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# Archaic Pronouns in *The Lord of the Rings*

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## *Introduction*

The study of the archaic and medieval influences in JRR Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (henceforth *Rings*) has become a staple of Tolkien studies. Giants in the field, like Tom Shippey and Verlyn Flieger, have painted a picture of the influence of medieval texts on Tolkien's writing as one of the primary factors underlying his works and use of language. Given this interest in Tolkien's love of the medieval and in his language use, it is surprising that so little attention has been given to his use of second-person archaic pronouns. Archaic pronouns are the singular *thou*, *thy*, *thee*, *thine* and plural *ye* pronouns (*ye* was also used as a polite singular on some occasions). These pronouns were used in the English language between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, after which, these forms were replaced by *you* in Modern English (although they still persist to some extent in Scottish dialects, Irish English, religious practices and in idioms).<sup>1</sup> In every interaction, speakers would mediate and consider which pronouns were appropriate for the scenario based on different social criteria such as the status of the speaker and the addressee, 'the degree of social distance between them [...], the level of emotion, the level of formality, and the specific context (location/purpose) of the dialogue'.<sup>2</sup> The use of these pronouns in *Rings* reflects these same nuances. Throughout *Rings*, the characters consistently use *ye*, *thee*, *thy* and *thou* in ways reminiscent of Middle and Early Modern English. For example, the reader sees Denethor refute Gandalf by using *thou* and *thee*, yet also sees Éowyn entreat Aragorn by switching to the same second-person pronoun. That this was done consciously on the part of the author is almost certain. It goes without saying that Tolkien was a linguistic genius and fascinated by the development of languages; most notably, he developed an Elvish language family tree based on Finnish and Welsh which developed along recognizable linguistic patterns.<sup>3</sup> However, for the 'mannish' languages (particularly Westron, or the Common Speech), he rendered these explicitly in English (for instance, the Rohirric language was based on the Mercian dialect of Old English). It is partly through archaic pronouns that Tolkien affords the English rendering of these fantasy languages with historical linguistic properties.

Based on close reading of the primary text and comparative analysis with historical literature, the present paper aims to show that Tolkien used his knowledge of Early English second-person forms of address to enhance the internal cohesion and realism of his fictitious world. This will be demonstrated through Tolkien's literary theory for fairy-stories, which he outlined in his 1939 lecture "On Fairy Stories", described by Verlyn Flieger as Tolkien's 'definitive statement

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<sup>1</sup> Graham Shorrocks, 'Case Assignment in Simple and Coordinate Constructions in Present-Day English', *American Speech*, 67.4 (1992), 432–444 (pp. 433–438).

<sup>2</sup> Terry Walker, *Thou and You in Early Modern English Dialogues*, (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2007), p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> The Elvish languages went from Primitive Quendian to Common Eldarin and eventually into Sindarin and Quenya. Khuzdul (Dwarvish) and Adunaic (the language of the Numenoreans) were both designed to sound Semitic.

about his art'.<sup>4</sup> It maintains that there are three tenets for a convincing "Fairy story" – (1) it must be consistent and immersive in its quality, (2) it must teach its audience something when they "return" to the real world, (3) the climax of the story must point towards Jesus' defeat over evil. Each of these tenets support and strengthen the quality of the fairy story. It will be demonstrated that in *Rings*, the use of archaic pronouns supports these three tenets. First, the use of archaic pronouns between characters is both consistent and creates emotional complexity, both of which foster immersion. Second, archaic pronoun usage teaches *Rings*' audience the value of archaic language in the transmission of the past. Finally, archaic pronouns are used to link *Rings* to the Psalms and Jesus' victory over evil. Through these three tenets, Tolkien infuses his world with emotional, historical and spiritual depth.

### *Linguistic Background*

There is a long history of scholarship that attempts to determine the nature of pronoun addresses in the medieval and early modern periods, and how they should be interpreted. R. Brown and A. Gilman are noted for their influential 1960 article where they explained the dimensions of Latin *tu* (T) and *vos* (V) in terms of the parameters of 'power' and 'solidarity'.<sup>5</sup> A person's level of power is determined by how they refer to, and were referred to themselves, by an inferior or superior. A superior uses T but receives V from an inferior. Solidarity amongst equals increases the likelihood of T being used to express intimacy and V to express formality. Switching between pronouns was used to express contempt, irony or mockery.<sup>6</sup> However, this view has been criticized by K.M. Wales who observes that 'a theory based on universals can be too "powerful", to the point, paradoxically, of crudity'.<sup>7</sup> She argues instead for a model which allows room for 'individual variation or development on the part of specific speech communities'.<sup>8</sup> According to Wales, the pronoun forms gradually went from a gradient of polite or impolite usage, to an unmarked versus marked distinction, until eventually *you* replaced *thee/thou* altogether.<sup>9</sup> A marked distinction involves the expected pronoun being replaced by the unexpected pronoun, thus making the exchange additionally meaningful or exciting '[i]n cases where *you* is expected, the occurrence of *thou* indicates that the speaker is emotionally aroused, and thus *thou* is marked for affect, making *you* the unmarked or default form.'<sup>10</sup>

The marked/unmarked model has been criticized by some scholars (Calvo 1992, Hope 1993, Jucker 2000), who argue that our interpretation of pronoun usage should not be over-generalized but should be considered on a case-by-case basis instead. While this paper agrees that in essence, the marked/unmarked model often hinders correct analysis of pronoun usage in medieval and early modern texts, for Tolkien's work it is suitable.

