid.: 70-71), as can be seen with Schiller. It is therefore argued by some that disenchantment was the consequence of the process of secularisation of Christian concept of Men's dominion over nature itself, a process that would have then taken place towards the end of the Medieval Period, i.e. during the Renaissance, but such a view was also challenged with for instance the work of German philosopher Hans Blumenberg (cf. 1985).

Nevertheless, the medieval period appears to be an era of tension, despite the fact it is denoted as an age during which the world was seen as complete (cf. Berman 1981: 50), as "medieval life and thought were significantly affected by animistic and Hermetic notion" (ibid.: 74), which can be seen with alchemy, a discipline that sought to proof such completeness (ibid.: 80 ff.).

Religiously speaking, and in regard to Western Europe, disenchantment provoked the rationalisation of cults, taking magic and the fantasy, so to say, out of Christianity,

²² Enlightenment is defined as the removal of fear and the "disenchantment of the world" [...]. Max Weber's term for the rationalisation of the modern world returns. The motif of "instrumental reason", the technical mastery and subjugation of nature, is dominant. The Enlightenment is directly compared with this. As in "Eclipse of Reason", the subjugation of external nature results in the suppression of internal nature. Instead of liberating the subjects, the domination of nature leads to ever new forces of nature.

which reached its climax with the Reformation, at least according to Max Weber (Ottmann 2010: 74). It was also said that, as a Christian, Tolkien refuted this disenchantment (Milbank 2007: 8), while facing it altogether (ibid.: 163), meaning that this tale deals with this phenomenon, hence not escapist. The Fourth is indeed seen rather negatively to some extent, but the passing of the elves is not necessarily seen as a bad outcome altogether, as it is rather met with acceptance, which is not a form resignation in face of loss. It is the acceptance of the fact that the world is changing.

Tolkien faces this disenchantment with the transition into this Fourth Age, which corresponds then to the end of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, especially regarding their state as eras of tensions and of profound changes. In his novels, he creates this disenchanted world while reenchancing it simultaneously, being thus an enchanted tale of a long disenchantment, just as it speaks about conservation of nature and good stewardship while describing a succession of natural destructions and examples of unsustainable stewardship.

VI.5. The Dominion of Men and the Anthropocene

The importance of stewardship, in relation to the disenchanted feeling that prevails throughout Tolkien's work, allows us to take a more ecocritical approach, as one might consider the Fourth Age, especially with its denomination as the Dominion of Men, as a literary expression of the Anthropocene.

The concept of the Anthropocene has been first introduced by the biologist Eugene F. Stoermer and then popularised by Nobel-Prize-winning chemist Paul J. Crutzen (Haber et al. 2016: 8; Moore 2017: 44n17). This term designates the geological era that follows the Holocene, and is described as a period whose decisive actor is none but the human race itself, that is, "the ecological age dominated by the human" (Estes 2017: 190). This connects this concept with that of climate change (Moore 2017: 27), the latter said to have anthropogenic causes (Parizeau 2016: 30). Originally speaking, this concept was introduced as the fact that the human race will leave a geological layer (Haber et al. 2016: 8), i.e. they will leave an imprint in the geological history of the Earth. But the term is quickly extended to the human responsibility regarding the degradation of the environment, which was already seen by Crutzen.

The beginning of the Anthropocene is hard to situate. As said above, it is said to have followed the Holocene, i.e. a geological warm era that began more than 10.000 years ago. But regarding its start, as mentioned in the introduction, there is a debate,

“some arguing for the Industrial Revolution and the deposit of carbon in the earth’s surface as a result of human activities, others for the nuclear age, when radioactive particles begin to appear in the earth as well as in human teeth; still others point to other watershed dates, as for instance the beginnings of the cultivation of plants or grains.”
(Estes 2017: 19)

Despite this debate, there is one point that is agreed upon, and that is humans’ profound effect on the environment, and their responsibility which puts a considerable weight on the political sphere. However, although there is a scientific consensus, it is said that the political sphere failed to deliver on the issue, which is, according to Brian L. Moore, also due to the profit-driven media who missed the opportunity of sufficiently informing the public (2017: 27).

