Tolkien's Middle-Earth.
A Myth in a Test Tube

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1 Introduction

When dealing with myth, the intuitive question to ask is: ‘What is myth?’ The sheer variety and scope of possible answers, however, has rendered this question impractical, and as hoping to find a concise definition for a phenomenon so widely discussed seems undue, one may find that asking what ‘constitutes’ myth is a more humble, yet perhaps also more rewarding pursuit, as it asks for aspects rather than consistent concepts. There is a huge variety of aspects that might be studied when engaging with myth and in the course of this paper we will try to cover those that seem to us indispensable: essential components, workings, and functions. Unlike most research, however, we will approach these aspects of myth from yet another perspective and ask: ‘How is myth made?’ In order to do this, we will take a look at a modern myth the creation of which might be the most well-documented process of myth-making: J.R.R. Tolkien’s Middle-Earth mythology.

‘The construction of elaborate and consistent mythology (and two languages) rather occupies the mind’ writes Tolkien in a letter to his publisher Stanley Unwin in 1937.1 And indeed Tolkien’s mind seems to have been occupied with this act of constructing Middle-Earth for most of his life, while his professional career was spent studying and lecturing on philology and the medieval myths of (Northern) Europe at Oxford University.

We will therefore start by problematising existing concepts and conceptions of myth and developing our own linguistic approach, followed by a discussion of the ways in which Tolkien as a scholar was influenced by myth and in turn went on to influence myth with his literary work. The final part will then deal with Tolkien’s mythical world and its languages in detail, and how a characterisation of myth as an inherently linguistic phenomenon can be derived from Tolkien’s synthetic myth.

1 TOLKIEN 1995, 19. When referring to the collected letters, we indicate the number of the letter rather than the page.
2 Pondering Myth

2.1 Myth & Myth-Making

Myth as such seems to have become a rather bloated term, ready to be applied to almost anything given an appropriate or ‘sufficient’ contextualization. From the more typical forms of ancient myth, often closely linked to a wider mythology, to modern ‘myths’ such as sports stars and media trends one gets the impression that, as far as calling something ‘myth’ is concerned, anything goes. Myth has itself become a myth.

Undoubtedly, though, nothing starts out as myth. The one thing all alleged ‘myths’ have in common is that they require an act of making or re-making (or ‘branding’ and ‘re-branding’ in the context of modern phenomena like sports stars etc.). Far from constituting a closed category, myth appears to be able to incorporate any phenomenon that has undergone appropriate transformation. This transformation, a process often referred to as ‘myth-making’, is in some approaches taken to be a central defining feature of myth, and the questions of whether this transformation is inherently narrative (that is, whether or not the transformation is based on a ‘turning-into-story’) and whether this narrativity is in turn a prerequisite for myth remain at the core of critical debate.

2.2 Conceptions of Myth

As has already become discernible, the main problem in dealing with myth on an academic level lies in defining the very subject of examination in the first place. Casting aside common popular and rather depreciating conceptions of myth as something fictitious and untrue, one is left with two main strands of battling approaches: one characterising myth by its subject matter and context of occurrence, the other defining myth according to its form and function. Within the first strand, the main debate is

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2 Instead of this rather broad (and obviously only provisional) dichotomy on a first fundamental level, ANDREW VON HENDY, in the introduction to his work on *The Modern Construction of Myth* distinguishes four ‘types of theories’: ‘the ideological, the folkloristic, and the constitutive, [which] all stem from and stand in relation to a fourth, a romantic or transcendental original.’ (2002, xi) It is important to note, here, that von
about whether myth is a matter of topic (meaning that there is a specific kind of ‘mythical’ raw material) or of typical motifs and a certain temporal setting. Within the second (and generally more recent) strand, there is great variety of approaches ranging from identifying a certain mythical style (a kind of ‘mythic mode’ of narration grounded in structural and formal features) to the formulation of mythic functions.

Two major influential theories of myth were developed by Roland Barthes and Northrop Frye. Both published in 1957, Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* and Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* quickly became seminal works of scholarly engagement with myth. In his first essay, dealing with his ‘theory of modes’, Frye deals with *myth* in the common sense of a story about a god (Frye 1957, 33) which requires a *divine* hero. He then goes on to use the term *myth* in the sense of ‘[t]he union of ritual and dream in a form of verbal communication’ (ibid. 106) in his essay on a theory of symbols. So he uses *myth* in two very different ways: firstly, to denote a certain kind of story, almost a literary genre; and secondly, to describe an act of symbolising that involves certain predetermined elements (namely ritual and dream). This is a very important conceptual development, as it places myth somewhere in between being concerned with certain ideas or concepts, and being essentially a particular kind of discourse; it is therefore treated as a kind of hybrid in that it

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Hendy’s distinction differs from ours not only in the number and mode of distinction of its categories, but more importantly in its aim. While von Hendy intends to ‘[clarify] the principal lines of development in the construction of the concept’, (ibid.) we instead survey existing approaches in order to locate our own working definition within the broader field of approaches to literary and linguistic phenomena in general.