In Tolkien's works, archaic pronouns such as *thou*, *thee*, *thy* and *ye* are only uttered seventy-eight times across twenty-four different exchanges; as Tolkien describes it, the 'deferential' *thou/thee* forms had receded out of the Common Speech, with only the most skilled and learned

<sup>4</sup> Verlyn Flieger, 'Verlyn Flieger "On Fairy Stories"', *TolkienEstate.com* (accessed 26 Dec 2023), <https://www.tolkienestate.com/scholarship/verlyn-flieger-on-fairy-stories/>.

<sup>5</sup> R. Brown and A. Gilman, 'The pronouns of power and solidarity', in *Style in Language*, ed. by T. A. Sebeok, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), pp. 253–276 (pp. 256–257).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>7</sup> K.M. Wales, 'Thou and you in early modern English: Brown and Gilman re-appraised', *Studia Linguistica*, 37, 107–125 (p. 122).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 116–117.

<sup>10</sup> R. Brown and A. Gilman, 'Politeness theory and Shakespeare's four major tragedies', *Language in Society*, 18 (1989), 159–212 (pp. 177–8).

characters adopting them in specific contexts.<sup>11</sup> Instead *you* in *Rings* is the unmarked, default form for discourse, making any archaic pronoun by extension deviant, or ‘marked’. This was noticed by Betty J. Irwin, who wrote a brief article on the topic of archaic pronoun usage in *Rings*. Irwin writes: ‘Tolkien’s use of [archaic pronouns] is effective for the simple reason that he does not use the form often; when he does use this archaic pronoun, the reader is alerted to some significant and serious event.’<sup>12</sup> Irwin’s study primarily focused on identifying which type of archaic pronouns are used and to what effect (derogatory, referential, expressions of affection etc.), but she does not address the potential contribution the use of archaic pronoun makes to the themes discussed in *Rings*. The one other Tolkien scholar who (briefly) addresses the topic is Tom Shippey in his celebrated work *The Road to Middle Earth* (1985). Shippey briefly notes how the different functions of pronoun use coincide with the different ‘styles’ of *Rings*, from the low style of the *Hobbits* (who do not use archaic pronouns) to the high style, to the brief instances of the sublime.<sup>13</sup> This will be examined in more detail below. In order to address this gap in the literature, this paper aims to study pronoun usage in *Rings* from a marked/unmarked linguistic framework, treating each occurrence of an archaic pronoun as significant and as a window of insight into the dynamics of the characters and the linguistic realism of the world that they inhabit.

### *Literary Background*

This paper argues that unmarked/marked pronoun forms of second-person address are used to reinforce a literary theoretical framework proposed by Tolkien himself in his lecture ‘On Fairy Stories’ (1939). In ‘On Fairy Stories’, Tolkien outlined his literary manifesto for writing stories about Faërie (this Tolkien defines as stories that take place in the realm of Faërie, the Perilous Realm, which include satire, adventure, morality, and fantasy stories): the kinds of stories that first led him, in his childhood, to divine ‘the potency of words, and the wonder of things’.<sup>14</sup> It is therefore essential that this theory be used to analyze language in his works. First, according to Tolkien, a true ‘fairy story should primarily be real. These narratives cannot be a ‘dream story’ like, for example, *Alice in Wonderland*.<sup>15</sup> They must be internally consistent and convince the reader they exist. He describes this as ‘the inner consistency of reality’; the ‘successful “sub-creator” [...] makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is ‘true’: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside.’<sup>16</sup> The second tenet of his theory holds that, by extension, when the reader ‘returns’ to the real world, they have gained a new ‘perspective’ on their own world by virtue of comparison. Tolkien calls this ‘recovery’, wherein the reader regains a clear perspective on their own world.<sup>17</sup> Finally, fairy stories should offer moral consolation through their happy ending; they should be ‘eucatastrophic’, a term Tolkien coined himself. A eucatastrophe occurs when a story turns from a main character meeting certain doom to a happy event which leads to a ‘good’ ending. At the lowest point of the story, suddenly the fates of the characters take a turn for the better. It combines the Greek ‘eu’ (meaning ‘good’), with the literary concept of ‘catastrophe’. While eucatastrophe has since its invention been deployed in

<sup>11</sup> Tolkien, J. R. R., *The Lord of the Rings*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishing, 1954), p. 1489. E-book.

<sup>12</sup> Betty J. Irwin, ‘Archaic Pronouns in *The Lord of the Rings*’, *Mythlore*, 14.1 (1987), 46-47 (p. 46).

<sup>13</sup> T. A. Shippey, *The Road to Middle Earth: How J.R.R. Tolkien Created a New Mythology*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishing, 1992), p. 240-2.

<sup>14</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, ed. by Verlyn Flieger and A. Anderson, (New York: HarperCollins Publishing, 2014), pp. 69.

