



Transformative Works as a Means to Develop Critical Perspectives in the Tolkien Fan Community

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Eleven years ago, I did something that would have life-changing results, although I had no notion of this at the time: I typed the name "Nerdanel" into a search engine. I was a newly minted Tolkien fan and was working through *The Silmarillion* for the second time and, like many fans, needed all the help I could get. I was bored that day and using the Internet to look up characters from *The Silmarillion* who had caught my attention. One of the top results pointed to a page by a person who called herself Nerdanel. I clicked on it and found that she'd written several stories about *The Silmarillion*. I began to read them and it was like this distant world, this Arda, that I'd observed as though upon a ship offshore was suddenly underfoot; these characters, whose boldest actions were all that I could discern from my far-removed vantage point, were suddenly right in front of me. I could hear their voices, see the subtle shifts in expression as they pondered their world and each other. I'd come ashore; I was among them.

I'd always made sense of things using stories. I'd even started to do this with *The Silmarillion*, having written a play and part of a political satire about the House of Fëanor and Nargothrond, respectively. But I had no idea that other people did this, much less shared what they wrote with others. I had no idea that this was an acceptable way to respond to the text. Trained as an undergrad in a university creative writing program, I'd been pressured to accept an extremely narrow and limited definition of literature and, by extension, of what constituted acceptable creative writing. I was embarrassed by what I'd written about *The Silmarillion* and kept it secret, termed it a guilty pleasure, and kept the disks hidden in a box in my desk.



In the last eleven years, since I fatefully typed "Nerdanel" into a search engine, I have experienced a revolution in my thinking on literature and writing. Today, I am the founder and owner of the Silmarillion Writers' Guild, the Web's only *Silmarillion*-only fan fiction archive and considered to be one of the most respected archives in the Tolkien fandom, and am one of the moderators on the Many Paths to Tread archive and coordinate the annual Back to Middle-earth Month event. What I've witnessed and learned in my ten years in those roles—about Tolkien, about fandom, and about myself—is what brings me before you today. I proposed this paper as part of the theme of "Tolkien and the 21st Century" because, in the age of the Internet, writing and reading fan fiction has become one way that Tolkien fans have developed and expressed critical views about the texts and shared them with other fans, becoming more astute and better read critics of the texts than perhaps they would have otherwise been.

Transformative works, or fan fiction, based on Tolkien's books have been around for a long time. The first documented fan poem and fan fiction were published in 1959 and 1960, respectively, in printed fanzines. The next three decades of Tolkien fan fiction followed the typical pattern for fandoms prior to the rise of the Internet: Stories, discussions, poetry, and folk songs were published by fan-produced publications or zines distributed at fantasy conventions and through the mail. The fan history wiki Fanlore first mentions Internet Tolkien fandom in 1992, with the founding of the first Usenet newsgroup for Tolkien fans. As the decade progressed, personal websites and mailing lists began to arise for fannish activities, including the sharing of fan fiction. By summer of 2000, the first Tolkien-based fan fiction was posted to the website FanFiction.net (Organization for Transformative Works). Pages 2 and 3 of the handout have more details on the history of Tolkien-based fan fiction.

The rise of Tolkien fandom on the Internet and the simultaneous release of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy had, in Tolkien fandom scholar John Lennard's words, "much the same effect on fanfic at large as throwing a tanker-load of gasoline on a camp-fire" (Part 4). With the arrival of online mailing lists, especially Yahoo! Groups, fan fiction writers began to gather online to discuss the books and, of course, share stories. These groups drew boundaries upon the vast and newly discovered landscape of Internet Tolkien fan fiction and carved the Tolkien fan fiction community into smaller contingents, largely based on the types of stories one wrote or one's approach to interpreting Tolkien's texts. Media scholar Henry Jenkins notes that this fragmentation is a normal phase of the development of fan fiction communities during times

of massive entry of newcomers into the fandom (*Fans* 142). As the first half of the first decade of the new millennium passed, fan fiction archives—often built by the same groups that had established the original mailing lists—began to supplant mailing lists as places to share fan fiction. The boundaries the mailing lists had drawn, though—the insularity, the sometimes high degree of specialization, the almost xenophobia toward groups and writers who approached the texts differently or preferred a different focus—were kept in place by the archives.