There are some obvious obstacles for any kind of ‘topical’ definition of myth, as may be clear from the increasing number of ‘myths’ and their growing diversity in terms of topic. These ‘topical’ definitions or theories of myth are therefore closely linked to a historical approach to myth and overlap to some extent with von Hendy’s folkloristic and romantic theories.

Again, this strand overlaps to some extent with von Hendy’s ideological and constitutive theories.

Frye’s and Barthes’ theories belong to what we have called the first and second strand of theories, respectively (though Frye also displays aspects of the second strand).
applies a particular form to a particular content and thus relies on both.

Barthes, coming from a different academic tradition, goes way further in his *Mythologies*. As, however, Barthes’ work is likely to receive detailed attention elsewhere within this essay-collection, focusing on some points that are essential to the progress of our argument will be sufficient. Probably the most important of Barthes’ hypotheses is that ‘myth is language’ or, more precisely, that ‘myth is a type of speech’. This enables him to discern myth as something that ‘cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form.’ *(IBID.)*

In getting rid of the need for relying on a certain kind of content, Barthes takes a conceptual leap and clearly situates myth within the realm of semiotics.

The fundamental dilemma of dealing with myth is reflected in this vast range of approaches: Lacking both a clear-cut definition from the prescriptive side and a sufficient limitation of things or concepts that might be referred to as ‘myth’ from the more descriptive side, it is rather difficult to find a starting point for characterising the phenomenon adequately. Even the narrative substance of the myth, previously taken for granted, has been undermined by Barthes and others by accepting symbols and other visual stimuli as myth, substituting *discourse* for *narrative*.

For our own working definition, we will therefore resort to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) in order to try to resolve what seem to us to be the remaining issues: the question of the essentiality of the narrative aspects of myth, and the nature of the relation between myth and reality (in an ontological sense).

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6 **BARTHES** 2009, xix.
7 **IBID.** 131
8 The distinction made here between prescriptive and descriptive is a very general one. It corresponds to a great extent with approaches viewing myth as either relying on content and form, or as a matter of form and function. The unifying idea, then, seems to be that there is a distinct form that myth takes (which is different, however, from saying that it is the one defining feature of myth).
2.3 The *OED* & the Pragmatic Approach

Following a kind of ‘etymologist’s approach’ our treatment of these aspects of myth will draw heavily on the most reliable source for the development of actual usage of terms available to scholars of English philology, the *OED*. Tolkien himself was involved in compiling the very first edition of the *OED* and his creative work was greatly influenced by this ‘etymologist’s approach’ as shall be seen later. The *OED* is an extraordinary source in that it provides not only all denotations and connotations of a word, but also additional information regarding its etymology including different forms of the word and their respective first documentation.

As far as myth is concerned, the *OED* lists no less than five meanings, grouped into two major denotations:

1. **a.** A traditional story, typically involving supernatural beings or forces, which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something such as the early history of a society, a religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon. *Myth* is strictly distinguished from *allegory* and *legend* by some scholars, but in general use it is often used interchangeably with these terms.
   
   **b.** As a mass noun: such stories collectively or as a genre. In later use coloured by sense 2a.

2. **a.** A widespread but untrue or erroneous story or belief; a widely held misconception; a misrepresentation of the truth. Also: something existing only in myth; a fictitious or imaginary person or thing.
   
   **b.** A person or thing held in awe or generally referred to with near reverential admiration on the basis of popularly repeated stories (whether real or fictitious). Cf. *LEGEND n. 8*.
   
   **c.** A popular conception of a person or thing which exaggerates or idealizes the truth.

As can already be seen, the first, traditional meaning clearly corresponds to Frye’s notion of myth as a special kind of story, expanded to include a certain epistemological function. Yet for our approach the second meaning seems to yield more promising statements. All three aspects of the second meaning focus to a certain extent on the ontological status of myth. 2.b. is even more precise in drawing attention to the irrelevance of the factuality or fictitiousness of a myth’s content. Like the linguistic sign itself, myth’s contentual relation to a factual reality seems arbitrary.
From a synchronic point of view, Barthes is right in confirming Saussure’s notion of the sign as being conventional and arbitrary. To complicate matters, however, language is a whole system of signs, and by definition elements within that system are not wholly conventional and arbitrary, but also subject to certain limitations and the internal structure of the system. Whether or not that system is in itself again conventional and arbitrary does not really make a difference (but surely poses an interesting question). And there is a further limitation in that both a particular sign as well as the system of signs (language) have a historical dimension to them, which makes it necessary to also analyse their diachronic properties. We may find, after all, that while, theoretically, an abstract, ideal Saussurean sign may well be both conventional and arbitrary, particular signs (while still being essentially conventional) are not arbitrary, in that they have a (hi-)story to them and thus a narrative element. The necessary conventionalisation disrupts the integrity of the sign’s arbitrariness.

