

Some God Lies Hidden in the Asphodel:
Christianity and Pre-Christian Polytheism in the Works
of Oscar Wilde and J.R.R. Tolkien

by

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Introduction

This thesis seeks to illuminate the ways in which Oscar Wilde and J.R.R. Tolkien use Christian – specifically Catholic – and pre-Christian polytheist themes in their work. While most critics focus on the prevalence of either Catholic and Christian literary themes *or* the prevalence of pre-Christian polytheistic themes in the work of these authors, I am interested in the ways in which these themes coexist within their work. Wilde's and Tolkien's writings share a blended, non-competitive quality; that is, within their works, the religious themes they employ work in harmony despite coming from disparate, mutually exclusive religions.

Though Wilde and Tolkien are influenced by different pre-Christian religions, and though they do not mix these religions in exactly the same way, they share a common rejection of religious hierarchy. Neither author's work presents Christianity as greater than or truer than (or less than or less true than) his pre-Christian sources¹. Nor is there a sense in their writing that their sources are in competition with one another. Rather, both authors' work has a quality of concord to it; the sources balance each other, inform each other, and combine to create worlds unlike anything that could be imagined by an author adhering to only a single religious outlook.

¹ A common Catholic interpretation of the relationship between pre-Christian polytheistic religions and Christianity figures pre-Christian religions as historical preparations for the true word of Christ. Since all souls were made by the Christian God, proponents of this theory believe, pre-Christian religions were the attempt of Christian souls, before the birth of Christ, to understand the world presided over by the Christian God. This accounts for the similarities between Christian and pre-Christian mythology. (Cyril Charles Martindale)

Wilde's work presents the reader with worlds in which Catholic and Hellenic themes – and even gods – coexist. In my first chapter on Wilde, I will discuss his poetry (1881-1898). Many of Wilde's poems unite Christian and Hellenic registers. This is not unusual for Victorian era poetry. But, unlike those of his contemporaries, Wilde's Hellenic references are not represented as scholarly allusions, contrasting with Christian themes that are presented simply as truth; they are treated as religious thoughts. In other words, where one poet might mix Christian religion with Hellenic mythology, Wilde mixes it with Hellenic religion².

My second chapter on Wilde addresses two of his longer works: the 1891 play *Salome* and the 1892 short story "The Fisherman and His Soul." In *Salome*, Wilde blends the Biblical story of Salome with the principles of proper tragedy from Aristotle's *Poetics*. But, rather than simply tell a Christian story through an ancient Greek method, Wilde changes the story of Salome slightly to assume a Hellenic sensibility and expands on or ignores certain aspects of Aristotle's theories to better suit a Christian one. In "The Fisherman and His Soul," Wilde fits Hellenism into the Christian category of pre-fallen innocence, moving it from its usual place in the category of anti-Christian sinfulness. He also symbolically links "love" in the Christian sense of God's love to "love" in the Hellenic sense of Aphrodite's love. By

² Three terms that I use frequently but which should not be thought of as interchangeable are "religion," "mythology," and "cosmology." By "religion", I mean a system of beliefs or faith. By "mythology" I mean the stories of a religion. By "cosmology" I mean the world that a religion imagines itself to exist in. Commonly in Christianity, for example: the belief that God sent his son to die for "our" sins is a part of the religion, the actual story of Jesus' life is part of the mythology, and the ideas that we share our reality with devils and angels and that we have immortal souls are part of the cosmology.

finding a way for Christianity and Hellenism to fit together, Wilde essentially constructs a hybridized religion that encompasses them both. Yet, by linking the single Christian God to Aphrodite, Wilde draws attention to the ways that this hybridization can never, truly work.

Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) blends its various religious themes quite differently from how Wilde's work does. Whereas the worlds that Wilde describes in his poetry are implicitly aligned with the world of the reader, Tolkien's Middle-earth is the exact opposite. The thematic mingling in Tolkien's writing plays out in a world designed for it. Where Wilde could be said to have created a new *religion* from the two he loved most, Tolkien created a new *cosmology*. In my first chapter on Tolkien, I examine the ways in which, in writing the *Lord of the Rings*, he was mimicking what he saw as the greatest attributes of *Beowulf* by comparing the novels to his famous 1936 essay "Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics." In the second chapter, I explain how this mimicry creates a series of books that blends Christian and pre-Christian themes both cosmologically and stylistically.

