

# Mythmoot VI: Dragons!

Abstracts for Friday, June 28, 2019

Academic Presentations (10:30 am – 12:00 noon)

Main Room

## **The Genetics of Elven Hair Color – *Marie Prosser & Ellen S.***

"[Middle-earth] is only (as yet) an incompletely imagined world, a rudimentary 'secondary'; but if it pleased the Creator to give it (in a corrected form) Reality on any plane, then you would just have to enter it and begin studying its different biology, that is all."

*J.R.R. Tolkien (Letter 153)*

While not as contentious a topic as the wingédness of balrogs or the origin of Tom Bombadil, discussions of elven hair color among fans of Tolkien's work have always been surprisingly rampant. Any artist who has represented the elves has been informed by fans (rightly or wrongly) as to what hair color a character ought to have. While we do not seek to definitely answer that question for the elves whose hair color was not described by Tolkien (sorry, Legolas), we would like to explore the genetics of elven hair color using Tolkien's descriptions, his family trees of the elves, and the genetics of Caucasian human hair color as a starting point. Tolkien's hobbit and elven genealogies and descriptions are (perhaps surprisingly) very consistent with the concepts of heredity known to us now with the advent of genetics, with a few uniquely elvish traits such as silver hair (even in children), the mingled silver and gold of Galadriel's hair, and the dark black color of Melian's hair passed down in Lúthien's line. Be prepared for some flashbacks to high school biology class with Punnett Squares and a discussion of dominant and recessive traits!

Marie Prosser has been working on the Silmarillion Film Project since Season 1, and since they can't seem to get rid of her, they have named her a showrunner. Had you been in her high school biology classes, you would have learned genetics using family trees from Tolkien's and Rowlings' work, but she would not have forced you to do a pentahybrid cross! Through Signum's message boards, she was able to find someone equally interested in the idea of applying the genetics of human hair color to the elves and surprisingly willing to do the math to work out the probabilities of the outcomes of children in each of the families Tolkien recorded. Ellen is a more recently-joined but enthusiastic participant in SilmFilm. While she is unable to attend Mythmoot, their collaboration led to the creation of this paper.

## **Extending Arda: Mapping Beyond The Lord of the Rings and Silmarillion – *Stentor Danielson***

J.R.R. Tolkien invented an entire world of Arda, but Christopher Tolkien's iconic maps show only the areas in the northwest of the main continent of Middle-earth where most of the action of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* takes place. With just a handful of references to the geography of the lands beyond Christopher's maps, various artists have sought to portray a broader view of Arda through their own maps. Examination of these world-extending efforts reveals differences among fans as to the nature and status of Middle-earth as a subcreated world. In particular, these maps exhibit a range of approaches to the question of how closely the remainder of Arda should resemble the geography of our Earth, given that the portion mapped by Christopher is a pseudo-Europe in broad strokes but does not resemble our Europe in any detail. The forthcoming Amazon series is likely to heavily influence these fan reconstructions going forward, in light of the series' introduction with its own extended map.

Stentor Danielson is an Associate Professor in the department of Geography, Geology, and the Environment at Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania. They are also a professional fantasy cartographer, producing maps for clients including the Seventh Sea and Cthulhu Dark roleplaying games as well as selling their work at [mapsburgh.com](http://mapsburgh.com).

### **Tolkien's War on Terror: The Reception of *The Lord of the Rings* on American Audiences in the Wake of 9/11 – Alicia Fox-Lenz**

*The Lord of the Rings* is a war-inspired novel, birthed within the trenches of WWI and honed during WWII. These two wars left their mark on Tolkien and heavily colored the "cauldron of story" he pulled from to create Middle-earth. Because of the centrality of armed conflict and its related themes within *The Lord of the Rings* the story remains applicable in our modern era, which is still plagued by armed conflict. I will explore this applicability in modern day America through critical and audience reception during times of conflict, utilizing keyword analysis on a corpus of reader reviews as well as contemporary criticism to search for parallels between Tolkien's story and post-War on Terror America.

Alicia Fox-Lenz is currently pursuing a graduate degree in English Literature and Language with a dual concentration in Tolkien Studies and Germanic Philology at Signum University, and is interested in studying Tolkien through a Cultural Studies lens and expanding the mantle of mythopoeic literature to interactive narrative platforms. More specifically, her work examines the applicability of Tolkien to a modern audience through audience reception and comparisons to other pop culture media and contextualizing the Legend of Zelda franchise as a work of mythopoeia.