In a way, we are confirming not only Barthes’ notion that ‘myth is language’⁹, but also asserting the validity of the reverse, namely that language is myth.¹⁰ So while Barthes insists that ‘language needs special conditions in order to become myth’ (IBID. 131), we take language to be essentially and inherently mythical in the ways it functions. The relation between myth and reality we propose is ‘pragmatic’ in that it does not try to relate myth ‘back’ to some fixed concept of what reality is¹¹. Instead, we claim that myth is ‘real’ in a pragmatic way of relating it to its effect. Those effects are closely linked to what we have identified as the content-and-context strand of theories and also to the workings of myth that Barthes identifies: Certain myths prompt certain reactions. Be it in actual traceable deeds related to political

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⁹ Barthes 2009, xix.
¹⁰ This notion may at first seem identical to Barthes’ claim that ‘Myth is a type of speech’, but it goes further in claiming that language is inherently – even if to varying degrees – always mythical. This subtle difference also makes clear that Barthes did not intend his ‘myth is language’ to be generally reversible. He implies congruency, not identity.
¹¹ As should have become clear from taking a structure- and form-based approach whether or not the ‘content’ of a certain myth expresses factual realities of the ‘real world’ becomes essentially irrelevant. Also, this ‘real world’ is too fuzzy a concept in philosophical discussions and carries all kinds of problematic implications that entail a whole worldview or philosophy.
ideology (in both positive and negative ways), in more subtle effects of shaping notions and ideas in a society as a whole, or even in prompting critics to write about the need for de-mythologising myth. This effect of myth cannot be denied and it is independent from whether or not those reactions are a result of misinterpreting myth as something factual. The effect remains 'real' and is unquestionably, even if indirectly, caused by the myth.12

Our dictionary-based approach is therefore characterised by two essential features: It treats myth as a narrative phenomenon of form and relation, and it defines myth’s relation to reality as ‘real’ in pragmatic terms, just as the formal aspect is treated in pragmatic terms by thinking about what formal features are necessary to cause an effect (in a kind of minimalist and deconstructivist way). Our engagement with Tolkien, then, serves as an example to illustrate how language in itself and on its own is both a necessary and sufficient criterion for myth.

2.4 The Meaning of Words

Following that approach, myth is an inherent part of words, unsurprisingly also of the very word ‘myth’ itself. Just on its own, it necessarily conjures up all kinds of ideas. Because of its intrinsically arbitrary and conventionalised nature as a sign, we have different notions of what myth actually is, wonder how it came to carry such a variety of connotations, and finally trace the development of its meaning and its use in certain context. From just looking up the word in a dictionary or even just thinking about its meaning in some depth, we immediately construct an idea of the history of ‘myth’ as a word which links in with general social and intellectual history and how talking about myth has actually affected society. The word is deeply rooted in both its historical development and in its relation to other words within language, from which it is distinguished and through which it is defined.

How does that myth, inherent in language, take actual form? A simple yet very true answer to that question would be: in human discourse; actual use of language, discourse in the form of both speech and thought (to some extent determined by language). Linguistic performance is an act of ‘myth-making’ and

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12 One might even say that this kind of being ‘real’ matters more than the original factual status of something, as it has immediate effects on the future, but that is another matter.
the key to relating the linguistic matter of myth to its actual utterance and thereby to its effect, situating myth in-between, or probably even as the actual link between what has traditionally been differentiated as langue and parole.

While it has turned out preposterous and perhaps even impossible to define myth by its ever-hazy content, myth's form or mode of presentation remains invariably the same in the sense that it is ever substantiated in human discourse and thus must become traceable within the complexities of language (shaped by its use).

Elaborating that idea, language may be identified as being able to mediate as well as preserve what we provisionally refer to as 'the mythical mode'. Only within the medium of language and its transformation ('making') into words can myth become a comprehensible part of human discourse and create an 'effect' in the first place.

3 Tolkienian Myth

3.1 Tolkien and Myth

It is at this point in our argument that Tolkien's particular approach of 'making mythology' comes in. In contemplating this mythology, a lot may be gained by reading his creative works in relation to his academic career, as 'for him the two activities were utterly, indissolubly linked—perhaps more so than for any other writer or philologist.'

For the wider public, Tolkien's contemporary fame is perhaps almost solely based on his literary works The Hobbit (1937), The Lord of the Rings (1954) and The Silmarillion (posthumously published in 1977). It is a widely unknown fact that he was also a distinguished scholar and philologist of his time, an expert in languages like Old and Middle English, Old Norse as well as their respective mythologies.

Tolkien spent most of his childhood and youth in Birmingham (1896–1911) and at a very early age discovered his love of languages and his delight in a word's shape and sound. Already during that time, he took this— at first purely aesthetic—interest to the next level by beginning to invent his own languages. While

this would at first involve producing extensive lists of made-up words and attempts at creating a suitable grammar for them, these efforts already laid the foundation for his developed Elven languages ‘Quenya’ and ‘Sindarin’, both of which not only possess comprehensible systems of morphology and syntax but provide us with a – wholly made-up and yet coherent – linguistic history.