Regarding the role of the human in relation to the nonhuman, the Anthropocene suggests the huge responsibility of the human, which then would call for a “planetary stewardship” (Haber et al. 2016: 11), as well as for a reflexion on the very nature of the human species (ibid.: 12), i.e. an ontological reflexion which would leave a large incidence on culture and literature. However, to assert the responsibility of the human regarding the environment is not a new development altogether, as it could be said that such a responsibility could be already found in the Book of Genesis, then taken by medieval exegesis which saw human beings as stewards of nature, as previously argued in this dissertation.

The theory of the Anthropocene also implies a critique of modernity, which then lays the basis for a culture of responsibility/stewardship (*Kultur der Verantwortung*), “in deren Mittelpunkt eine Transformation des Mensch-Natur-Verhältnisses steht”²³ (ibid.: 13). It also bears philosophical considerations, inasmuch as it discusses and challenges the freedom of the human in face of a catastrophic form of determinism (see Parizeau 2016: 23-38).

There are however questions regarding this concept, which, although it is said to criticise modernity and anthropocentrism, is still a concept that „einen Rückblick des

²³ at the centre of which is a transformation of the relationship between man and nature

Menschen auf sich selbst nach seinem Ende impliziert“²⁴ (Horn 2014: 36), thus remaining heavily anthropocentric in its essence.

While Tolkien wrote *The Lord of The Rings*, the concept of the Anthropocene was not yet developed. Nevertheless, it did not prevent people from understanding man's colossal impact on nature, and Tolkien saw and knew the effect of human activities, such as the industrialisation of England which affected the landscape in which he grew (cf. Hammond & Scull 2017: 245-8). It has also been already mentioned in this dissertation that Tolkien's work is concerned by the idea of stewardship, a theme that was much discussed in Dickerson and Evans' (2017) ecocritical analysis of his work.

The Dominion of Men, being part of the Fourth Age, corresponds in a way to the Anthropocene, inasmuch as it ushers the world in an era during which Men have a central role in relation to the environment, among other things, as “all the lands [...] shall be dwellings of Men” (*LOTR*: 1272). It was also mentioned towards the end of the previous chapter and throughout much of this chapter that Tolkien regarded this Fourth Age with a rather pessimistic view, arguing that Men would grow bored, and that they would eventually harm nature. Such a pessimistic view could correspond to some interpretations regarding the Anthropocene, as this concept is much related with catastrophist ideology according to which “the logic of the ‘anthropocene’ era [...] more and more obviously presages disaster” (Gibson 2017: 214), or as Glenn Albrecht writes: “the ruthless pessimism that is emerging from the critics of the Anthropocene” (2019: xi). Furthermore, it implies a misanthropic feeling that the human is “rotten, to the core” (ibid.: 217), although the misanthropic aspect of the critique of anthropocentrism is subject to debate (cf. Moore 2017: 31; see also Garrard 2012: 25).

Naturally, there are limitations regarding the comparison between the Anthropocene and Tolkien's Fourth Age, as the main argument of this dissertation asserts that Tolkien's legendarium mirrors the transitions that took place during the medieval period. Notwithstanding that, it can also be argued that the Anthropocene has its roots in earlier stages of human history than only in the industrial period, as it has been shown in this dissertation that the transitions that took place during the medieval period allowed, to some extent, the industrial turn to happen. Furthermore, some ecocritics argue that we should regard the medieval period more closely in relation with

²⁴ implies that human being look back on themselves in relation to their own end

the current ecological crisis, as it can reveal itself to be a source of valuable information in order to better understand it (see Estes 2017: 9-34).