Most analysis of religious themes in Wilde's and Tolkien's writing focuses on a single religion. Critics and fans alike tend to write on either *only* Christian themes or *only* pre-Christian polytheist themes. Occasionally, this is due to the limited scope of the piece of criticism, but frequently, it involves a kind of wilful ignorance of the presence of other religious sources in the work. For example, in *Art and Christhood* by Guy Willoughby, the author gives a Christian reading of the love and forgiveness in "The Fisherman and His Soul." Though Willoughby quotes the passage where the priest calls some creatures "pagan things," he does not address the role of "paganism"

in the story (43). James G. Nelson, in contrast, in his essay “The Honey of Romance,” takes up the image of Wilde-the-pagan and declares:

His desire for beauty, his ideal of self-realization through pleasure, his devotion to the life of the senses was to set him at every turn in opposition to the restrictive nature...of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. And although he was to flirt with the Roman Catholic church, pose as the guilt-ridden penitent, and imitate the life of Christ, Wilde genuinely was... a pagan... (William Baker 131)

Nelson dismisses Wilde’s love of and involvement with Catholicism with such flippant terms as “flirt,” “pose,” and “imitate” and pronounces him a pagan because of his philosophies on life. Wilde’s understanding of his own identity is irrelevant; it is for critics to judge what he “genuinely” was by their own definitions. This attitude towards Wilde is unjustified; not only does it ignore the ability of a believer to interpret his religion differently from the way the majority does, but by viewing Wilde as only a “pagan,” one risks misjudging the Christian themes that pervade his writing. While Willoughby’s single-mindedness may be less offensive, it runs the same critical risk of overly narrowing the analytic focus.

Problems in Tolkienian criticism are similar. In “Why Tolkien Says ‘The Lord of the Rings’ Is Catholic,” Joseph Pearce³ points to the Catholic themes and moments in the text. However, Pearce neglects to mention the many explicitly pre-Christian themes and moments in the series, and the article implies that the books are *purely* Catholic. While there are no such deniers on the other side of the fence (one would be hard pressed to find a critic who would argue with Tolkien’s assessment of his own work as “fundamentally religious and Catholic,” (J.R.R. Tolkien, “Letters”

³ Though this article was published in the niche journal *National Catholic Register*, it is of note that Pearce has also published several books, two specifically on Tolkien.

172)), many critics of Tolkien simply omit any discussion of his works' Christian elements. In "Light-elves, Dark-elves, and Others: Tolkien's Elvish Problem," Tom Shippey discusses the role Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* may have had in inspiring Tolkien's elves. While Shippey notes Snorri's position as a thirteenth-century Christian writing about his pre-Christian ancestors' beliefs, he does not elaborate on how that might have affected Tolkien's work given the *Lord of the Rings*' universally acknowledged Catholic dimension.

It would be unfair to claim that these critics have read into the texts those themes that best agree with their own religious alignments or with their personally constructed images of the authors in question. Nevertheless, the focus for these critics is on a single religion. This does the original works a disservice as it ignores the complex beauty of the way in which Wilde and Tolkien blend religious themes. This paper attempts to remedy this oversight.

Tolkien wrote, "One of my strongest opinions is that investigation of an author's biography is an entirely vain and false approach to his works" (Humphrey Carpenter 1). But I hold quite the opposite. While an understanding of an author's life will not unlock the mysteries of his writing, it will illuminate their genesis and may support one interpretation of a work over another. The lives of Wilde and Tolkien strongly support my reading of the religious themes in their work. Both of these authors have emotional and personal connections to the themes and ideas of the religions they blend in their work. Understanding how these myths and religions fit into their lives can help to show why and how they use them.

Oscar Fingal O'flahertie Wills Wilde was born on the 26th of September 1854 in Dublin, Ireland (Jonathan Fryer 8). His parents, Jane Francesca Elgee Wilde and William Wilde, were of English descent and from prominent Anglican families, but both were fervently invested in their Irish identity (Jarlath Killeen 2). Wilde's mother became deeply involved in Irish nationalism in the 1840s, and, under the pen name "Speranza," wrote political articles and poetry for the cause (Killeen 3-4). Given the close link between Irish Nationalism and anti-Protestant Catholicism, it was only natural that Jane Wilde became interested in the latter as well. She made certain her children were taught Catholic theology and even had them baptized as Catholic in an unregistered ceremony (Killeen 13).

Irish folk-Catholicism, the religion practiced in peasant communities in Ireland in the 19th century, was a blend of Celtic practices and beliefs with traditional Catholic dogma (Killeen 19). William Wilde strongly believed that the peasant class of Ireland was only superficially Catholic and still retained their pre-Christianity on a "deeply psychological level" (Killeen 6) and would often trade his services as a doctor for folk-Catholic stories from peasant farmers (Fryer 5). Oscar frequently accompanied his father on his trips and, no doubt, came into a great deal of contact with this form of Catholicism (Killeen 8).