<sup>15</sup> He also excludes ‘Beast-fables’ from fairy-stories, that is, stories that have no human or fantastical actors, only animals. This is adjunct to fairy-stories, but not part of it. *Ibid*, 35.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 52, 60.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 67.

literary circles to describe these turns in the story, according to Tolkien, for an ending to be properly eucatastrophic, it must also ultimately point to Jesus's victory over evil.<sup>18</sup> This is because eucatastrophe 'has pre-eminently the "inner consistency of reality"'. There is no tale [such as Jesus' victory of evil] ever told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many skeptical men have accepted as true on its own merits'.<sup>19</sup> The following analysis will show that the use of archaic second-person pronouns in *Rings* help the narrative meet these three requirements.

This paper is, therefore, undoubtedly biased towards the author- Tolkien's 'tenets' for what a fairy story must be fit his personal preferences quite closely. As a devout Catholic, for example, it is unsurprising that Tolkien felt fairy-stories should ultimately be eucatastrophic in their conclusion. Whether the (modern day) reader is similarly affected is as such not the focus of this paper, instead the aim is to discuss the intentions of the text, and therefore to demonstrate how the careful inclusion of archaic pronouns in *Rings* enriches its story and from the author's perspective adds depth and complexity to the worldbuilding.

### *Emotional interactions and the 'inner consistency of reality'*

The first function of fairy-stories according to Tolkien is to immerse the reader by creating an 'inner consistency of reality'. Archaic pronouns are used in *Rings* to underpin the story's inner cohesion by having the characters adhere to consistent linguistic laws that are modelled on Early Modern English and reflect their emotions, motivations and status. Insightful examples of this technique are witnessed in exchanges between Éowyn, Arwen, Aragorn and the Witch-king.

The first notable interaction occurs between Aragorn and Éowyn. After Aragorn announces that he is going to go to the Paths of the Dead, Éowyn confronts him and begs him not to go, as 'I do not bid you flee from peril, but to ride to battle where your sword may win renown and victory. I would not see a thing that is high and excellent cast away needlessly'.<sup>20</sup> Before and throughout this exchange the tension between these characters has been rising and the reader is being primed to anticipate a confession of romantic feelings. For example, the reader is told that '[Éowyn's] eyes were ever upon Aragorn, and the others saw that she was in great torment of mind'.<sup>21</sup> Aragorn seems to be aware that the discussion is leading up to a confession, as he carefully tells Éowyn, 'Were I to go where my heart dwells, far in the North I would now be wandering in the fair valley of Rivendell'.<sup>22</sup> Rivendell is the home of Aragorn's fiancé, Arwen Undómiel. This seems to fall on deaf ears as Éowyn is for a while 'silent, as if pondering what this might mean. Then suddenly she laid her hand on his arm'.<sup>23</sup> With these interactions, Tolkien consistently increases the tension between the characters and heightens audience expectations. Yet, once the conversation reaches its climax, Éowyn rather cryptically tells Aragorn, 'Neither cause [to go to the South] have those others who go with *thee*. They go only because they would not be parted from *thee* – because they love *thee*' (emphasis mine).<sup>24</sup> To modern ears, this exchange seems to fall short of an outright confession of love, and yet it most certainly is one. Throughout this conversation Aragorn and Éowyn have been addressing each other using the unmarked *you*, until this pivotal moment when Éowyn

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 75.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 78.

<sup>20</sup> Tolkien, *Rings*, p. 1027.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 1026.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

mentions love, and uses the marked *thou*. This instance parallels similar occurrences in Shakespeare's plays when high born lovers, prepared to declare their love, move from cautious *you* to ardent *thou*. This is seen with Romeo and Juliet, Benedick and Beatrice, Portia and Bassanio, and Rosaline and Orlando.<sup>25</sup> Compare, for example, how Benedick from *Much Ado About Nothing* switches from *you* to *thee* in this confession scene:

Benedick: I will swear by it that you love me, and I will make him eat it that says I love not you.

Beatrice: Will you not eat your word?

Benedick: With no sauce that can be devised to it. I protest I love thee.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, before Juliet and Romeo kiss, she tells him 'Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much'<sup>27</sup> but afterwards she only addresses him with *thee* and *thou*. Tolkien in fact acknowledges this technique, writing in the footnotes of the Appendices: 'Since this pronoun is now unusual and archaic it is employed mainly to represent the use of ceremonious language; but a change from *you* to *thou*, *thee* is sometimes meant to show, there being no other means of doing this, a significant change from the deferential, or between men and women normal, forms to the familiar.'<sup>28</sup>

However, directly after Éowyn pronounces her love, she leaves and the interaction ends, leaving the reader in the dark about Aragorn's feelings. This question is resolved rather quickly in the very next scene, when Aragorn and Éowyn interact yet again. Here, the reader can see that Aragorn insists on referring to her with the unmarked and neutral *you*, despite Éowyn's repeated use of only *thou* and *thee*:

But she said: 'Aragorn, wilt thou go?'

'I will,' he said.

'Then wilt thou not let me ride with this company, as I have asked?'

'I will not, lady,' he said. 'For that I could not grant without leave of the king and of your brother; and they will not return until tomorrow. But I count now every hour, indeed every minute. Farewell!'

Then she fell on her knees, saying: 'I beg thee!'<sup>29</sup>

This exchange makes it obvious that Aragorn is keeping Éowyn at arm's length, but his reasons for doing so are not entirely clear. The truth behind Aragorn's feelings is again only indicated by the

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<sup>25</sup> Sister St. Geraldine Byrne, *Shakespeare's Use of the Pronoun of Address; its Significance in Characterization and Motivation*, (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1936), p. 153.

