

10-1-2015

Songs in Middle-earth

Ellory Busch
Marquette University

Ellory Busch
Gerard Canavan
English 4610
12/18/15

Songs in Middle-earth

J.R.R. Tolkien created a world filled with myth and magic in his Legendarium. This world has a rich history, much of which is laid out in *The Silmarillion*. *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* tell the story of a great quest, a story that is worth reading. Within this story, many stories are told through the language of songs. Songs and poetry shape the Legendarium and have unique elements among different cultural groups and in different parts of Middle-earth. At the basis of music, however, is a higher power. The creation of everything on earth was born out of a song, and at the end of time this song will be perfected. When the Legendarium is read with an emphasis on the creation of music, the themes of honor, prophecy, and perilous journey all end up pointing to a higher power.

Songs and music are not only a frequent element in the Legendarium, but they are an essential part of Tolkien's writing. The importance of songs in Middle-earth, and to each individual character that uses music as a form of expression, is fully realized when reading *Ainulindalë* at the beginning of *The Silmarillion*. At the very beginning of time, the reader finds Ilúvatar, the God and Creator of Arda, surrounded by the Ainur. In a descriptive passage, Ilúvatar introduces his Great Music, a theme that is perfect and brings forth life. From this passage, the reader learns that songs are not only necessary to the creation of Arda, but also powerful as tools to create. The Ainur understand the power of the music when Ilúvatar uses their song to show them of a vision of the creation that is to come. At that basis of this story is Ilúvatar's creative power, and that he holds dominion over the Ainur because they are also a part of his creativity (Harvey 26).

An important element of this creation through music is Morgoth's use of music that interrupts Ilúvatar's theme. This part of the story brings a complicated moral dilemma into *The Silmarillion*—subcreation. Outside of Ilúvatar's plan, Melkor attempts to use his imagination to create something separate, something that does not fit with Ilúvatar's design. The result of this is eventually a better song, because of Ilúvatar's hand in building the music upon what Melkor tried to create. Although the song becomes more beautiful, it was in need of restoration to Ilúvatar's will in order to be this way. There is a need for art to be in line with the will of Ilúvatar, and to hold a purpose rather than just subcreation to gain power for oneself.

The story of creation through song in *Ainulindalë* is crucial to the use of songs throughout the *Legendarium*, because it shows just how central music is to the creation of Arda and all things created on it. In *The Silmarillion*, the Elves develop their self-understanding and their understanding of the world around them because they were the only "living things that spoke or sang" (*Silmarillion* 49). Although all things were created out of song, the ability to use song for communication and story telling sets the Elves apart. Once again, the reader realizes that songs are primordial in these stories. Therefore the use of songs by the different races and in different contexts is a subject worthy of study. Elves and Men in *The Silmarillion* hold dominion over the created world, and speak of their ruling as the "Age of Elves" or the "Age of Men." Their importance and status in the world existed from the moment of their creation, and Tolkien provides us with the story of their coming (Harvey 25).

The Silmarillion, in some ways, stands on its own, due to the expansive timeline. In many ways, however, the themes introduced in the creation of Arda and through the first

inhabitants recur throughout the Legendarium. The *Hobbit* and the *Lord of the Rings* include music and poetry in order to keep a history, to inspire, to mourn loss, and to create distinct cultures. Tolkien crafted meaningful lyrics to numerous songs, and the thought put into the details of these songs is obvious. The creation of the world by Ilúvatar was a process of taking something abstract—the beauty of music—and giving it physical form (Harvey 26). Music allows this process to continue in reverse, as the actual historical events are told in song.

Dwarfish singing is present throughout the *Hobbit*. The first introduction to song in the *Hobbit* comes from the Dwarves, actually. The earliest song is a playful take on washing the dishes recklessly (*Hobbit* 13), but just a page later the Dwarves solemnly sing of the loss of their mountain to Smaug the dragon (*Hobbit* 14). This introduces an important aspect of songs—historical storytelling. The song is mentioned as an ancient one, and is used to retain the memory, but also to keep the desire to reclaim the mountain alive. The adventure within the *Hobbit* is driven by this passion the Dwarves have for their inheritance, and it leads them through peril to the Misty Mountain. It is within this mountain that the next song is introduced, a song of victory and pride, a song that tells of the greatness they foresee for their new empire (*Hobbit* 239). In this way, the Dwarves of the *Hobbit* represent many of the important aspects of song for the inhabitants of Arda—songs of joy, songs of frustrating inspiration, and songs of victory.