Thus Wilde grew up with a strong Irish Catholic influence *and* a strong Irish folk-Catholic influence. This familiarity with a creole pagan-Christian religion helped to create the comfort with which Wilde blends the two types of religion in his poetry.

In 1871, Wilde won a scholarship to Trinity College in Dublin (Fryer 13). There, his tutor instilled in him a love of Hellenism that lasted his whole life (Fryer 13). This focus led to an 1874 scholarship in classics to Magdalene College at Oxford (Fryer 16).

At the time, Oxford was the center of an Anglo-Catholic movement – the Oxford Movement – which tried to demonstrate the link between the Anglican church and the original church founded by the Apostles. Because of its holy origins, participants in the Oxford Movement believed, the Church should not be interfered with by the government (Killeen 14). Derogatively called Papists and accused of being secret Catholics by their enemies, many people involved in the Oxford Movement *did* in fact convert to Catholicism, and the religious atmosphere at Oxford was strained (Killeen 14). The constant presence of public Catholic conversion intensified Wilde’s existing Catholic leanings (Richard Ellman 53).

Wilde’s burgeoning attraction to other men was at this time framed in the ancient Greek ideal of love between older men and youths (Fryer 20). It was in vogue at the time among Oxford Classicists to associate what would now be called homosexuality with ancient Greece (Linda Dowling xiii)⁴. During Oxford’s summer break of 1877, Wilde traveled to Greece and Rome, doing such varied things as watching Hirschfeld’s excavations of ancient statues at Olympia and meeting the Pope (Killeen 15, Ellman 72). In his time at Oxford, then, Wilde was inundated simultaneously with Hellenism and Catholicism.

⁴ It is possible that this was a conscious effort on the part of men who experienced same-sex attraction to get the respectability and elitism of Hellenism to extend to behavior that their society deemed criminal (Dowling 28).

During the 1880s and early '90s Wilde rose to fame as a playwright and great conversationalist (Fryer 136). In 1886, he became involved with Robbie Ross, probably his first male lover and a fervent Catholic (Fryer 138, Killeen 16). Though his sexual relationship with Ross ended, they remained close friends (Fryer 56).

Wilde's descent from fame to ill repute began with a case of libel he brought against the Marquess of Queensberry in 1895 (Fryer 144). Queensberry – the father of Wilde's then-lover, Lord Alfred "Bosie" Douglas – left a now infamous card for Wilde at his club that read, "For Oscar Wilde posing as a sodomite [sic]" (Fryer 95). At Bosie's urging, Wilde sued Queensberry for libel (Frank Harris 113-114). He lost, and was promptly brought to court in a criminal trial for his sexual behavior (Dowling 1). Wilde testified in his trial that male love was "pure," "perfect," "intellectual," and that which "Plato made the very basis of his philosophy" (Dowling 1). This shows that the link between Hellenism and same-sex love and sex that was forged for Wilde in his days at Oxford was on his mind as he was sent to prison for two years of hard labor for "acts of gross indecency with another male person" (Dowling 1).

Wilde served his sentence at three prisons, the last of which, Reading Gaol, became the site of his last poem (Fryer 144). For three months of his imprisonment, Wilde had only the Bible and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* to read. He asked his friend Frank Harris to prepare a library for when he was to be released, saying, "I want... Anatole France... Dante, Goethe, the Song of Solomon, too, Job, and, of

course, the Gospels” (Harris 209)⁵. Wilde also said of the books he read in prison (once the restrictions were lifted):

I thought I should like the *Oedipus Rex*...but I could not read it. It all seemed unreal to me... St. Augustine...was worse still. The fathers of the Church were still further away from me; they all found it so easy to repent and change their lives. It does not seem to me easy. (Harris 209)

Clearly Wilde was contemplating Christianity (and a touch of Hellenism) while imprisoned. At the same time, Wilde was only *in* prison because of behavior he associated with Hellenism. He told Harris during a prison visit, “I am a Greek born out of due time” (Harris 199). Thus Wilde’s Hellenic actions led to a Christ-like martyrdom, condemned by those who once had loved him and those he loved.

When he was released from prison in 1897, Wilde went first to Dieppe, then to Berneval, and then, after many entreaties and against the advice of his friends, to Naples to reunite with Bosie (Anjali Gallup-Diaz 79).