Beside inventing languages for the sake of his own pleasure, the teenage Tolkien also became more and more immersed in the history of real languages such as Welsh, Gothic and Old Norse. His general interest in languages at this point in his life bears witness to his deep-rooted awareness for the historical dimension of a language (its somewhat organic process of coming-into-being). Behind this notion lies Tolkien’s later conviction that a language lacks authenticity and function if it does not possess a tradition or, in a wider sense, a ‘mythology’ it can draw on.

Educated first at King Edward’s School, Birmingham, and later at Exeter College, Oxford, Tolkien subsequently worked as an assistant for the first edition of the Oxford English Dictionary for two years from 1920 onwards and took up a post at the University of Leeds upon his return from war service, but soon went back to Oxford to become the Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon and a fellow of Pembroke College, and later Professor of English Language and Literature at Merton College.

During his short time at Leeds and the following decades at Oxford, Tolkien established himself as one of the specialists in his field. His academic publications range from his editions and translations of Old and Middle English texts like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1925), *Sir Orfeo* (1944), *Ancrene Wisse* (1962), over works on Middle English vocabulary and dialects, to his seminal articles *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics* (1936/1937)\textsuperscript{14} and *On Fairy Stories* (1939/1947)\textsuperscript{15}, which still form an essential part of the syllabus in Oxford and elsewhere.

Recent years have seen posthumous publications including verse renderings of the story of Sigurd the dragon-slayer (*The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun*, 2009), Arthurian legend (*The Fall of Arthur*, 2013), *Beowulf* (*Beowulf: a Translation and Commentary,*
2014), and a tale from the Finnish *Kalevala* (*The Story of Kullervo*, 2015).

While Tolkien remained constantly engaged in his academic studies throughout his life, he over time also became more and more intrigued by his literary project of creating his ‘Middle-Earth mythology’. In his everyday life, the two aspects of literary and academic ambition often appeared to be utterly incompatible – this certainly became apparent in the amount of disapproval he received for his literary endeavours by many of his academic colleagues at the time. Strangely enough, though, we may with hindsight see the pronounced ongoing discourse between his academic interests and his personal creative impulses. His semi-academic works most clearly ‘[reflect] the cross-fertilisation between his scholarly and creative activity’\(^\text{16}\).

It would, however, be too simplistic to say that this is a one-way relation. Creative writing serves as a readily available (and in fact the only available) playground and testing ground. For Tolkien, as shall be seen, writing myth served as the philologist’s test tube, the evocation of laboratory-conditions under which linguistic theories and ideas could be tested and revised according to the judgement of both author and reader.

### 3.2 Tolkien and Philology

The above excerpt referring to the word ‘myth’ taken from the *OED* gives an impression of the meticulous procedure through which Tolkien in his profession as a philologist (most systematically in his post of researching words for the *OED*) would attempt to understand the layers and idiosyncrasies of a word’s semantics in relation to its form along a historically-charged timeline.

By dissecting and thus raising awareness for the otherwise unconscious process of word-building, a philologist may try to lay bare the dynamics that make up the very concepts of words themselves. Naturally, such work does never remain within the realms of pure linguistics, but is bound to extend into all kinds of fields such as psychology, sociology and, arguably most significantly, history. In his portrayal of Tolkien’s commitment to language, *The Road to Middle-Earth*, Tom Shippey offers a fascinating insight into the way in which philology may cast light

\(^\text{16}\) Turner 2008, 2.
upon what he provisionally refers to as an ‘asterisk-reality’\textsuperscript{17}. Armed with the knowledge of the development of languages, their sound changes as well as their complex interrelations with other languages, a philologist may set out to reconstruct a past stage of a language or even a nowadays extinct one like Gothic. More importantly, he may thereby touch upon something beyond pure linguistics, something, in Shippey’s words, like ‘the history of a vanished people’\textsuperscript{18}:

Historical sources, for example, have presented Attila the Hun as ‘an enemy of the Goths under Theodorid’\textsuperscript{19} to us. A philological investigation into the matter, however, identified the name ‘Attila’ to be the diminutive form of the Gothic word for ‘father’ (atta). This strongly suggested that there must have been a ‘presence of many Goths in Attila’s conquering armies’\textsuperscript{20} and questioned the assumption of the Goths being strict opponents of Attila.

While such philological enquiry may be mistrusted as a reliable source as it categorically lacks sufficient historic evidence, it may nonetheless give an idea of the ‘thrill of old passion lurking in [a] name’\textsuperscript{21} that prepossessed Tolkien as a scholar and was, in turn, to be reflected in the very genesis of his creative work. In one of his letters to his friend W. H. Auden Tolkien writes:

\begin{quote}
[L]anguages and names are for me inextricable from the stories [...] They are and were so to speak an attempt to give a background or a world in which my expressions of linguistic taste could have a function. The stories were comparatively late in coming.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

While his languages, for Tolkien, were at all times his primary concern, his line of argument here puts forward the perhaps somewhat curious thought of the languages necessitating the creation of a mythology. His choice of words is particularly noteworthy for our argument in the sense that he makes explicit use of the term ‘function’ when referring to the stories and their relation to the languages. What he had in mind by that relation exactly shall now be illuminated with a few examples.