Some of this insularity and xenophobia was due to the release of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* movies, simultaneous with the rise of Internet fandom. The Tolkien fandom has always been subject to dramatic spikes in the number of participants coincident with the release of new texts, and such spikes are always the subject of anxiety for some among the existing fan base. Lennard notes that, as Tolkien's books became more widely available in the 1960s, the numbers of fans grew with infrastructure—societies, conventions, and fanzines—to match. Some of these were founded to counteract what veteran fans viewed as inappropriate interpretations and responses to Tolkien's works. Likewise, as the number of authors writing Tolkien fan fiction spiked with the release of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the anxiety of veteran fans grew, centering on the quality of fan fiction being produced by the influx of new fans and the misinformation to which these fans were subject, being familiar only with the films and knowing little to nothing of the vast book canon that had occupied veteran fans, in some cases, for decades. Lennard notes that differing preferences in source materials—books versus films—were often recast as concerns over quality fiction by Internet fan fiction writers, with movie-based stories and works by new fans usually relinquished to the losing side (Part 4).

Already divided by interest and approach, many of these new archives also sought to build an even higher wall around themselves with the not-unobvious intent of barring what were viewed as the most egregious productions by newer authors. Both the Open Scrolls Archive and Stories of Arda archive, for example, disallowed stories in which a modern character falls into Middle-earth, stories involving the film actors, and Mary Sue stories, a genre in which the author inserts an idealized version of herself as a character and often interacts romantically with one or more of the canon characters. Both also disallowed slash, a popular genre in which two same-sex characters carry on a romantic or sexual relationship. Other archives were more subtle though no less effective. The Henneth-Annûn Story Archive, for example, placed no such restrictions on content, but as Robin Anne Reid concludes in her analysis of the discourse style of the

informational sections of Stories of Arda and the Henneth-Annûn Story Archive, uses an "academic, professional, masculine, objective" style on its informational pages (360). Unlike Reid, I see this choice of language as likely aimed at dissuading newcomers who were otherwise attracted to Henneth-Annûn's almost complete lack of content restrictions. Indeed, despite its relative openness, Henneth-Annûn nonetheless maintained for many years a reputation of being a high-quality and intimidating archive on which to post and, despite the lack of content restrictions, was also subject to frequent accusations of elitism, as documented by Kristi Lee Brobeck in her article "Under the Waterfall."

I believe that this early fragmentation of the Tolkien fan fiction community had lingering effects that make it particularly inclined to produce authors who are not only well read but also insightful and critical of Tolkien's texts. As my handout explains, the subdivision of Tolkien fan fiction writers into dozens of archives and groups is similar to the formation of physical communities, creating a sense of cohesion and belonging when a participant visited some sites and a sense of discomfort and exclusion when visiting others. As part of researching this presentation, I created a survey for writers and readers of Tolkien fan fiction, on which I will rely heavily going forward. Your handout also includes much more data than I will have an opportunity to present in my twenty minutes. This survey indicates that Tolkien fan fiction writers continue to feel a territoriality about where they post their stories, even as some of the divisions erected in the early years of Internet Tolkien fan fiction are finally beginning to dissolve. Sixty-five percent of respondents indicated that they had a particular site that they considered their Tolkien fan fiction home, and 32% replied that there were one or more websites where they felt unwelcome to post. Twenty-six percent also agreed that they avoided sharing their stories on certain sites or groups because they did not agree with the approach taken by other writers there to Tolkien's texts.

This simultaneous tension and cohesion had two important effects, I believe. The tension between groups often put their writers on the defensive. They were pressed to not only examine how they used Tolkien's texts to create fan fiction but to justify their interpretations of those texts. A common complaint, when I first began writing ten years ago, for example, was that the author's notes on a story were often as long or longer than the story itself! This perceived need for justification, though, did create a group of fan fiction writers who were not only very well

read in the texts but accustomed to thinking about how they used and interpreted those texts in their stories.

The cohesion within groups and archives amplified the analytical approach that many writers took toward both Tolkien's texts and their own stories. Groups worked together to amass resources—most archives, for example, maintain a resource library—and members helped each other to locate information and make sense of a complicated welter of texts. Forums and mailing lists associated with archives provided a space for members to hold discussions and try out new story ideas on fellow members.