Therefore, it can be argued that although Tolkien's legendarium and writings depict a changing medieval period which is still impregnated with a mythical quality, it also mirrors the modern world and its challenges. One can indeed see the importance of the relationship between the human and the nonhuman, thus outlining Tolkien's environmental vision. This relationship can be observed through a medieval-related perspective, as it has been done throughout this dissertation. However, it always mirrors the modern context in which Tolkien wrote his narrative, as it can also prove itself relevant even for today's challenges.

VI.6. A Tale of its Age: Tolkien's Critique of Modernity

As can be seen throughout the whole dissertation, especially in regard to the previous sections, Tolkien's depiction of a fictitious Middle Ages mirrors the epoch in which he found himself, inasmuch as he also felt such disenchantment during his life. It was also possible to relate some aspects of his work to the Anthropocene, which makes a link to contemporary issues. Thus, his depiction of the medieval period always mirrors a relatively modern inspiration.

In "Tolkien in the History of Ideas" (Bloom 2008: 89-120), Brian Rosebury tries to situate Tolkien within the context during which he developed and wrote his body of legends, thus "examin[ing] [him] as a thinker, and a figure in the history of ideas" (ibid.: 89). It is Rosebury's argument that

The modernity of Tolkien's work, from the point of view of its content, lies not in coded reference to specific contemporary events or phenomena, but in the absorption into the invented world—no doubt a partly unconscious absorption—of experiences and attitudes which Tolkien would scarcely have acquired had he not been a man of the twentieth century. (ibid.: 93)

Tolkien responded to his epoch with the use of materials with which he was acquainted, that is, those from the Middle Ages and from myths. His use of these *unmodern* materials did not prevent some of the elements of his work from being described as "markedly modern" (ibid.). As an example, Rosebury focusses on the anti-heroic stance that perspires through the novel, although one could argue that heroes are to be found in

the novel, but the main protagonists, who carry the plot from the beginning to the end, such as the hobbits, can be said to be

embroiled in war against their own wishes, and fight only when immediately attacked. They are essentially 'civilian' temperaments, unsuited to combat and danger yet forced into them by circumstance: a common twentieth-century fate. They are, precisely, anti-heroes, in the pointed sense that their deeds of physical courage do not express their intrinsic characters (which are pacific and self-effacing) but are performed in spite of them. We admire them for their aversion to fighting, not their love of it. (ibid.: 94).

However, such modern elements can be related to the medieval context as such, as the medieval period saw the rise of the modern individual, with for instance the development of the bourgeoisie. It was also argued that during the late medieval period, the classical chivalry tale, which embodied heroic attitudes, became less and less popular, as can be seen in Chaucer's work (cf. Zipes 2000: 67).

This notwithstanding, the modernity of Tolkien's work could also show itself through the critique of modern society – a heavily industrialised society –, as conveyed through the environmental vision of Tolkien.

That environmental vision is, however, related to a broader theme. The disenchantment that has occurred within the history of civilisation, from the first urban communities to the global capitalist system that nowadays prevails in our modern world, provokes indeed a feeling of disconnection. However, that is not limited exclusively to Christianity and modern science altogether, as those are mainly processes dealing with theology, philosophy, and intellectual work in their essence. What matters is how it is used, how it is applied, how it is exploited for the benefit of the few. This has to do with power, another major theme in *The Lord of the Rings*, depicted through the one ring of power, among others (see Eaglestone in Drout 2007: 541-7). In the novel, knowledge itself is indeed not evil per se (Rosebury 2008: 104). But the way with which it can be used might be evil, for evil purposes, mainly the absolute power of an elite inflicted on the mass. It is not a coincidence that leftist parties are embracing ecological ideas nowadays, as it can be argued that a clear relation between the exploitation of the environment and that of the working class exists. For instance, anarchist theories recognise such analogies between the exploitation of humans over other humans and the nonhuman, inasmuch as anarchist philosophy regards the separation between the human and nature as an illusion altogether (Colson, 2001: 120-

1). And even many scientists now are a voice against the brutal exploitation of the environment – such as the French astrophysicist Aurélien Bareau, which shows that this exploitation is not the mere product of scientism and rational thinking.