## Breakout Room 1

Panel: Forcing the Scholarship of Star Wars

### **Canonical Legends: How Star Wars TV (Selectively) Resurrected the Expanded Universe – Dominic Nardi**

In April 2014, Lucasfilm announced that the hundreds of tie-in novels, comics, and video games set in the *Star Wars* universe—collectively known as the Expanded Universe (EU)—would no longer be part of the official *Star Wars* continuity. However, Lucasfilm also said that it would draw upon the EU works for inspiration. Indeed, four years later, the influence of the EU can clearly be seen in the canonical animated TV shows, particularly *The Clone Wars* (TCW) and *Rebels*. In this paper, I group this “borrowing” from the EU into four categories. First, the shows have occasionally adapted EU stories with minimal changes, such as the Zygerrian slaver arc on TCW. Second, the shows frequently incorporate characters or events from EU, but significantly alter the details or context. For example, the character of Thrawn from *Rebels* is almost the same as Thrawn from the EU novels, but the latter never fought *Rebels* on Lothal. Third, there are several ideas or designs in the TV shows loosely inspired by EU, but drastically modified. For example, Kanan Jarrus from *Rebels* superficially resembles Rahm Kota from *The Force Unleashed* video game, but the characters have very different personalities. Finally, the TV shows sometimes insert Easter eggs for observant EU fans, such as Jaxxon’s skeleton in TCW episode “A Sunny Day in the Void.” Throughout the paper, I also assess what this borrowing means for the state of the EU and how much of it has made the journey to canon.

Dr. Nardi is a political scientist with a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan. He also writes about sci-fi and fantasy franchises, including articles politics in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars*. He is currently working on an edited volume of scholarship about Frank Herbert’s *Dune*.

### **To err is human: why *The Last Jedi* is not a feminist film – Emily Strand**

Emily will present an analysis of 2017’s Episode VIII: *Star Wars The Last Jedi* which pushes back on critiques of the film from either end of the ideological spectrum on feminism: both those which unequivocally laud the film’s strong women and those which lament it as a rant against toxic masculinity, signaling the franchise’s devolution into leftist propaganda. Instead, Emily will argue that while the film is not perfect, its undergirding theme of failure and our human response to it is the interpretive key to unlock *TLJ*’s deepest meanings, both as a stand-alone film and as part of the larger epic. Emily will also point to a recent study which posits, after analyzing Tweets sent to the film’s director, Rian Johnson, that much of the critical backlash against *TLJ* may have been part of a misinformation campaign by foreign and alt-right agents who seek to sow discord within US culture. The presentation will encourage discussion of these developments and ideas, prompting a renewed consideration of the importance of *Star Wars* as a cultural icon.

Emily has taught religion at the collegiate level for more than 15 years, authored two books and many articles on Catholic liturgy and written extensively about religion and popular fiction for *Hogwarts Professor* and for her own blog, *Liturgy and Life*. She has spoken about *Star Wars* at conferences and on the “Mugglenet Academia” and “Reading, Writing, Rowling” podcasts.

### **A Beginning and an End: *Rogue One* on bridging the *Star Wars* Universe – Laurel Stevens**

Although bleak in tone, *Rogue Ones* delivers exactly what a fan would expect: droids, stormtroopers, the Hero’s Journey, and direct echoes of *A New Hope*. With the outcome of the movie already determined – the Rebellion gets the Death Star plans – there is only so much to

work with. After *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, this movie seemed like a simple nostalgia grab, and while it did indeed reach for the nostalgia factor when bringing in Grand Moff Tarkin and Princess Leia, the movie served a larger role in the Star Wars Universe. *Rogue One*, besides being the first movie (Ewoks excluded) without a Jedi at the center and host to a diverse cast, gave a new tone to the *Star Wars* franchise. I do not just mean the dark tone that follows this small band of misfits as they undertake what becomes a suicide run. *Rogue One* manages to both cast meaning on the original trilogy and build a new foundation for the franchise that continues in the polarizing *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*. Instead of continuing the “Chosen One” trope, *Rogue One* builds meaning into Luke’s destruction of the Death Star, as that victory now honors the sacrifices made to acquire the Death Star plans. *The Last Jedi*, in contrast to *The Force Awakens*, follows *Rogue One* and begins to break out of the “Chosen One” mold. *Rogue One* gets gritty and broadens the scope of *Star Wars*. This film sets the precedent that one messiah figure does not swoop in and save the galaxy, but that a collective effort builds the momentum to allow for the actions needed to save the galaxy. Luke Skywalker fired the shot that destroyed the Death Star. Jyn Erso and Cassian Andor gave him the ability to do so.