It is a common conception that Tolkien despised Shakespeare and actively sought to deconstruct his work. For a defense of relying on Shakespeare to analyze and study Tolkien's works, see Shippey, pp 200-09.

<sup>26</sup> William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing* ed. by B. Mowat, P. Werstine, M. Poston, and R. Niles, (The Folger Shakespeare, n.d.), 4.1.290-294. E-book.

<sup>27</sup> William Shakespeare, *Romeo & Juliet*, ed. by B. Mowat, P. Werstine, M. Poston, and R. Niles, (The Folger Shakespeare, n.d.), 1.5.108. E-book.

<sup>28</sup> Tolkien, *Rings*, p. 1490.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1028.

use of archaic pronouns. In an earlier scene, Aragorn is seen talking to a fellow Dúnedain who brings a message to him from Arwen, which reads: ‘The days now are short. Either our hope cometh, or all hope’s end. Therefore I send thee what I have made for thee. Fare you well Elfstone!’<sup>30</sup> For first-time readers of *Rings*, this is the only indicator that Aragorn and Arwen have a romantic relationship until they marry near the end of the book. Yet Arwen and Eowyn use *thou* in the same way -- the only suggestion attentive readers will get as to why Aragorn will not accept Eowyn. Aragorn instead insists on referring to Éowyn with the unmarked *you*, showing he does not return her affections. Yet he does respect and care for her. In analogous scenes in Early Modern English plays, readers find that often the person turning down the adamant suitor will refer to them with the contemptuous *thee*. For example, see how in *Midsummer Night’s Dream* Demetrius tells Helena, ‘I love thee not, therefore pursue me not [...] Tempt not too much the hatred of my spirit for I am sick when I do look on thee’<sup>31</sup>, or how Hermia tells Demetrius ‘Out, dog! out, cur! Thou drivest me past the bounds of maiden’s patience.’<sup>32</sup> In direct contrast to these traditional scenes, Aragorn does not use derogatory *thee*, preferring an unmarked *you*. Aragorn is a noble character and would not speak contemptuously to a lady.

Nevertheless his feelings go beyond simple respect, he also cares about Éowyn, albeit platonically. This is made clear in their last interaction, after Éowyn is throthplighted to Faramir:

Then Éowyn looked in the eyes of Aragorn, and she said: ‘Wish me joy, my liege-lord and healer!’

And he answered: ‘I have wished thee joy ever since first I saw thee. It heals my heart to see thee now in bliss.’<sup>33</sup>

Clearly, before Éowyn was linked romantically to someone else, Aragorn could not safely refer to her with an affectionate *thee* (despite undoubtedly caring about her) because of her feelings for him. Once she is betrothed to Faramir, he refers to her with an affectionate *thee* three times, a repetition so overt that it is almost impossible to miss. The use of pronouns in these interactions show remarkably consistent parallels with similar exchanges in Early Modern works. These parallels facilitate Aragorn’s image as a nobleman who acts wisely and regally in both personal and diplomatic situations. However, Éowyn’s feelings go beyond that of mere infatuation and are as nuanced as Aragorn’s, as becomes apparent in her confrontation with the Witch-King.

The Witch-King is another character who employs archaic pronouns when addressing Éowyn, and in doing so reveals underlying commentary regarding the nature of her feelings for Aragorn. This exchange is different to other interactions Éowyn has had because she has now undergone a class and gender transformation. She is no longer Lady Éowyn but has become Dernhelm, a low ranking soldier. Often in Early Modern English plays, an adoption of a disguise is reflected in the character’s second-person pronouns changing. In the play *The Covntrie Girle* by Anthony Brewer, a young chambermaid assumes the disguise of her lady. She is normally addressed as *you* (twenty-two times), yet when she is a lowly servant, she is usually addressed with the derogatory *thou*.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Dernhelm is addressed by the Witch-King with the derogatory *thou* to reflect his low status.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 1015.

<sup>31</sup> William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, ed. by B. Mowat, P. Werstine, M. Poston, and R. Niles, (The Folger Shakespeare, n.d.), 2.1.195-219. E-book.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 3.2.67.

<sup>33</sup> Tolkien, *Rings*, p. 1028.

<sup>34</sup> Walker, p. 199.

‘Come not between the Nazgul and his prey! Or he will not slay thee in thy turn. He will bear thee away to the houses of lamentation, beyond all darkness, where thy flesh shall be devoured, and thy shrivelled mind be left naked to the Lidless Eye.’

A sword rang as it was drawn. ‘Do what you will; but I will hinder it, if I may.’