Just as knowledge is not evil per se, Christianity is not intrinsically harmful to the environment, as one should look at the fact that it now embraces such ecological ideas, though using a different approach, through for instance the papacy of Jorge Bergoglio, during which he published the ecology-driven encyclical treatise *Laudato Si'*, whose title is inspired from the work of Saint Francis, the latter being sometimes related to ecocentrism (Garrard 2012: 25). In the introduction to his encyclical letter, the pope urges us “to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development” while appeal[ing] [...] for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet” (Pope Francis 2015: 12). It stresses on human responsibility as well as on the need for a new transcendence between the human and the nonhuman: “This is the basis of our conviction that, as part of the universe, called into being by one Father, all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect” (ibid.: 65-6). This corresponds to the alternative Christian that Lynn White Jr. discusses in his essay on the roots of the ecological crisis, besides criticising the consequence of the anthropocentricity that prevailed through Christianity, as he saw it as a possible source of eco-friendly ethics (Riley 2014: 241-60). Besides the emphasis on the bond that unites all living creatures to the creation, which is not revolutionary within Christian thinking, as it recalls the convictions of both Saint Francis and Thomas Aquinas, the encyclical letter revolves also around the notion of social justice, thus going beyond the faith-driven transcendental point of view:

I [Pope Francis] will point to the intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet, the conviction that everything in the world is connected, the critique of new paradigms and forms of power derived from technology, the call to seek other ways of understanding the economy and progress, the value proper to each creature, the human meaning of ecology, the need for forthright and honest debate, the serious responsibility of international and local policy, the throwaway culture and the proposal of a new lifestyle. (Pope Francis 2015: 14)

Tolkien's ecological vision oscillates between his faith and his awareness regarding the exploitation of the human and the nonhuman, for “[h]is fictional Middle- earth is a site

of struggle against ecological, as well as social and political, disaster, just as is our own” (Curry in Drout 2007: 165). In his work of fiction, Tolkien thus warns on the effect of power, i.e. the use of knowledge and exploitation justified by a precise mindset, which would then be responsible of this disenchantment. In order to achieve that, he used this medieval tone, using the epic and the romance, using medieval materials, medieval inspiration, a medieval philosophical setting, as argued in this dissertation, making thus *The Lord of the Ring*, and his all legendarium, a long enchanted tale of an alienation, an enchanted tale of a disenchantment.

Therefore, the Medieval is used alongside the mythical, as they constitute the core of Tolkien’s sources, his work as a scholar, mirroring his idiosyncrasies, his aesthetic preferences and his literary taste in general. But despite this medieval aspect, Tolkien’s work reveals itself as modern, albeit a critique of modernity.

Alongside this critique of the modern world, one could say that Tolkien’s offers an alternative. There is for instance the argument of Patrick Curry according to which Tolkien’s work calls for a re-enchantment, or a “resacralization” of some sort, not “a new religion”, but a “collective spirituality” (2004: 146-7), which could correspond to the Christian view as expressed in the encyclical letter mentioned above. This would correspond to the alleged fact that “people have looked to writers to recreate that sense of wonder and significance in things that scientific rationalism is held to have destroyed” (Clark 2011: 148).