\textsuperscript{17} SHIPPEY 2005, 22.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid. 17.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid. 18.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid. 18.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid 19.
\textsuperscript{22} TOLKIEN 1995, 163.
3.3 Tolkien and his Sources – ‘Thorin & Co.’

Tolkien’s engagement with the languages of Northern Europe made him familiar with manuscripts of the Prose Edda and the Poetic Edda, which together constitute the prime store of Scandinavian mythology today. In both of these, one can find (although differing to a certain degree) lists of dwarf names comprising – beside several others – almost all the names of dwarves that set out with Bilbo Baggins on his adventurous journey to the Lonely Mountain: Dwalin, (Balin)\(^{23}\), Kili, Fili, Dori, Nori, Ori, Oin, Gloin, Bifur, Bofur, Bombur and Thorin Oakenshield\(^{24}\). In his dissection of their meaning based on the version found in the Poetic Edda (Reykjavik, Árni Magnusson Institute for Icelandic Studies, MS Codex Regius), Jim Allan pinpoints the way in which their etymological meaning, while not always entirely resolvable, formatively plays into the narrative of the The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings\(^{25}\).

In The Lord of the Rings, Gimli begins chanting a poem, while the fellowship rests on its journey through the depths of Moria. This poem recounts the story of Durin, the first dwarf king of Moria, whose glorious period of reign is at that time long lost, but who is prophesied to eventually ‘wake [...] again from sleep’\(^{26}\) to restore the peace and wealth of former days. In the list of Scandinavian names, one finds an instance of the form ‘Durinn’\(^{27}\), which Allan identifies as containing the Old Norse stem ‘dürr-’, denoting ‘slumber, sleep’, making ‘Durinn’ literally translate to ‘the Sleeper’\(^{28}\). As in the case of Eärendil, we can see Tolkien adhering to the idea that a name is capable of accommodating a narrative potential on its own.

The arguably most striking detection within the list may be the name ‘Gandalfr’\(^{29}\). Carpenter tells us that, according to earlier drafts of The Hobbit, Tolkien had first intended Gandalf\(^{30}\) to take

\(^{23}\) ‘Balin’ is not found in the list. Allan argues that the name might be derived from ‘bál’ (fire) (ALLAN 2003, 223).

\(^{24}\) All of the names are already normalised to an anglicised spelling here.

\(^{25}\) ALLAN 2003, 220–226.

\(^{26}\) TOLKIEN 2007, 413.

\(^{27}\) Anglicised by degemination of <-nn> to <-n>.

\(^{28}\) Ibid. 222.

\(^{29}\) Anglicised by omission nominative ending <-r>.
the role of the company’s ‘chief dwarf’\textsuperscript{31}. In Allan’s analysis, the term is glossed as meaning ‘[s]orcery-elf’\textsuperscript{32}, in that sense effectively breaking ranks with the semantics of most of the other names. Its subsequent re-ascription to the wizard of the story, not the dwarf, demonstrates Tolkien’s way of adding to a sign’s arbitrariness the dimension of relating its linguistic form back to the etymological source.

The ‘rules’ of philology, that Tolkien uses consistently, make this drawing on a sign’s diachronically conventionalised content a very systematic and conscious manner of picking the semantic components which he, in a next step, works into his own Middle-Earth mythology.

3.4 Tolkien and Language – ‘Eärendil the Seafarer’

According to Humphrey Carpenter, Tolkien’s biographer, it ultimately was a line from the Old English poem \textit{Crist} by the poet identified as Cynewulf that is said to have struck Tolkien so profoundly that Carpenter claims it to be marking the very beginning of Tolkien’s mythology. The Old English line goes as follows:

\begin{quote}
Eala Earendel engla beorhtast / ofer middangeard monnum sended.
("Hail Earendel, brightest of angels, above the Middle-earth sent unto men."\textsuperscript{33})
\end{quote}

In Hall’s \textit{Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary}, ‘Earendil’ is glossed as ‘dayspring, dawn’ and ‘ray of light’ (Hall 1960, 96). Tolkien, however, insisted that in this context the word must have had another, ‘special meaning’ that exceeded its dictionary meaning. According to Carpenter, Tolkien assumed ‘Earendel’ to be both referring to John the Baptist in this particular religious context but also to the Morning-Star in a more general sense, that is Venus.

But even if this meant that – as in the case of Attila the Hun – pure philology was apparently overstretched in providing Tolkien with factual certainty for what exactly Cynewulf in Old English times had had in mind when uttering ‘Earendel’, the instance of the word form in this context itself made Tolkien sense

\textsuperscript{31} Carpenter 2000, 181.
\textsuperscript{32} Allan 2003, 222.
\textsuperscript{33} Carpenter 2000, 72.
something ‘very remote behind it [...] far beyond ancient English’\textsuperscript{34}. Philology did not provide an unambiguously correct answer, yet it posed to Tolkien the inexhaustible and to him more interesting question of pondering all it could have meant.