‘Hinder me? Thou fool. No living man may hinder me!’<sup>35</sup>

This clearly parallels similar “disguise” scenarios in Early Modern plays, but this pronoun use also reflects the Witch-King’s own character. As a microcosm of his character, this use of *thou* shows both his very ancient nature and his proud and disdainful personality, arguably the two most essential components of his character. As Terry Walker writes, using *thou* as a derogatory mark of class was one of its most outdated uses, and quickly became antiquated by the 17th century. He notes:

There is some change over time with regard to address to servants: in the first period thou is clearly the preferred pronoun of address, but after 1600, thou is used more to others’ servants (often when the servants are able to aid in a scheme) [...] Although not relating solely to servants, the evidence of a decline in thou to inferiors in my data is supported by the quantitative results of Johnson (1959, 1966) for the seventeenth century [...] as well as the qualitative results of Bock’s (1938) study: he finds there is no thou to inferiors at all after 1705.<sup>36</sup>

The Witch-king’s antiquated use of *thou* shows he is both ancient and out of touch. This characterization is reinforced by the fact that the only other characters to use derogatory *thou* in *Rings* are Denethor and The Mouth of Sauron, two characters who are either ancient or antiquated, and who both have proud and disdainful dispositions. It is no coincidence that the Witch-King uses the derogatory *thou* form no less than six times in one exchange; the repetition emphasizes all these aspects of his character. Tolkien effectively harnesses the subtleties of Early Modern derogatory forms of address to tell the reader everything they need to know about the Witch King as an antagonist to Éowyn, even though he says so little and appears so briefly.

However, the *thou* in this scene between the Witch-king and Éowyn also recalls Éowyn’s earlier conversation with Aragorn. In that conversation Éowyn repeatedly mentions how she desperately wants to fight and seek glory, partly out of a desire to follow Aragorn. She says ‘You are a stern lord and resolute [...] and thus do men win renown. [...] Lord, if you must go, then let me ride in your following. For I am weary of skulking in the hills, and wish to face peril and battle’<sup>37</sup> Even Faramir realizes this, telling her ‘You desired to have the love of the Lord Aragorn. Because he was high and puissant, and you wished to have renown and glory and to be lifted far above the mean things that crawl on the earth. And as a great captain may to a young soldier he seemed to you admirable.’<sup>38</sup> Éowyn projects all her hopes and fears for her life onto Aragorn and interprets it as

<sup>35</sup> Tolkien, *Rings*, pp. 1010-11.

<sup>36</sup> Walker, p. 234.

<sup>37</sup> Tolkien, *Rings*, 1026.

<sup>38</sup> Tolkien, *Rings*, 1263.



love. So for Éowyn to receive her longed-for *thou* on the battlefield, and for it to be used in a derogatory rather than affectionate manner, is Tolkien weaponizing the complexity of his pronoun usage to ironic literary effect. This reversal of an affectionate term to derogatory exposes Éowyn's glorification of love and war as perverted and fallacious; instead of offering her the meaning she has been expecting and anticipating, she finds herself dehumanized by a shadowy entity who robs her of her father figure and will to live. It is no coincidence that the arc of Éowyn and Faramir's relationship revolves around dismantling the idea of glory on the battlefield in favor of healing and home, deconstructing the close relationship love and honor have in Éowyn's mind.

Despite using these pronouns so sparingly, each instance marks the interaction as significant and crystallizes the dynamic between the characters. Through only five such interactions, Tolkien sets up a nuanced love triangle showing Aragorn's platonic affection and torn feelings, foreshadows his eventual marriage to the Lady of Rivendell, and artfully portrays the hollowness of Éowyn's complicated 'love' for Aragorn, which is really a twisted desire for glory. The myriad of emotions, status', and motivations held by each cast member is always relayed accurately to the reader by archaic pronoun usage that is consistent with how they were used in equivalent Early Modern scenes. The linguistic consistency created by the accurate use of archaic pronouns meet Tolkien's first criteria of fairy story, to create an 'inner consistency of reality' which becomes 'immersive'.

#### *Transmission of the past and 'recovery'*

Besides characterizing interactions between characters, archaic pronouns are often used to recall oaths, sing old songs, or tell old tales. Not only does this deepen Middle Earth's world-building, but it also highlights the fresh perspective the reader will 'recover' when they return from the immersive world to their own: the value of tradition and the past. It is noteworthy that societies in *Rings* that do not value the past, or are not ancient themselves, do not use archaic pronouns. The Hobbits, who are 'the most modernistic and novelistic characters in the book' use the 'low' style, and are therefore never heard using archaic pronoun forms. Shippey comments that this is an 'obvious consequence of the Western world's fifteen-hundred-year long climb down the ladder of literary modes'.<sup>39</sup> Their low style is the result of in-universe linguistic development, but also sounds the most contemporary and serves as the entry point for the reader. It is because their point of view (rural Victorian British farmers) is so familiar and mundane that the archaic registers of the following characters, by contrast, invoke elements of the mythical and fantastical. The users of archaic pronouns can be sorted into two groups: aristocratic (Aragorn, Éowyn, Faramir, Denethor) and ancient (Gandalf, the Witch-King, Arwen, Galadriel, the High Elves, Treebeard and the Mouth of Sauron). Both groups use the 'high' style of discourse which is described by Elizabeth Kirk as being 'the highly decorated [...] and the deliberately archaic, alliterative and sonorous, weighted with proper names from "other languages" and often inverting usual word order or adding, in opposition, information of no direct, utilitarian relevance'.<sup>40</sup> (The final style, that of the sublime, will be examined in more detail later.) The distinction between the low and high styles and their relation to archaic pronouns is recognized by Tolkien, who writes, for example, how,

Peregrin Took [...] in his first few days in Minas Tirith used the familiar [pronoun] for people of all ranks, including the Lord Denethor himself. This may have amused the aged Steward, but it must have astonished his servants. No

<sup>39</sup> Shippey, pp. 240, 366.