In the *Lord of the Rings*, the presence of the Dwarves is significantly reduced, and Dwarfish music is lacking as well. Gimli sings of Moria and Khazad-dûm in a song similar to those sung by his father in the *Hobbit* (*Fellowship* 309). The history he sings of tells of splendor and hope for a future, and he sings it to defend the pride of the Dwarves. As *The*

Two Towers opens, Aragorn and Legolas sing in memory of Boromir (*Two Towers* 407), but Gimli does not. Boromir was controlled by the ring, but died defending Merry and Pippin. The notable absence of a song from Gimli raises the question of Gimli's opinion of Boromir's death and honor.

Singing amongst the Elves is much more prevalent in the *Legendarium*. The first introduction of the Elves in *The Hobbit* involves singing, in fact, as Bilbo and the company hears a merry song coming from the trees (*Hobbit* 46). The Elves are introduced as playful in this scene, and these Elves seem distinct from the wise, ageless Elves introduced later on. We next hear the Elves sing at the end of the adventure, when Bilbo is journeying home. He observed that they sing in the trees "much the same as before" (*Hobbit* 269). This journey ends much like it began, in a Shire that has not changed drastically, but with a Hobbit who has changed a lot. The change in Elvish music in the *Legendarium* mimics the change in the type of story that's being told—a story that is darker and more transformative.

Elvish song is drastically more important in the story of *The Lord of the Rings*. The Ring is identified by the Elvish inscription on its band. Although Elves are necessary to the formation of the fellowship and Legolas is present throughout the journey, they are not as significant to *The Lord of the Rings* as one might assume knowing that their involvement in the history of the ring. As the Age of Men dawns, Elves have a decreased stake in the future of Middle-earth. When Elves are first introduced in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, it is once again by singing, but they already seem more noble or ancient than the playful singers in *The Hobbit*. From the outset, *The Lord of the Rings* is more solemn than the *Hobbit*. The Elves in *The Fellowship of the Ring* have a depth of knowledge about Sauron and the Ring that is invaluable to the fellowship. When Legolas sings of Nimrodel as the company nears

Lothlórien he tells of the ancient splendor of the Elves (*Fellowship* 330). Elven songs like this one connect Elves with light and with the stars, themes that are important to the formation of Arda in *The Silmarillion*. Legolas tells of what awaits the Elves—a journey West (*Fellowship* 331). Galadriel sings a song with similar themes, and mourns her time in Lórien: “Too long I have dwelt upon this Hither Shore... but if of ships I now should sing, what ship would come to me, what ship would bear me ever back across so wide a Sea?” (*Fellowship* 363) The Elves often have this distinctive sadness in their voice, and the sense of being called West. In this way, the Elves are constantly being reminded of their creation and of the vast history of their world that they had lived through. Galadriel is an example of why elven songs are important, because she sings not only of the history of the world, but of the countless years that she has walked it. The songs of both the Dwarves and the Elves are essential to understanding the history of Middle-earth. *The Silmarillion* reads similarly to a history book, but the rest of the Legendarium relies on the oral history passed through songs and poems to explain the past and to prophesy about the future (Eilmann 101).

Elvish songs are described as “sweet” and as offering comfort. Their music speaks of heartbreak, darkness, and the passing of time, but it also speaks of creation, Ilúvatar, and a call back to the light. When Sam arrives at Lórien he remarks that he felt as if he was “inside the song (*Fellowship* 342).” This is an instant in which Sam might be seen as having less of an understanding of the world and less experience with the beauty of the Elves, but really this moment is an important gateway between *The Silmarillion* and the rest of the Legendarium. Sam does not remark that the song is beautiful, he says that he feels that he is a part of the song. Even Haldir, an elf, does not see this as a connection to Ilúvatar and the song of the Ainur. This moment in the story is an important connection between the

fellowship and the holiness of the Elves. Sam is able to see that what he is experiencing goes beyond the created world (Eilmann 99).

The journey of the hobbits in both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* involves the creation of and recitation of many songs. Bilbo discovers a skill for creating songs when he taunts the spiders in Mirkwood Forest (*Hobbit* 147). As he returns to the Shire at the end of his adventure he speaks of never-ending roads and journeys ending where they began, a poem that leads Gandalf to exclaim, “you are not the hobbit that you once were (*Hobbit* 274).” Bilbo adds to this song as he leaves the Shire in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, realizing that the road is calling him once more.