These communities also help to foster a dedication to Tolkien's texts and to the Tolkien fandom that contributes to the relatively high standard of critical discourse. While most fan fiction writers write indiscriminately for several fandoms—in his book *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers*, Henry Jenkins self-identifies as a "total media slut" and notes a complete lack of "any hierarchical or 'monogamous' relationship to texts"—this is less often the case for Tolkien fan fiction writers (19). Twenty-six percent of Tolkien fan fiction writers wrote only Tolkien fan fiction, while just 13 percent of participants in a general fandom survey wrote for just one fandom. Of those who did write or had written for other fandoms, 65 percent considered Tolkien their primary fandom, suggesting that around 90 percent of Tolkien fan fiction writers spend all or much of their time in that fandom. Finally, Tolkien fan fiction writers have authored Tolkien fan fiction, on average, for more than six years, and almost a third have been writing for ten years or more.

This is a huge commitment of one's life to creating and reading stories that cannot be published and bring their authors prestige in the traditional sense, and it becomes a fair question to ask: Why? And for what purpose? As I began to design my survey, I posed a simple question on LiveJournal and Tumblr: Why do you write Tolkien fan fiction? By the time I had sifted out the reasons and pared each reason down to a few words or phrases, I had a list almost three pages long of reasons that people gave. One of the main aims of the survey was to measure to what extent authors agreed or disagreed with these reasons. Page 7 of the handout includes a graphic representation of just some of this data. The survey is ongoing and I have only done a preliminary analysis on a tiny fraction of it, but what I hope this shows is the variety of reasons why people dedicate years and sometimes decades of their lives to writing Tolkien fan fiction.

My purpose here, however, is to look at just a narrow subset of those reasons: those that concern analysis and criticism of the original texts. In a conversation with a friend and fellow writer, she mentioned an interesting ongoing conversation on a popular Tolkien forum. She was reluctant to join in, however, because other participants tended to deride and ridicule fan fiction writers. She noted, however, that the subject of the discussion was something that we'd actually discussed many times too. The only difference? Our discussions largely took the form of fiction, of stories that resulted from the in-depth study and analysis of Tolkien's texts and then presented our conclusions in narrative form.

The idea that fan fiction can serve as a vehicle for responding analytically and critically to a text isn't new. In 1992, Henry Jenkins published the groundbreaking book *Textual Poachers*, which largely served as a defense of media fandom from within academia, something unheard of at the time. Jenkins' theory of fandom and, with it, fan fiction is that it is a participatory culture that allows participants to find meanings and interpretations in a text that align with their interests and experiences but not necessarily with how the author intended the text to be read. As readers, we are taught to privilege the author's intentions in terms of meaning and view analysis of a text as ferreting out the correct meaning of that text. We are recipients of what the author chooses to tell or show us and are taught that exceeding those boundaries is to tread upon forbidden ground. Fan fiction writers take a different approach. We don't simply receive the texts and the lessons Tolkien hoped they'd teach; we use his stories as the bricks and our own experiences and interests as the mortar and, with them, build our own meanings. It is often what Tolkien didn't tell us or didn't show us that interests us the most. On the Silmarillion Writers' Guild, for example, there are stories that consider the biochemical basis of the Rings of Power, the political complexities of the Noldorin kingdoms and principalities in Beleriand, the medical and psychological recovery of Maedhros after being hung from Thangorodrim, the social and legal statuses of homosexual characters in Middle-earth, and the philosophical differences between the Eldar and Avari. Nerdanel, the character who got me into all of this to begin with, is mentioned a mere four times in the published *Silmarillion*; on the SWG, we have about 150 stories about her. In *The Road to Middle-earth*, Tom Shippey notes that it was the blank spaces in literature and history that attracted and inspired Tolkien (38). It is the same for us, and it is most often what is unseen and unexplained that compels us to think, talk, and write about it.

Jenkins and his successors have done much to document the kinds of critical analysis used by fan fiction writers, quoting extensively from interviews, online discussions, and fan fiction itself to build their case. However, one could argue that the most engaged and insightful fans necessarily percolate to the top of this kind of analysis. I hoped my survey would start to remedy this. Instead of representing only those fans confident enough of their views to share them in online discussions, I hoped that the survey would also represent the views of fans who write fan fiction but perhaps don't participate on a large enough stage to have their views represented. Indeed, 742 people had responded to the survey by the time I downloaded the results for this presentation, and 436 of them were writers. While concerns over self-selection by the most dedicated writers remain, I hope this methodology was more encouraging of broader involvement.