<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth D. Kirk, "I Would Rather Have Written in Elvish": Language, Fiction and "The Lord of the Rings", *A Forum on Fiction*, 5.1 (1971), 5-18 (p. 14).

doubt this free use of the familiar forms helped to spread the popular rumour that Peregrin was a person of very high rank in his own country.<sup>41</sup>

The difference between low and high styles, Tolkien writes, ‘was intentional [as] all the enemies of the Enemy revered what was ancient, in language no less than in other matters, and they took pleasure in it according to their knowledge. The Eldar [...] spoke most naturally in a manner nearest to their own speech, one even more antique than that of Gondor’.<sup>42</sup> Whereas the modern hobbits do not use archaic pronouns, ancient (reverent) cultures, like those of Gondor, Rohan and the Eldar, do. Using archaic pronouns in Tolkien’s world is therefore intrinsically connected with having knowledge of the past and revering it.

A striking example of this is the appearance of archaic pronouns in the *Elven Hymn to Elbereth*. Elbereth is otherwise known as Varda Elentari, the Valar who is the Queen of Heaven. As the hymn is being sung in Sindarin, the language of the elves of Rivendell, Frodo attempts to translate what he understands, which is the version that the reader receives. The song bears a notable resemblance to *A Elbereth Gilthoniel*, another Sindarin hymn. Indeed, it might well be that song, but mistranslated in certain parts by Frodo. The *Elven Hymn* reads:

*Snow-white! Snow-white! O  
Lady clear! O Queen  
beyond the Western Seas!*

*O light to us that  
wander here Amid  
the world of woven  
trees!*

*Gilthoniel! O Elbereth!*

*Clear are thy eyes and  
bright thy breath! Snow-  
white! Snow-white! We sing  
to thee In a far land beyond  
the seas.*

*O Stars that in the  
Sunless Year With  
shining hand by her  
were sown, In windy  
fields now bright and  
clear We see your silver  
blossom blown!*

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<sup>41</sup> Tolkien, *Rings*, p. 1490.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

*O Elbereth! Gilthoniel!*

*We still remember,  
we who dwell in this  
far land beneath the  
trees,*

*Thy starlight on the Western Seas.*<sup>43</sup>

Tolkien describes this song as a hymn in a letter, writing, ‘these [invocations to Elbereth] and other references to religion in *The Lord of the Rings* are frequently overlooked.’<sup>44</sup> Indeed, according to both Stratford Caldecott and Marjorie Burns, the hymn is very similar to John Lingard’s Marian hymn *Hail Queen of Heaven, the Ocean Star*, written in 1851. Caldecott claims that ‘Tolkien would have been familiar with one of the most popular Catholic hymns from his childhood, the tone and mood of which are markedly close to those of Tolkien’s song to Elbereth’.<sup>45</sup> More likely, however, is that Tolkien drew inspiration from Middle English Marian devotional lyrical poetry, which addresses the mother of God using *thou* and *thy*. In both cases, the use of the pronoun is intimate and devotional. Therefore, the elves repeat the hymn as a religious tradition. In terms of its contents, the hymn recalls the events recounted in *The Silmarillion* where Varda creates the stars, as seen in the line ‘O stars that in the Sunless Year with shining hand by her were sown’. According to Cami Agan: ‘through these allusions, Tolkien establishes another kind of “reality”: a “temporal layering” of ancient stories, both oral and written, which add weight not merely to the world of Middle Earth but also to its aesthetic creations: *its languages, its songs, and its literary transmission of history*’ (emphasis mine).<sup>46</sup> Here, the iteration of old language (including archaic second-person pronouns) facilitates the transmission of the past and a society’s history. More than just transmitting a society’s history, it also demonstrates the recurring cycles of Tolkien’s legendarium. This song explicitly recalls the ‘themes of “passing” associated with elves in all texts’,<sup>47</sup> as seen in the line ‘we still remember, we who dwell in this far land beneath the trees, thy starlight on the Western Seas’. Veneration of that which is lost is linked intrinsically to the Elves’ exile and their memory of older days. The use of archaic *thee* heightens the tragedy of their loss. A similar temporal layering, which emphasizes both the transmission of the past and its continued effect on the present (and the importance of language towards achieving this aim) is mentioned by Tolkien in his discussion of *Beowulf* in *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics* (1936).

If the funeral of Beowulf moved once like the echo of an ancient dirge, far-off and hopeless, it is *to us as a memory* brought over the hills, an echo of an echo. [...] Yet it is in fact written in a language that after many centuries has still essential kinship with our own, it was made in this land, and moves in our northern world beneath our northern sky, and for those who are native to that tongue and land, it must ever call with a profound appeal—until the dragon

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 104.

<sup>44</sup> Qtd. in Shippey, p. 73.

<sup>45</sup> Stratford Caldecott, ‘The Lord & Lady of the Rings The Hidden Presence of Tolkien’s Catholicism in The Lord of the Rings’, *Touchstone* (2002), (p. 22).

<sup>46</sup> Cami Agan, ‘Song as Mythic Conduit in *The Fellowship of the Ring*’, *Mythlore*, 26.¾ (2008), 41-63 (p. 44).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

*comes*.<sup>48</sup> (Emphasis mine).