Bilbo and Frodo are similar in their use of songs, because they both articulate the draw to leave the Shire and follow a larger calling. It is essential to note that, when Frodo begins his journey to Rivendell he uses Bilbo’s same departure song, but with a dark change. Bilbo sings that he will pursue the road “with eager feet” (*Fellowship* 35), but Frodo changes this line in his own departure so to “with weary feet (*Fellowship* 72).” This alteration is very much in line with the type of adventure Frodo is embarking on, and with his outlook on the journey ahead. There is a solemnness surrounding his mission, and a feeling that he has agreed to an ill-fated mission. Through the hobbits, song is used to articulate the underlying themes of the story. Bilbo gained the Ring on his adventure, and now Frodo will fight to lose it. The weight of this calling is clear as Frodo approaches Mordor and feels the weight of the Ring almost too great for him to continue.

Frodo has a passage in *The Fellowship of the Ring* similar to Sam’s experience of Elvish music in Lórien. As he sits in Elrond’s Hall of Fire, Bilbo sings a song than takes Frodo into a dreamlike state. Instead of simply hearing Bilbo’s song, Frodo sees and feels it:

Almost it seemed that the words took shape, and visions of far lands and bright things that he had never yet imagined opened out before him; and the firelit hall became like a golden mist above seas of foam that sighed upon the margins of the world. Then the enchantment became more and more dreamlike, until he felt that an endless river of swelling gold and silver was flowing over him, too multitudinous for its pattern to be comprehended; it became part of the throbbing air about him, and it drenched and drowned him. (*Fellowship* 227)

This passage brings music into a different dimension. Frodo describes something that is outside of the physical world, or that is outside of time. This song affects him much like Tom Bombadil and Goldberry's song—he is lulled into a dream-like state. Once again, the reader finds that art is an experience that connects Middle-earth to the deep spiritual history of Tolkien's stories. In his essay "I Am the Song," Julian Tim Morton Eilmann compares Sam's experience of being within the song to Frodo's experiences of the song flowing all around him—also putting him within the song. "More than that, owing to the dreamlike boundlessness that culminates in the joyful experience of unification, he would be able to say, 'I am the song'" (Eilmann 106). Sam and Frodo's descriptions of music point to the same important theme, that creation is art. Sam and Frodo experience Elvish song, which is a form of sub-creation that is in line with Ilúvatar's creation. The transcendent quality of these songs is a result of the creative potential the Elves possess (Eilmann 104).

Frodo's experience also brings about another important point about song: the connection with water. Water is described in *Ainulindalë* as a musical sound that draws listeners to it in an inexplicable way. Ilúvatar speaks to Ulmo saying, "Behold rather the

height and glory of the clouds, and the everchanging mists; and listen to the fall of rain upon the Earth! And in these clouds thou art drawn nearer to Manwë, thy friend, whom thou lovest (*Silmarillion* 19).” Ilúvatar himself describes the power of the sound of water and there is a hint of the spiritual underlying flowing water. Characters note this connection throughout the Legendarium. In *The Silmarillion* we learn that water is a comfort and a calling: “In water their lives yet the echo of the Music of the Ainur more than in any substance else that is in this Earth; and many of the Children of Ilúvatar hearken still unsated to the voices of the Sea, and yet know not for what they listen (*Silmarillion* 19).” The first music Elves hear is the sound of running water. Although Men are given dominion over earth, they are left with a deep yearning to “seek beyond the world (*Silmarillion* 41).” In the same way, the Elves feel a call to the sea and to the West. Even though the Hobbits are naturally afraid of water, it is an essential element of their journey. The crossing of rivers and travel on rivers as well as Frodo’s experience of song as water show the connection between water and their story. In Tolkien’s unused epilogue to *The Lord of the Rings*, Sam hears the sound of waves on the shore, calling him to journey West.

The songs of Men express many important themes of the Legendarium. Although some songs focus on history, love, and prophecy, many focus on war, honor, and memorializing the dead. In *The Hobbit*, the Men of the Lake sing of a prophecy fulfilled—a king returned to his hall and the goodness that is to come. Aragorn quotes songs and poems about kings of old, and the people sing of Aragorn as their long-awaited king. As stated earlier, music and poetry in Middle-earth are an important form of oral history. Among the Men we see that song is used to rally troops and call them to battle. The Men of Rohan are

an especially important example of the use of songs for success in battle. As the Rohirrim moved towards Minas Tirith and prepared to fight to the death, Théoden urged them:

*Arise, arise, Riders of Théoden!
Fell deeds awake: fire and slaughter!
spear shall be shaken, shield be splintered,
a sword-day, a red day, ere the sun rises!
Ride now, ride now! Ride to Gondor!* (quoting *Return of the King* 820)

For the Men of Rohan, music is the most basic form of language. Songs are used to learn history, but more importantly to teach morals. These songs teach the importance of honor, and that honor often involves laying down one's life. Rohan illustrates another important function of music—inspiring men to march to the death. At Helm's Deep, all hope seems to be lost, and in this moment Théoden rides out fearlessly to face the enemy head on (*Two Towers* 528). His self-sacrifice inspires his men, but also exemplifies the belief that losing one's life in battle can be honorable.

The story of the Men is different from that of the Elves; a truth that is seen through the differing songs between the two groups. The Elves have a long history in Middle-earth, a history that many of them were alive for, but Men are mortal and have to face death more readily. At the same time, the *Legendarium* takes place during a time of turnover, when Elves are departing and Men are coming into a greater power in Middle-earth. In this transitional time, the war over Middle-earth requires the sacrifice of the lives of older men. The war does not entail old men sending young men to war or a government sending boys to war, but middle-aged men being called to fight for their people. Tolkien would reject an allegorical reading of this element on the *Legendarium*, but it is still interesting to note the similarities between this element of the work and World War II. This portion of the story

was written before World War II could have had an influence, but the paralleled truths show the realistic nature of war in Middle-earth (Croft 58).

Songs are used throughout the Legendarium not only to tell the history of Middle-earth, but also to tell of honorable men and epic tales. Aragorn uses the story of Beren son of Barahir and Lúthien Tinúviel to satisfy Sam's desire of a story from the past (*Fellowship* 187). Beyond that, the story illustrates a tale of the relationship between Men and Elves, and is a mirror image of Aragorn's own relationship with Arwen. The Dwarves of *The Hobbit*, Gimli, Legolas, Aragorn, and many other characters tell tales of their ancestors, often in the form of songs and poems. These characters also ponder the fact that they may one day be in these songs.

Frodo and Sam have an important exchange about ending up in legends one day. Sam uses future stories and songs to raise Frodo's spirits. Sam realizes that they are a part of a great story, and that one-day they may be remembered in song. Just like Sam's profound statement about the songs of the Elves earlier, he recognizes the importance of playing a role in these epic adventures. He even notes that stories that end with unchanged characters and an unchanged world are not the most meaningful tales. Importantly, Sam states that their journey is still a part of the larger story that has been passed down through time, and that they are carrying the last light from Galadriel (*Two Towers* 696). Sam sees hope in their situation, not necessarily hope that they will survive, but hope that some good will come out of this. His hope is derived from the songs and stories he heard as a child—songs where ordinary people became a part of a much bigger story. Frodo and Sam have the interesting task of writing their own story. Bilbo chronicled his own journey, Frodo adds to it, and Sam is left with the task of completing it. These stories do not become songs,

but song is still important to the memory of these characters. Bilbo sings of his journey and the history of Middle-earth, and Frodo has moments of creating songs as well.

The songs of Men are as important in Middle-earth as the songs of the Elves. Whether Rohan sings of battle and glory or Gondor honors their ascending king, these songs hold a deep cultural and spiritual meaning for the men. Those who write and sing songs are sub-creators, but the Valar expressed that Man is a part of the music of Arda. “The Valar declared to the Elves in Valinor that Men shall join in the Second Music of the Ainur (*Silmarillion* 42).” Within this quote lies an important truth: music was used to create the world, but at the end of time the song will continue. The songs of individual characters and cultural groups all connect to an unseen power through the themes of honor, prophecy, remembrance, and a call to water. The music that was used to create the world was beautiful beyond description, but the song at the end of time will be even more beautiful.

Works Cited

Crost, Janet Brennan. *War and the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2004. Print

Eilmann, Julian Tim Morton. "I Am the Song: Music, Poetry, and the Transcendent in J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth." *Light Beyond All Shadow: Religious Experience In Tolkien's Work*. Ed. Paul E. Kerry & Sandra Miesel. Plymouth: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2011. 99-117. Print.

Harvey, David. *The Song of Middle-Earth*. North Sydney: George Allen & Unwin (Publishers) Ltd., 1985. Print.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1994. Print.

---. *The Hobbit*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2007. Print.

---. *The Return of the King*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1994. Print.

---. *The Silmarillion*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2001. Print.

---. *The Two Towers*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1994. Print.