Reflecting on this very essentially ‘Tolkienian’ reaction to language’s and history’s ultimate indeterminacy, Shippey notes:

One sees that the thing which attracted Tolkien most was darkness: the blank spaces, much bigger than most people realise, on the literary and historical map.\textsuperscript{35}

It was the word form’s abiding suggestiveness that prompted Tolkien to imagine his very own story to it: By composing a poem, he created the character of Earendel, the Evening Star, on his voyage from Westerland.\textsuperscript{36}

Eventually, this was followed by the word’s systematic integration into his own invented language ‘Quenya’: In the \textit{Introduction to Elvish} compiled by Jim Allan, the term ‘Eärendil’ is glossed as its original OE meaning ‘Morning-Star’ but also as ‘Ocean-friend’ or ‘Ocean-lover’.\textsuperscript{37} Taking a closer look, one finds separate entries both for ‘Eären’ referring to the ‘Sea’ or the ‘Ocean’\textsuperscript{38} and the suffix ‘ndil’ or ‘dil’ (following the liquids [r] and [l]) denoting ‘friend,-lover’\textsuperscript{39}.

This strict method of incorporation illustrates Tolkien’s somewhat rigorous sense of obligation that admonished him to stay true to a word’s etymological history. As displayed in the example, the ‘new’ or, more accurately, ‘secondary’ meaning to the word that Tolkien adds is carefully fitted into the old context so as not to flaw the ‘organic’ nature of the overall picture: In the posthumously published version of the \textit{Silmarillion}, Eärendil appears as the legendary Mariner who carries the Morning-Star on his brow into the sky\textsuperscript{40}, testifying that in spite of it acquiring new semantic components the word’s original meaning remained at the very core of the story.

\textsuperscript{34}CARPENTER 2000, 72.
\textsuperscript{35}SHIPPEY 2005, 44.
\textsuperscript{36}CARPENTER 2000, 78.
\textsuperscript{37}ALLAN 2003, 29.
\textsuperscript{38}IBID. 29.
\textsuperscript{39}IBID. 35.
\textsuperscript{40}Cf. TOLKIEN 1999, 300.
Then, at a chronologically later point within the mythology’s
narrative, mention of Eärendil finds its way into The Lord of the
Rings. After being tricked into Shelob’s lair by Gollum, Frodo
Baggins unveils the phial containing the light of Eärendil en-
dowed to him by Galadriel and calls out for aid to a visionary
Eärendil: ‘Aïa Eärendil Elenion Ancalima!’ (Quenya for ‘Hail
Eärendil, brightest of stars!’)\textsuperscript{41}.

This instance aptly illustrates the presence of two very differ­
et concepts concurrently coming into \textit{effect} in this single word
form ‘Eärendil’: For one, ‘Eärendil’ here refers to the physically
present light of Galadriel’s phial, and on the other hand, it de-
notes a somewhat non-corporeal force for good that Frodo ad-
dresses in a moment of despair.

Intriguingly it exemplifies how any subject-matter within the
closed system of Tolkien’s secondary world cannot remain ‘once-
made’ if it continues to be discoursed about, but is governed by
an on-going process of re-making as long as it persists as an ac­
tive part of the system: For Frodo as a character within this sys­
tem and thus a participant in its continuing discourse, ‘Eärendil’
who came into the narrative as the Seafarer at one past point\textsuperscript{42},
has become a myth, while Frodo in turn comes to us readers as a
piece of a mythology.

3.5 Tolkien and Creation – ‘What is a hobbit?’

It would certainly be a naïve assertion to propose the creations
of both \textit{The Lord of the Rings} and \textit{The Hobbit} to be completely ex­
plainable by contemplating the linguistic constructions of certain
words that Tolkien happened to come across in his academic
studies. The many factors, ideas and notions that may play into
the creative process of a writer’s imaginative mind remain – as
language itself does – ultimately too complex and opaque to ever
be entirely dissolvable. But instead, it would perhaps not be too
far off the mark to say that at all times in the process of his liter­
ary creation Tolkien remained faithful to the overall idea that
language itself precedes and even necessitates a narrative
(myth). Without it, there would be no story to tel; with it, a story
must be told.