Just as *Beowulf*'s language has emotional power over the modern reader and constructs a 'profound appeal' for England's descendants in the event of the cyclical return of 'the dragon', so too do the elves use archaic language to recall and venerate their past with an eye to the potential impact it holds to their future.

This trope is also seen in the invocation of past oaths and stories that Men (another culture besides Elves that Tolkien describes caring about the past) tell. Aragorn describes to his companions how Isildur, his forefather, cursed the Men of the White Mountains for turning their backs on him in the first battle against Sauron where 'Isildur said to their king: "Thou shalt be the last king. And if the West prove mightier than thy Black Master, this curse I lay upon thee and thy folk: to rest never until your oath is fulfilled. For this war will last through years uncounted, and you shall be summoned once again ere the end".'<sup>49</sup> When Aragorn comes to recruit the Men, he asks them, 'Oathbreakers, why have *ye* come?' When they tell him they have come to fulfill their oath, Aragorn tells them that 'The hour is come at last. Now I go to Pelargir upon Anduin, and *ye* shall come after me. And when all this land is clean of the servants of Sauron, I will hold the oath fulfilled, and *ye* shall have peace and part forever'<sup>50</sup> (emphasis mine). Here the use of archaic pronouns again shows the relationship between the past and the present, and the cyclical nature of Tolkien's legendarium. When the Men of the White Mountains betrayed their oath to Isildur, Aragorn depicts Isildur using *thou* and *thy* derogatorily to curse them. This is reminiscent of curses in the King James Version, where *thou* is employed to curse other people, as seen in Deuteronomy 28:15-20, which reads: 'The LORD shall send upon thee cursing, vexation, and rebuke, in all that thou settest thine hand unto for to do, until thou be destroyed, and until thou perish quickly; because of the wickedness of thy doings, whereby thou hast forsaken me.'<sup>51</sup> (emphasis mine). Yet, when Aragorn, Isildur's descendant, invokes that oath again, he uses *ye*, much like Théoden, who also uses *ye* to invoke the oaths of the Rohirrim by saying: 'Oaths ye have taken: now fulfill them all...'<sup>52</sup> Irwin writes that 'In both [the oath scenes with Aragorn and Théoden], the "ye" form is used both as the plural and as a formal term suggesting the strength and responsibility which the warriors must exhibit in the approaching battle.'<sup>53</sup> Where once these men were cursed with derogatory *thou* for not fulfilling their oaths, now they are reminded of their responsibility as warriors, and called on to set in motion something that started a long time ago with the use of *ye*. As such, the use of archaic pronouns for direct recall of the past not only provides 'a sense of history, or layers of "reality," to his created or "Secondary" world, [but] some references appear to go beyond such a purpose to suggest a deeper connection between the stories of an ancient past and the "now"'.<sup>54</sup> Archaic pronouns, by virtue of *being* archaic, are not only part of the past these characters recall, but they facilitate the recall of said past by marking it as venerable or derogatory and impact the present by demonstrating the cyclical nature of Tolkien's legendarium. This not only creates a world that has a rich lore and historical depth, but the reader is encouraged to appreciate archaic language in their own world and reassess its power and ability to impact their present.

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<sup>48</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics,' in *Classic Readings on Monster Theory: Demonstrare, Volume One*, ed. by Asa Simon Mittman and Marcus Hensel, (Amsterdam: ARC, Amsterdam University Press, 2018), pp.1-18 (p. 18).

<sup>49</sup> Tolkien, *Rings*, p. 1024.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1034.

<sup>51</sup> Deuteronomy 28:15-20.

<sup>52</sup> Tolkien, *Rings*, p. 1094.

<sup>53</sup> Irwin, p. 46.

<sup>54</sup> Agan, p. 42.

*The sublime and 'Eucatastrophe'*

Finally, we turn to Tolkien's use of the sublime style in *Rings*. Shippey notes how in the use of the sublime style, seen in scenes such as 'the Anduril ones, the Fields of Cormallen, the Eagle's song', Tolkien reaches beyond romance 'to what almost anyone might call "myth"'.<sup>55</sup> As is well known, Tolkien desired to write a 'mythology for England' but this left him in much the same predicament as the *Beowulf* poet; *Rings* becomes a story of virtuous pagans, noble but doomed. However, as Shippey describes, 'there is at least one moment at which Revelation seems very close and allegory does all but break through: naturally enough, a moment of "eucatastrophe", to use Tolkien's terms for sudden moments of fairy-tale salvation.'<sup>56</sup> When Faramir and Éowyn sense the earthquake that causes the fall of Barad-dûr and Sauron, Faramir becomes filled with an irrational joy. Then an eagle-messenger sings:

*Sing now ye people of Minas Anor  
for the realm of Sauron is ended for ever  
and the Dark Tower is thrown down.*

*Sing and rejoice, ye people of the Tower of  
Guard for your watch hath not been in vain,  
and the Black Gate is broken,  
and your King hath passed through,  
and he is victorious.*

*Sing and be glad, all ye children of the West for your King shall come again,  
and he shall dwell among you,  
all the days of your life.*<sup>57</sup>

