Making Myth

By: Matthew D'Antuono

"Myth is the mountain whence all the different streams arise which become truths down here in the valley…myth is the isthmus which connects the peninsular world of thought with the vast continent we really belong to. It is not, like truth, abstract; nor is it, like direct experience, bound to the particular."

--C.S. Lewis, "Myth Became Fact"

The term "myth," for many, conjures up images of giants and centaurs, goblins and orcs, dragons and elves. Some of our minds may grasp at the images of the powerful Greek gods of Olympus, while others clamber to recall the legendary Norse inhabitants of Asgard. We imagine fantasy stories—stories from books we have read, of long journeys, heroes, monsters, and demons. Some people might fondly recall an image of a faun carrying an umbrella and parcels or a golden ring glowing red with otherworldly runes. That these latter two images are associated with mythologies of ancient cultures in our minds is a testament to artistic skills of two of the most prominent literary figures in history, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, the authors, most famously, of *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings*, respectively. What is perhaps more astounding, however, is that these two writers, as Christians, were able to create such fantastical worlds rich in their own origin stories, mythologies, gods, songs, cultures, languages, beliefs, races, and ideals, seemingly separate from traditional Christian thought.

Lewis and Tolkien shared a philosophy—one unique to the twentieth century, and perhaps beyond—that Tolkien concisely summarizes in his essay *On Fairy Stories*. Put simply, they believed that "…mythology and religion…are two distinct things that have become

inextricably entangled…" (Tolkien 1947, 9). For them, mythology was not some false story, but rather a form of history that is rooted in reality and that seeks to explain the nature of things as they are (Piper and Mathis, 52). This definition of myth as history is implicitly similar to an interpretation of religion—an attempt at explaining the nature of the world as it exists, taken as historical truth by those who follow it. Equipped with such principles, Lewis, Tolkien, and a group of their friends, called the Inklings, were therefore able to construct a complex and elaborate worldview that masterfully weaves together religion (Christianity in particular) and myth, from which they created arguably the greatest pieces of fiction ever written.

This argument implicitly assumes, however, that all members of the Inklings held the same philosophical world views. While many held similar perceptions, owing to the influences of Tolkien and Lewis, not all had identical views. Each member had was influenced by independent events in their own lives and used such influences to incorporate myth into their writings in a variety of different ways. Tolkien and Lewis themselves differed in this regard, Lewis tending to meld a variety of myths and mythical figures and themes together in the same story, much to the horror of Tolkien, who believed it was more "proper" to incorporate myth from mainly one source only, as he did in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, which are densely populated with references to the Norse mythopoeia (Lovgren 2005).

The Inklings ("those who dabble in ink"), what Lewis and Tolkien almost playfully named their group of more literary-inclined friends, would meet for weekly discussions on Thursday evenings in Lewis's offices at Magdalen College as well as midday Tuesdays for socialization at a local pub, The Eagle and Child. This group of men, whose attendance fluctuated and whose membership changed over time, met regularly for almost twenty years, from the 1930s until the late 1940s. Apart from being a collection of Oxford professors and writers, the Inklings were social fraternity, what Lewis considered, an "informal club…the

qualifications (as they have informally evolved) are a tendency to write, and Christianity" (Zaleski and Zaleski, 238). According to Owen Barfield, one of the group's more prominent members, this meant the group members shared a worldview. In particular, they yearned for the infinite and unattainable (Duriez and Porter, 7). Fantasy, for the Inklings, was the route towards attaining the unattainable, a pathway to the higher world (Heaven) and a way of describing, through myth and symbol, its felt presence (Zaleski and Zaleski, 11).

Lewis's friendship with Tolkien began one evening after a meeting of the Kolbítars, where he says he stayed up through the night into the early morning talking with Tolkien about "the gods & giants & Asgard for three hours" (Zaleski and Zaleski, 177). Such discussions would later become instrumental in Lewis's conversion back to Christianity. Gradually, with the influence, arguments, and urging of Tolkien, Lewis came to realize that the myths and stories that had for so long invoked his imagination were also pointing him towards the truth of the Gospel (Piper and Mathis, 53). Tolkien, who had been theological about the implications of myth for a long while, essentially "persuaded" Lewis into his conversion by showing him Christian reality through the lens of mythopoeia, although Lewis took the final steps toward conversion himself (Duriez and Porter, 39). Thus the integration of Christianity and myth was complete for Lewis, giving rise to his acceptance of Tolkien's philosophy that would serve as the basic foundation for his future works. Consequently, this shared worldview is important to understand in order to study any of the works of Tolkien and Lewis (and other members of the Inklings), in particular the *Narnia* stories and Lewis's Space Trilogy and Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit.* Moreover, the implications of this philosophy on more modern views of Christianity merits exploration.

Tolkien has said, "God is the Lord, of angels, and of men—and of elves. Legend and history have met and fused" (Tolkien 1947, 24). Similarly, Lewis believed myths are "good

dreams" God sends to humans to prepare us for the "true myth" (the Gospels). For Lewis and Tolkien, therefore, myths were not merely legends, but alternate histories that mirrored our past and revealed its truth (Lovgren 2005).

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