\textsuperscript{41} TOLKIEN 2007, 942.
\textsuperscript{42} Cf. TOLKIEN 1999, 300.
One of the most famous and well-known words associated with Tolkien’s literary works can, despite some controversy, indeed be identified as his very own invention: the *hobbit*. Tolkien in his lifetime was quite convinced that the term ‘hobbit’ came to him out of the blue while he pursued the then somewhat irksome task of marking exam papers\textsuperscript{43}. Nonetheless, he conceded the possibility of having read or heard the word before by remarking in a letter ‘that buried childhood memories might suddenly rise to the surface long after’\textsuperscript{44}. Some time after his death, the term ‘hobbit’ was indeed found in a long list of ‘supernatural beings’ appearing in the so-called ‘Denham Tracts’\textsuperscript{45} recorded before Tolkien’s time. However, since Tolkien was, when using the word, unaware of this, any semantic connection to the older recording would have been an unconscious one and thus not one that Tolkien was deliberately paying homage to in the same way as with ‘Earendel’ or ‘Gandalf’: What is relevant to our argument is that Tolkien’s concept of a ‘hobbit’ was beyond doubt unprecedented.

Believing the ‘hobbit’ to be his own invention, Tolkien all the more felt an imperative need to ‘fit the word into the linguistic landscape of Middle-Earth’\textsuperscript{46} by employing his philologist’s skill of ‘reverse engineering’\textsuperscript{47}: After the two hobbits Meriadoc and Peregrin have greeted Théoden, king of the Rohirrim in *The Road to Isengard*, Théoden answers them: ‘[H]ere before my eyes stand yet another of the folk of legend. Are not these the Halflings, that some among us call the Holbytlan?’\textsuperscript{48}.

Since Tolkien devised his Rohirrim to be speakers of Old English, ‘holbytlan’ can be identified as a compound word consisting of ‘hol’ meaning ‘hole’\textsuperscript{49} and ‘bytla’, the poetic variant of ‘bylda’, that arguably signifies a ‘builder’ or ‘householder’\textsuperscript{50}. The word ‘hole-builder’ as such, however, cannot be found in any Old English dictionary. As Gilliver, Marshall and Weiner in their discussion of Tolkien’s handling of words aptly observe, he ‘is playfully suggesting’ that an OE form ‘holbytla’, if it had existed,

\textsuperscript{43} Cf. CARPENTER 2000, 181.
\textsuperscript{44} TOLKIEN 1995, 319.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid. 146.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid. 144.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{48} TOLKIEN 2007, 727.
\textsuperscript{49} HALL 1960, 189.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid. 61; 63.
may well have developed into its Present Day English form ‘hobbit’. Within the Appendices to The Lord of the Rings, Tolkien takes matters even further by revealing the human tongues of Middle-Earth and Modern English to actually be of quite different linguistic origin. ‘Hobbit’, he explains, is in his secondary world actually expressed by the word form ‘kuduk’ (analogously derived from ‘kûd-dûkan’ which also denotes a ‘hole-dweller’) and as such was only translated by him for our – the readers’ – sakes.

While Tolkien’s argument here doubtlessly contains a whimsical or even impish undertone, it serves to shed light on the consistency of method that underpins his story-making (and myth-making). Even or especially when dealing with made-up words, Tolkien found them to be useless if their linguistic form itself was unable to equip them with the tools of intrinsically signifying a meaning of their own. With this ‘invented’ etymology in mind, the famous first sentence of The Hobbit reveals itself to actually be a somewhat pleonastic spelling out of its own subject-matter: ‘In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit’.

In his pre-eminent position as a philologist, Tolkien very consciously felt this connection between a word’s form and its narrative potential. His linguistic pondering made him discover that a form must – for the pragmatic justification of its own existence – condition a function. And this inherent function he recognised was – at least partially – mythical.

It would, however, be wrong to conclude that his linguistic expertise made him more receptive to myth in terms of its pragmatic effect than other people who lacked a similar background. Philology had only supplied Tolkien with the tools to systematically trace linguistic evidence of otherwise elusive elements that may play into the making of myth.

Contemplating this notion, Tolkien may not only be regarded as a writer but in an equal sense as a theorist of ‘myth-making’. By dismantling the aspects that make up a word similar to the way in which a chemist de-constructs the components of an organic substance, Tolkien discovered myth to be at the very core of our language.

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51 Although Gilliver, Marshall and Weiner claim a more likely linguistic development to be ‘hobittle’ (cf. GILLIVER/MARSHALL/WEINER 2009, 145).
52 Cf. TOLKIEN 2007, 1496.
In his position as a writer, he productively uses this philological deconstruction-technique by weaving the dissected components at hand into his own creative process of myth-making. The result is a synthetic myth, incorporating and in fact imitating many of the processes at work in the creation of conventional myths (in the sense of myths that have grown over time) and deliberately using them to create a myth shaped by a particular author at a particular moment of time.

3.6 Tolkien and the Essence of Myth – ‘Tom Bombadil’

One of the most remarkable inventions within Tolkien’s Middle-Earth is Tom Bombadil. Sometimes treated as a kind of inconsistent intruder into an otherwise consistent mythology, he serves as an ideal example not only of Tolkien’s writing process, but, more importantly, for Tolkien’s capability to create character and story out of mere language and to then incorporate this creation into his wider works.