This argument is, however, criticised by Brian Rosebury (2008), who retorts that “Tolkien’s critique is more cautious in what it rejects—as an orthodox Catholic, Tolkien is never less than respectful towards rationality, or science as a mode of knowledge, whatever its abuses—and much more cautious in what it proposes” (105). Such interrogations regarding the renewal of transcendental thinking animate also ecocriticism as such, as Timothy Clark explains in *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* that

The enormity and complexity of environmental issues and their depth of implication in the commonest habits of thought or daily action may also perhaps underlie the intellectual instability of some ecocritical texts, torn as they often are between revisionist insights and lapses, as if on numbed recoil, into outmoded kinds of romanticism or new age rhetoric. (2011: 5)

In his book, which surveys ecocritical thinking in general, Clark discusses some transcendentalist attitudes regarding the environment, mentioning Thoreau's 'transcendentalism'²⁵, which raises serious questions such as:

How does one continue to write in a mode originally grounded in transcendentalist conceptions of nature, that is, producing analogies and sometimes even moral parallels between natural processes and human attitudes and behaviour, but to do so now within a modern scientific understanding of geology, evolution and cosmology? (ibid.: 146)

Drawing back to Tolkien, the question regarding the need for a new transcendental relation towards land or not could reflect the interrogations that exist within ecocriticism. Furthermore, the cautious aspect of Tolkien's critique, as expressed by Rosebury, could be said to lie on the fact that Tolkien's fictitious world is a world in transition, just as our own world. It is true that this world is bereft of its former magic emanating from the divine nature of Eru Illúvatar, and that it could be seen as an alienation from the natural world, since Men do not possess the same relation to land as the Elves did. However, Middle-earth is also rid of its old demons, such as Morgoth and its malevolent servant Sauron, who can be seen as the source of tyranny and bigotry. While the Dominion of Men implies the passing of the Elves, it also means the defeat of the very incarnation of evil, which is not a negative outcome, quite on the contrary. Naturally, errors will be made, and Tolkien seemed sometimes rather pessimistic regarding what the future holds, but he nonetheless delivers a story of perseverance and resilience in front of what seems catastrophic.

Such perseverance and resilience could be said to emanate from the so-called *eucatastrophe*, i.e. a concept Tolkien himself coined, according to which salvation would eventually come after a painful experience, such as the resurrection of Christ (see Tolkien 1983: 155-7). One must, however, not reduce Tolkien to his faith, and this *eucatastrophe*, this "happy catastrophe", in the sense of a happy ending which comes as a surprise, could be seen as an optimist attitude "in favour of mankind and the entire creation" which survived by Tolkien, despite his alleged pessimism (Honegger 2006: 226-9). It is however not a blind form of optimism which would only favour the future

²⁵ Although quite similar, 'transcendentalism', as expressed in Thoreau's sense, does not completely correspond to the Christian transcendent view that binds the whole creation through God's love, but rather to "R. W. Emerson's tradition of reading moral and spiritual guidance in natural forms [...], affirming possible analogies between the natural and human worlds" (Clark 2011: 32).

and reject the past, but it rather encourages the reader to accept the present and the changes through which it goes, following thus Honegger's argument according to which

Tolkien endeavours to come to terms with 'modernity' by means of providing the lost context(s) to the fragments of modern existence so that he - and his readers - arrive in modernity not via ironic disenchantment but by commemorating of what has been lost. (ibid.: 211)

Drawing back to disenchantment as such, Tolkien proposes therefore with the aid of medieval materials a *reenchantment* inasmuch as he delivers with his body of texts, especially with *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*, an enchanted tale of a disenchantment, a tale of an *Entzauberung* and an *Entgötterung* of Nature. He does however not call for a resacralisation in Curry's sense, in my opinion, though it was argued that, due to the fact that his novels works as fairy tales, "the readers [could] catch a glimpse of a fuller communion between the transcendence and our world" (cf. ibid.: 228). On the contrary, he calls for a sense of responsibility towards nature, while warning on the abuse of power and knowledge. This sense of responsibility and the fact that Middle-earth is greatly marked by the history of its inhabitants challenge the dichotomy between the human and the nonhuman. This creates a bond between them, which does not require to believe in some higher deity which would connect all the creatures with their environment. One can see that with the motivations of the hobbits in their quest to destroy the ring of power. One could perhaps relate this way of thinking to Glenn Albrecht's Symbiocene, described as:

The Symbiocene, as a period in the history of humanity on this Earth, will be characterized by human intelligence and praxis that replicate the symbiotic and mutually reinforcing life-reproducing forms and processes found in living systems. This period of human existence will be a positive affirmation of life, and it offers the possibility of the complete reintegration of the human body, psyche, and culture with the rest of life. (2019: 102)

It is not caused by religious beliefs, but by a pragmatic and realistic desire to preserve one's home, perhaps in a way to counter what Albrecht designates as *solastagia*. i.e. "the lived experience of distressing, negative environmental change" (ibid.: x). Also, it goes against the simplistic idealisation of the wilderness, as it can be said that this concept "is ideological in the sense that it erases the social and political history that gives rise to it, extending into reactionary politics as well as Thoreau's occasional

misanthropy” (Garrard 2012: 78), and that it mitigates human responsibility towards it (ibid.). Thus, it is not about reconnecting to a distant and allusive past, nor is it about idealising a pristine land that is virtual altogether. It is rather about living in a changing world, which proves that his legendarium is all in all a tale of its age which also resonates in our present time.

Thus, beyond any transcendental issues, his novels mirror the growing concern regarding the state of the planet, as well as in relation with social problems. Therefore, this medieval-like tale of transition finds itself in accordance with this *Kultur der Verantwortung* mentioned above, this culture of responsibility and stewardship regarding the environment. Being a critique of modern society, albeit cautious, it therefore manages to remain relevant in this era that came to be called, rightly or wrongly, the Anthropocene.

Conclusion

In its attempt to bring together ecocriticism and medieval studies – with the aid of Honegger’s ‘interpretatio mediaevalia’ –, this study aimed at bringing more light into the relation between Tolkien’s ecological vision and his proclivity for the medieval period and for myths. While putting the emphasis on the relationship between the human and the nonhuman, be it from a material or a philosophical – or even theological – perspective, it focussed on the similarities between Tolkien’s fiction and medieval-related materials, ranging from medievalist studies to literary works from the Middle Ages, such as the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* or the work of Geoffrey Chaucer. More specifically, it analysed the analogies between the transition from a pagan animistic world to a more anthropocentric Christian world and that found in Tolkien’s legendarium.

In a broader sense, this study also supported to some extent Lynn White Jr.’s argument according to which the medieval period and Christianity are the source of our current ecological crisis (1996: 9-11). While it might be said that his argument is an exaggeration, it however corresponds to the general ecocritical stance which seeks to reassess “Western intellectual and social history in a global context” (Barbera & Payne 2010: 209). By doing so, it was possible to venture beyond the material and economic origins of the ecological crisis, taking a more ideological perspective, which is as relevant as the others that are perhaps more obvious to the general opinion. Similarly, it allowed the ecocritical analysis of Tolkien’s work to be rooted in philosophical and theological ideas while also using a diachronical – or rather historical – perspective, ranging from the pagan age to the Anthropocene.

Thus, through the combination of different methods and sources, and always with an emphasis on the liminal, transitional aspect of both Tolkien’s world and the Middle Ages, this dissertation analysed the similarities between Tolkien and the *Beowulf*-poet, whose relationship goes far beyond the fact that *Beowulf* is considered as one of Tolkien’s main sources for his legendarium. His poetics resemble indeed that of the anonymous medieval author, inasmuch as they are both bridges between older materials and a modern audience.

Through the connection between the two authors, it was for instance possible to conduct a symbolic analysis of the slaying of the beast, which represents the victory of Christianity over ancient pagan beliefs, whose forms of interpretation and adaptation can be found throughout Tolkien's writings. It shows that, through various episodes taken from Tolkien's legendarium, one can find adaptation of this Western topos which Tolkien then absorbed within his creative process, an attitude that could be described as partly deliberate, should one consider Tolkien's essay on the Anglo-Saxon epic mentioned above (Tolkien 1983: 5-48).