Here, the use of *ye* (and 'hath') signal to most of Tolkien's audience that Tolkien's stylistic model is again based on the Bible, and in particular the Psalms.<sup>58</sup> The poem is reminiscent of Psalm 24, which repeats twice: 'Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors, for the King of glory shall come in.'<sup>59</sup> The Christian interpretation is that this King of glory is Jesus. The Baptist preacher Charles H. Spurgeon writes: 'He who, fresh from the cross and the tomb, now rides through the gates of the New Jerusalem is higher than the heavens; great and everlasting as they are, those gates of pearl are all unworthy of him before whom the heavens are not pure, and who chargeth his angels with folly. *Lift up your heads, O ye gates.*'<sup>60</sup> The *Song of the Eagle* is, of course, about Morannon ('the Black Gate'), and about Aragorn, the King. Yet, the text undoubtedly has a double meaning. Tolkien was clearly referencing another type of defeat over evil, where the gates are the Gates of Hell, and the King is Jesus, and the song as a whole refers to the triumph of Jesus over evil. The link between these two hymns is highlighted by the use of *ye*: 'ye people', 'ye people of the Tower' and 'ye children', paralleling the usage in the Psalms: 'ye righteous' and 'ye

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<sup>55</sup> Shippey, p. 242.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>57</sup> Tolkien, *Rings*, p. 1262.

<sup>58</sup> Shippey, p. 227.

<sup>59</sup> Psalm 24.

<sup>60</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), pp. 908-913.

gates'.<sup>61</sup> More significantly, from the perspective of this reading, the 'people' that the *ye* refers to are not the people of Gondor but us, the readers. These pronouns allow the song to address the reader directly and to proselytize. As Shippey describes it: 'Tolkien was presenting his "eucatastrophe" as a forerunner or "type" of the greater one of Christian myth.'<sup>62</sup> The only other moment in *Rings* that resembles eucatastrophe is when, after the fall of the Tower and being carried to safety, Sam, seeing the resurrected Gandalf before him, believes that he is in heaven.<sup>63</sup> This shows the significance of the *Eagles' Song*, and explains why Tolkien infused the song with marked pronouns. In this scene Tolkien uses the *ye* pronoun to link the eucatastrophe in *Rings* to its biblical equivalent, the resurrection. As discussed before, this link to the resurrection, according to Tolkien, increases the realism of the story and the reader's immersion in his world, because it is the 'truest' story. Tolkien's world becomes imbued with spiritual depth.

### Conclusion

This paper has offered a very preliminary look into the use of archaic pronouns in *Rings*, by studying the way they are supposed to communicate emotional, historical, and spiritual depth. The nuances of Eowyn's emotional interactions can be identified and understood based on the pronouns used between her, Aragorn (and Arwen), and the Witch King. While Eowyn's interactions were selected for their explanatory power, all the interactions in *Rings* taken together facilitate Tolkien's first tenet of 'inner consistency of reality': they all operate alongside consistent and recognized linguistic laws (specifically those of the Early Modern period). Meanwhile, the songs and stories of old that characters repeat show the power of archaic language. The song to Elbereth shows not only that the Elves have an old history that stretches back millennium, or that underneath the surface Tolkien's world lie layers of religious veneration (both of which enhance the worldbuilding and by extension the immersion of the story), but more significantly it shows the cyclical nature of Tolkien's world. Just like in his assessment of *Beowulf*, Tolkien displays the importance of viewing language as a vehicle to understand not just the past, but also its connection to the present. This fulfills his second tenet, that the reader should 'recover' a new perspective from their trip to another world for when they return to the real one. Finally archaic pronouns also facilitated the eucatastrophic purpose of *Rings* by pointing towards the Psalms celebrating the 'king of Glory' and the ultimate victory over evil, and by extension making *Rings* a forerunner of its biblical equivalent. Thereby *Rings* briefly proselytizes the 'ultimate truth' to its audience. The use of archaic pronouns is one of the many factors in Tolkien's story that lends it the emotional, mythological, and spiritual depth it is noted for in both academic and mainstream circles.

A promising area of future study would be to consider the many other times archaic pronouns appear in *Rings*, such as the interactions between Denethor and Gandalf, the songs of Treebeard, or the dialogue with the Mouth of Sauron. Moreover, further study into unmarked pronouns based on the premise that pronouns *can* be marked would make an interesting paper; for example, when Faramir proposes, the reader would expect him to give Eowyn her longed for familiar pronoun, but instead he goes *more formal* and refers to her in the third person, a conundrum that stumps this author.<sup>64</sup> Tolkien studies would doubtlessly benefit from the application of other

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<sup>61</sup> Irwin, p. 46.

<sup>62</sup> Shippey, p. 227.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p. 198.

<sup>64</sup> This is more interesting because the most obvious explanation, that Faramir uses the third person to symbolically vassal himself to Eowyn, is refuted by Tolkien himself in Letter 244, where he explicitly denies that their relationship is in any way modelled on courtly love tropes.

linguistic and literary models to this topic, particularly ones that prioritize the experience of the reader, rather than the intentions of the author. A fascinating discussion in online circles is how translations of these archaic pronouns into languages that still have *tu/vos* constructions impact the meaning of the text. Finally, a study of not just *Rings*, but also other Tolkienian works that use archaic pronouns such as *The Silmarillion* or *The Unfinished Tales* would doubtless offer many new and fascinating insights.

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