Laurel Stevens is a technical writer by trade, and a voracious reader and occasional non-technical writer by choice, with a BA in English Literature & Language from Westminster College. She is currently pursuing her MA in Literature and Language from Signum University. Her published works include an essay on trees and evil in Tolkien’s literature and a smattering of poetry.

## Breakout Room 2

### **Truly Ancient Dragons: The Chaos-Creatures of Ancient Mesopotamia and the Levant and Their Legacy in Later World Literature – Kevin Hensler**

The earliest discovered and comprehended extant written literature in the world which deals with dragons, or at least beings interpreted as dragons, comes from Ancient Mesopotamia. Folklore involving dragons or dragon-like creatures no-doubt existed even before the dragon-literature of Ancient Mesopotamia, but even most of the folklore preserved probably postdates the great empires of Mesopotamia, the scribes of which produced this literature.

I would like to talk about how these early ideas grew and changed before, centuries later, they were received in the ancient Israelite and Second-Temple Jewish traditions, through which the Christian and Rabbinic Jewish traditions received them, and the interpretive legacy we inherit from these very early traditions even today. I would also like to reflect on how these traditions might have interacted with and influenced other dragon traditions from other cultures, such ancient attestations of which, unfortunately, do not survive.

Kevin Hensler is a doctoral student in Religion at Temple University who has presented at a number of Mythgard events in the past.

### **Liars, Damned Liars, and Dragons – Kate Neville**

The original serpent of the Judeo-Christian tradition is also its original liar, whose words lure Eve and Adam into disobedience. In J. R. R. Tolkien’s legendarium, the breeder of dragons in *The Silmarillion* is Melkor/Morgoth, mightiest of the Ainur, who “became a liar without shame” (31).

Oddly enough, *The Hobbit* begins with a lie by one of his most revered characters, Gandalf, who scratches a patently false advertisement on Bilbo's lovely green door: "*Burglar wants a good job, plenty of Excitement and reasonable Reward*" (29). Bilbo himself is often less than honest on his way 'there and back again,' calling to mind the rascally character of many a fairy tale hero. This paper will look at the layers of falsehood in Tolkien's legendarium, not only in the speech of actual dragons but in the speech and deeds of Elves, Dwarves, Men, and Hobbits, with a view towards a greater understanding of the ethos of his Secondary World.

Kate Neville, after nearly four decades in the Primary World, returned to the Secondary World of scholarship, receiving her M.A. in Tolkien Studies from Signum University in 2017. She has since presented at five conferences, including two Mythmoots and the 2018 Atlanta Mythcon, and earlier this year contributed to 'The Year's Work in Tolkien Studies 2016' for the journal *Tolkien Studies*.

### **Dragons, Serpents, and Gold: Smaug, Glaurung, and the Golden Fleece – Evan Hulick**

Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* and *The Hobbit* present a network of intricate relationships between harm and desire, perceived boons and disastrous outcomes, and free will and doom. Bilbo Baggins and thirteen Dwarves, led by Thorin Oakenshield, begin their quest to restore their homeland in a tale written for younger audiences. Yet, the closer the Company reaches the Lonely Mountain, the more complex the tale is woven, drawn into the gaze of Smaug himself, wherein the tale takes on a different tone: Lake-Town will burn, three armies will almost declare war against each other over dragon-cursed gold, and, unbeknownst to all, including Tolkien, the One Ring will come into the Shire. Smaug, in a long lineage of dragons and other quasi-natural, quasi-supernatural threats in myth and lore, is many things: with an intellect as sharp as the Sphinx faced by Oedipus in Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* and a threat as poised as Aietes's protector of the Golden Fleece in *The Argonautica* by Apollonius of Rhodes. So also, is Glaurung, faced by Turin in a tragedy that culminates in Turin's own demise. A Classical comparison may add a distinct layer to our understanding of these dragons as they appear in Tolkien. As Jason strives to the ends of the world to claim the boon, the Golden Fleece, that will bring prosperity to his home in Thessaly, Thorin wishes to undo the fate that doomed Erebor and reclaim the treasure. These victories over dragons are short-lived and result in personal tragedy and doom as dragons themselves act as the gate-keepers of fate or doom, yielding perilous consequences for all who face them; yet, a Boethian view of chance reveals a certain hope that culminates through Bilbo- Frodo's journey to destroy the Ring - and this is a distinction that deepens the uniqueness of Tolkien's use of dragons.

Evan Hulick is a Teaching Fellow in the English Doctoral Program at the Catholic University of America (CUA) in Washington, D.C. He is currently published in the *Mythmoot IV: Invoking Wonder Conference Proceedings* with the title- *On the Nature of the Dúnedain*; he has also published several poems and essays with a focus in Twentieth Century American Literature.