Still from a symbolic, or rather from a more philosophical and theological perspective – yet still in regard to the relation between the human and the nonhuman –, this dissertation focussed on the philosophical and theological situation of the late Middle Ages, and especially on the efforts to blend Christianity with Greek philosophy from the twelfth-century onwards. This blend would have created medieval Christianity, which, using Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, spread a worldview according to which God's creation was inherently good, and that it was ordered in a hierarchy which climbs towards heaven, thus justifying a particular mindset that would favour the human. In this hierarchy, human beings were placed at the centre, that is, between animals and angels. This conception, alongside the reinforcement of monotheism, created a more anthropocentric worldview, the human being considered as a 'frontier being', occupying a prime position.

Through such conceptions, it also made possible the exclusion of the spiritual from nature, though already begun with the suppression of animism. While Tolkien's work is not a theological treatise that works with allegory, this dissertation analysed various elements that borrows some elements from the medieval mindset, especially those that tended to exclude the spiritual from nature. This could be seen very clearly through the growing gap between the Immortal Lands and Middle-earth, as well as through the fact that the Elves are departing the land at the end of the Third Age.

Beside representing a part of the exclusion of the spiritual from the material world, the passing of the Elves was also described as being a representation of the disappearance of the *genius loci*, i.e. an old animist trend which saw nature inhabited by spirits, especially in relation to the destruction of land. This was put into relation to Chaucer's poetry which also related the destruction of the environment to the

disappearance of natural spirits. Broadly speaking, it allowed also an analogy between Tolkien's work and the diminishing of elves and fairies during the medieval period. Through such an analysis, it was also possible to point at the analogies between the environmental situation of both Middle-earth and that during the medieval period.

The passing of the Elves allowed a transition to the Dominion of Men, i.e. the fact that Tolkien's world was being taken over by human beings, who then affirmed their power, or rather their stewardship, over the nonhuman. This dissertation showed that this dominion of the human mirrors the growing anthropocentrism manifested from the Renaissance onwards. This period in time finds its echo in the figure of Aragorn, who comes as a 'renewer' who creates a connection with a glorious past of the Men of Númenor, through his blood, as well as with the passing world of the Elves, through his marriage with the elven princess Arwen.

Although the Dominion of Men represents in a way the positive outcome of the human supremacy over the nonhuman, it also entails a growing disenchantment caused by the passing of the Elves and the disappearance of all that is magical and enchanted within Middle-earth, as expressed in Habermann and Kuhn's essay (2011: 272). This was put in relation with "the darker side of the Renaissance", according to which "th[e] relationship between achievement and the anxiety it creates is one of the characteristic features of the Renaissance" (Brotton 2006: 4). Such darker side of the Dominion of Men was emphasised through the analysis of Tolkien's only writing regarding that said period, which conveys a rather pessimistic glance towards the future.

This pessimistic glance was again supported with the analysis of disenchantment, seen as a dispiritualisation of the world caused by a mechanical society, or by the passing of the Valar and the Elves in Tolkien's work.

Drawing to a more ecocritical and modern perspective, the Dominion of Men was also put into relation with the Anthropocene, inasmuch as they both represent an era dominated by human responsibility regarding the nonhuman.

This allowed us to conclude that despite the medieval aspect of Tolkien's work, and despite that his fictitious world mirrors indeed the transitions that can be found throughout the medieval period, his work is nonetheless profoundly modern, inasmuch as it remains relevant with regard to contemporary issues, which led us to argue that his work could be said to be in accordance with the culture of responsibility conveyed

through ecological awareness and through conceptions such as the Anthropocene, which however have failed to turn the tide.