Tolkien fan fiction writers are generally an extremely well-read group. Three-quarters of the writers who responded to my survey had used *The Silmarillion* as a source for their fan fiction, and well over half had used *Unfinished Tales*, *The History of Middle-earth*, or both. A significant majority of these writers also agree that they had learned more about Tolkien's world, read texts by Tolkien that they would not otherwise have read, and conducted research they would not otherwise have done because of fan fiction. As their agreement with these statements suggests, writers often consult a broad range of texts as part of what is termed canon formation, or determining the factual basis in which a writer will set her stories. Page 9 of your handout includes more information on canon formation, but writers use both narrative details as well as extratextual information—information about the texts that is not communicated in the narrative itself, such as composition dates for drafts or Tolkien's notes and letters—in determining which details from a vast, complex, and often contradictory and incomplete set of texts are most authoritative and therefore worthy of use in their stories.

This type of scrutiny and analysis of the texts closely parallels, appropriately enough, the analysis used in fields like Tolkien's own Anglo-Saxon studies, where texts are often fragmentary, incomplete, and undateable. Once again, uncertainty prevails, and the reason Tolkien fan fiction writers seemingly never tire of their task is the same reason the debate over the date of *Beowulf* is over a century old and still going strong: There are many more unknowns than knowns, and taking what sparse narrative and extratextual details we have and seeing where

they lead is immensely rewarding, both intellectually and creatively, and opens new territory and lines of inquiry to seemingly endless reevaluation and reworking.

Tolkien fan fiction writers also tend to be aware of the analytical and critical purpose of their writing and consider this a reason why they write. Ninety-five percent of respondents agreed that fan fiction let them share their views and opinions on Tolkien's world, and 89% felt that the writing process itself helped to form those opinions. More data and analysis of writers' perceptions of the critical purpose of their writing can be found on Page 8 of the handout. As the statements participants were given began to shade more toward criticism, with an implied value judgment of Tolkien and his fictional world, fewer writers agreed that this was their purpose. However, more than half still agreed that writing fan fiction let them criticize Tolkien's world and challenge his worldview. Given that around 20% of respondents answered "No opinion or not sure" to these questions, this half of writers still represents a significant majority of the Tolkien fan fiction community. Finally, 80% of writers felt that writing fan fiction helped them "to connect with others who have a deep understanding of Tolkien's world," suggesting that a significant majority of writers felt that their writing signaled not only their commitment and interest in Middle-earth but also invited discussion of that world with other fans.

In *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins writes, "Organized fandom is, perhaps first and foremost, an institution of theory and criticism" (86). This is certainly true of the Tolkien fan fiction community. Although writers write to enjoy themselves and entertain others, this is hardly the sole or even primary reason why authors remain so committed to Tolkien's texts, in defiance of the convention of fandom at large, in which mobility between fandoms is expected and normal, and why they engage heavily in the writing and reading of Tolkien-based fan fiction for years or even decades. The questions posed by writers in their stories—some of which were issues Tolkien himself found important, others not—are often identical to the types of questions being asked in the Tolkien scholarship community. Extensive reading of multiple texts, synthesis of information across texts, and analysis and interpretation of those texts also closely mirror the methods used by scholars. The difference? At the end, the skilled Tolkien fan fiction writer will present her argument or her inference and will do so in the form of an engaging and artistically rich work of fiction.

The rise of Internet fandom and the advent of so many venues in which to share stories online is quite often discussed by veteran fans as saturating the Internet with poorly written dreck

that reveals fundamental misunderstandings of Tolkien's work. I'm not going to argue against the existence of such stories. I will contend, however, that in the longer term, those writers who remain in the fandom, who continue to write and, most importantly, who continue to read, research, synthesize, and analyze what they learn about Tolkien's world will develop the ability to work with the texts at a critical level. I will also contend that fan fiction can serve as an entry point for critics and scholars of Tolkien's work who perceive themselves as barred from more traditional scholarly discourse. In the twenty-first century, participatory fannish activities, such as writing fan fiction, will sustain interest in Tolkien's works and encourage new generations of fans to continue reading, thinking about, and writing about Tolkien.

Note on Survey Data and Limitations: Data on the Tolkien fandom is based on a 20-minute online survey designed and administered by Dawn Walls-Thumma. Data was collected between 24 December 2014 and 1 January 2015. The survey was taken by 742 Tolkien fan fiction readers and writers. Because participants self-selected, results may reflect the opinions and practices of a more committed segment of the Tolkien fan fiction community than reflects Tolkien fan fiction writers as a whole. The survey was also more widely promoted on some sites than others, and other sites—including FanFiction.net—that have a significant Tolkien fandom contingent were not widely reachable at all. As such, the results should in no way be regarded or treated as universal to the Tolkien fan fiction community.

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