Tom Bombadil started out as a figure in some of Tolkien’s early poems, at that time still unrelated to what would later become Tolkien’s Elvish languages and the resulting mythology. Alan Turner, in his essay on “‘Tom Bombadil’: Poetry and Accretion”54 analyses this ‘process of accretion’55 and its effect on Tolkien’s Middle-Earth. He acknowledges ‘that the relationship between Tolkien’s prose and poetry is not linear, but rather cyclical’56.

In the context of our argument, it is, perhaps, not too bold to claim that not only the relationship between his prose and poetry, but his creative process as such may be described as essentially ‘cyclical’ in nature. From his collected letters, one gets an idea of how Tolkien was haunted by the thought of not being able to finish his mythology, i.e. his Silmarillion (as can be seen from the number of his works that were only published posthumously). This (epitomized in Leaf by Niggle57) was not least the

54 Turner 2008, 1–16.
55 Ibid. 3.
56 Ibid. 2.
57 ‘It was written down almost at a sitting, and very nearly in the form in which it now appears. Looking at it myself now from a distance I should say that, in addition to my tree-love (it was originally called The Tree), it arose from my own preoccupation with The Lord of the Rings,'
case because he over and over again changed aspects, revised story-lines and added new bits to it throughout his lifetime. Such a restless method of operating demonstrates the way in which Tolkien ever proceeded to muse about the words and the concomitant stories that had evolved and indeed continued to evolve from them.

In this short story we are presented with Niggle, a painter, who sets out to draw a tree but discovers that he can ‘paint leaves better than trees’\(^{58}\). While the picture of his tree continues to grow, Niggle begins to feel more and more restless as it appears to him both ‘wholly unsatisfactory and yet very lovely’\(^{59}\).

In the context of our argument, Niggle’s as well as Tolkien’s ceaseless engagement with their work may to some extent become comprehensible. As the tree in the short-story suggests, Tolkien identified the making of story and myth as an imperishable, organic process. A myth can never remain static because it is the very ongoing mode of thinking and speaking about something in terms of myth (‘the mythical mode’) that qualifies it to be categorised as myth in the first place, and it is in this way that Bombadil is incorporated into the main mythology: Starting out as wordplay and poetic experiment, the inner linguistic quality forced itself upon the growing mythology as the clearest example of the creation of myth out of language, where, through the use of nonsensical and almost Dadaistic language and the resulting loose thread of story, even the historical dimension is obscured so that Bombadil cannot be traced back to an originally arbitrary sign. He defies temporality and causality, and when incorporated into the main mythology, he can still only be defined by his name while his power is exercised through singing and naming\(^{60}\). Or, to say it in the terms of *Leaf by Niggle*, Bombadil,

\(\text{the knowledge that it would be finished in great detail or not at all, and the fear (near certainty) that it would be ‘not at all’.}^\text{\(\text{TOLKIEN 1995, 199}\)}\)

\(\text{\(\text{IBID. 89.}\)}\)

\(\text{\(\text{IBID. 89.}\)}\)

\(\text{\(\text{IBID. 172); ‘Then Tom put the ring round the end of}\)}\)

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though probably being very different from all the other leaves of linguistic creation, was the most organic and authentic of the leaves, made of the same matter as the trunk and thereby an indispensable part of the tree as a whole. Bombadil is at the same time the most artificial myth, as he is created purely from language without reference to any real-world actualities, but also the most natural one within the mythology in that he is the most synthetic myth in a deliberately synthetic mythology.

4 Conclusion

The myth of ‘myth’ can or even must be approached from a variety of perspectives. Our own pragmatic approach to myth is based on observations regarding the relation between myth and language, and, as a necessary result, myth and reality: Myth is that which achieves real effects by relying exclusively on a linguistic narrative without depending on any particular ontological or factual status of the narrated.

Tolkien’s academic career and scholarly work not only made him a specialist in both medieval myth and linguistic engagement with said myth, but also serve as the inspiration for his creative endeavours. At the core of his creative process lies his conviction that language is to be held as something organic and ‘alive’, conditioning the reality it signifies to ever remain on the verge of turning into ‘yet another story’. In this sense, ‘myth’ can never be reduced to a particular subject matter, but is the making/transforming of any subject and that way forms the very basis of our thinking and perceiving reality.

In the short story, when Niggle has reached the end of his journey, he finds himself gazing at the Tree he had attempted to draw time and time again, and instinctively adjudges it to be ‘finished’. Yet re-considering his words, he corrects himself:

If you could say that of a Tree that was alive, its leaves opening, its branches growing and bending in the wind that Niggle had so often felt his little finger and held it up to the candlelight. For a moment the hobbits noticed nothing strange about this. Then they gasped. There was no sign of Tom disappearing.’ (IBID. 174)
and guessed, and had so often failed to catch. He gazed at the Tree, and slowly he lifted his arms and opened them wide. ‘It’s a gift!’ he said.61

It is this process of comprehending the world through language and thought that lends all kinds of myths their lasting appeal. Myth is the spelling out of language’s intrinsic narrativity. It is inherent to language’s power to signify, and thus to engage in myth is to engage in the very nature of our language.

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