This study brings therefore Tolkien's work in accordance with the culture and the literature of the Anthropocene, which dismisses then the critical stance which sees his work as a juvenile piece of escapist fiction. As Tolkien explained it, the escapist notion is to be seen as a mean to recover from something, or as a response to a form of loss. Thus, beyond any medieval-related considerations, this dissertation proved that escapist narratives are not necessarily idealised in Tolkien's writings. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* is indeed an enchanted tale of a disenchantment, and the same could perhaps be said regarding fantasy fiction in general.

This literary genre has gained a lot of popularity recently, especially since Peter Jackson's adaption of Tolkien's novels, but not only since then, as one should consider, for instance, the huge success of *Harry Potter* and *Game of Thrones*. The mistake will be to consider those as mere reactions to the depredation of the environment, thus pushing millions of people into idealised fantasy worlds where they could forget their troubles. This study showed that it was not that simple, as Tolkien's work, being of one the cornerstones of the genre, and many other fantasy narratives, are nothing but long tales of disenchantment, defeat, loss, and suffering. However, although this dissertation professed a positive view on fantasy, one should keep in mind that as in many other literary genres, fantasy is marked by one could call a "power struggle" which shows that conservatist attitudes remains, but the "genre is attempting to move beyond the narrow, and regressive, point of view that has dominated sci-fi/fantasy books for half a century" (cf. Bruney 2020). There are indeed new authors that are rising, changing the genre and making it more inclusive, as can be seen with N. K. Jemisin, whose Hugo-Award-winning trilogy explores modern themes, such as transgenderism and race²⁶. Fantasy fiction is thus not just a few simplistic narratives where one's imagination and futility are flattered, but are rather a way for people to engage real problems while using another frame, in this case often a (partly) medieval one.

As can be seen throughout this dissertation, the medieval period was a time of serious changes regarding the relation between the human and the nonhuman, and is indeed a crucial source of data, should one investigate the origins of today's ecological

²⁶ This novel was analysed as part of the class *on Contemporary Eco-fiction* LGERM2872 given by Prof. Ben Debruyn (2019).

crisis. The fact that fantasy fiction uses this frame in order to develop its narratives is, in my opinion, due to this parameter, though also due to a long tradition of texts from time immemorial. The medieval is, paradoxically, alien enough for a partial escape to happen, and close enough to be relevant to the modern audience. The recovery aspect is then gained through the fact that fantasy fiction often demands us to accept change, thus not to cling to an unreal magical past.

Through the use of enchanted elements, and with an emphasis on both land and people, fantasy fiction allows people to think differently of their environment. It is not necessarily about a renewed religious transcendence, such as the one professed by Pope Francis in his encyclical letter (2015: 65ff.), but it deals rather with the acceptance that the human is profoundly intertwined with the nonhuman, thus corresponding to the ecocritical stance which calls for a critique of the dichotomy between nature and culture, between the human and the nonhuman, as seen in William Cronon's essay (1996: 25), while insisting on human responsibility, which seems to be a preponderant theme in these trouble times we came to call the Anthropocene.

However, beyond this veil of disenchantment and despair, there is this spark of hope, embodied in the awareness brought along with ecocritical studies, amongst others, which mirrors the growing concern for the environment. Everything needs to be done, and rather being too pessimistic or too optimistic regarding the future, one could perhaps hold a tragic posture, as can be seen with the "pari tragique" of French philosopher Michel de Montaigne, that is, "dans la perspective du néant", namely in the acceptance of death which then demands the acceptance of the fact that the world lies in a state of perpetual decay, while demanding the best from oneself (Conche 2011: 61-78).

I conclude this dissertation with a famous quote from *The Lord of the Rings*, made popular with Peter Jackson's adaptation, a quote which, in a way, seems to correspond to the "pari tragique" of Montaigne, and which might also correspond to the zeitgeist of the Anthropocene which the human needs:

‘I wish it need not have happened in my time,’ said Frodo.
‘So do I,’ said Gandalf, ‘and so do all who live to see such
times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide
is what to do with the time that is given us. [...]’ (*LOTR*: 67)

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