Wilde was said to have converted to Catholicism on his deathbed, but biographers are doubtful. Fryer notes that Wilde had been given opium to dull his pain and was unable to speak at the time of his conversion (127). In 1905, an anonymous writer, thought to be Lord Alfred Douglas, published a statement in the *St James Gazette* saying that Wilde had not been conscious and died “without ever having had any idea of the liberty which had been taken with his unconscious body” (Rev. Edmund Burke 40). However, Father Cuthbert Dunne, who performed the

⁵ It is unclear why, after having access to the Bible in prison, Wilde wanted certain parts of the Bible available upon his release. I can only assume that the image of a prepared library was meant as a way to convey his thoughts and feelings to his friend.

conversion and last rites, wrote that Wilde gave his consent to each step of the process by making signs and, though unable to speak, was quite lucid (Burke 42).

From these facts of Wilde's life we can see that the threads of Hellenism and Catholicism (woven together by the early familiarity with Irish folk-Catholicism) were constants throughout Wilde's life.

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, known as Ronald, was born on 3 January 1892 in South Africa to English parents, Arthur and Mabel Tolkien (Leslie Ellen Jones 2). At the age of three, he moved with his mother and younger brother, Hilary, to Birmingham, England (Jones 4). His father died less than a year later (Jones 4). Unfortunately, Arthur's death left his family with little means and Mabel depended on her parents and in-laws for assistance (Jones 5). Eventually, Mabel found a cottage in Sarehole and moved there with the boys (Jones 5). Tolkien mentions in his letters that Sarehole provided a great deal of inspiration for the Shire (Jones 6).

Mabel tutored her sons and soon discovered young Ronald's proclivity for languages (Jones 6). Reading and writing by age four, Tolkien was especially fond of cowboy stories, Arthurian legends, and fairy tales (Jones 6-7). One of his favorite stories was the Germanic legend of Sigurd slaying Fafnir the dragon via Andrew Lang's *Red Fairy Book* (Jones 7).

In 1900, Tolkien's mother and her sister converted to Roman Catholicism, and the Tolkien boys were converted as well. Their Unitarian and Methodist family, along with the Baptist Tolkiens, took great issue with this as Catholicism was still regarded with suspicion in early twentieth-century Britain. Mabel no longer had the

families' financial support and Ronald was now too old for her to tutor him, but he won a scholarship to his father's alma mater, King Edward's School. The Tolkien boys briefly attended the Birmingham Oratory – a Catholic school – but Ronald went back to King Edward's once Mabel realized that it was more academically rigorous. (Jones 7-10)

While the boys were at Birmingham Oratory, Mabel became quite close with one of the school's priests, a Father Francis Morgan. He cared greatly for the family and Mabel named him as the boys' guardian in her will. In April of 1904, Mabel discovered she had diabetes and was hospitalized. By November of the same year, she was dead (Jones 10-11).

While studying at King Edward's, Tolkien was taught by George Brewerton. Brewerton was a medievalist and more interested in the Anglo-Saxon than the French origins of the English language. It was through Brewerton that Tolkien first became interested in philology. After receiving a primer on the language from his teacher, Tolkien managed to teach himself Anglo-Saxon (also known as Old English) and read *Beowulf* for the first time. (Jones 17-19)

Now under the care of Father Morgan, the Tolkien boys lived for a few years with one of their aunts. However, the oppressive mood of her house depressed them, and in 1908 Father Morgan found a place for them at the house of the Faulkeners – a couple who lived with their daughter and another boarder, an orphan named Edith Bratt (Jones 21). Though she was a few years older than the boys (three years older than Ronald), the three of them became friends and considered themselves united against the rules of Mrs. Faulkener (Jones 22). By 1909, Ronald's and Edith's

relationship had turned romantic. He spent so much time with her that Father Morgan was worried he would not do well enough on his entrance exams to Oxford to get the scholarship he needed. Morgan was also worried about the scandalous potential of the lovers living in the same house. He found a new place for the boys to live and ordered Tolkien to stop seeing Edith romantically (Carpenter 41). Meanwhile, Tolkien did not, in fact, do well enough on his exams to get the scholarship and would need to study to take them again the following year (Jones 22). Though Father Morgan had forbidden their relationship, he had not expressly told Tolkien that he could not see Edith. They met a few more times in 1910 before gossip made its way to the priest and he banned all further contact between the two until Tolkien's twenty-first birthday (Carpenter 42).

Tolkien finally managed to pass his exams and in 1911 he started at Exeter College at Oxford (Jones 25). He began studying Classics but switched to English Language and Literature (Jones 27, 32). At Oxford, Tolkien studied many Celtic and Germanic languages and, through this study, became acquainted with numerous ancient texts, mostly mythological⁶ (Jones 31-32). He spent a considerable amount of time on Anglo-Saxon and Middle English and was moved by the beauty of the languages (Jones 35).

On Tolkien's twenty-first birthday, at 12:01 AM, he wrote Edith again for the first time in three years. He proposed marriage only to find out she was already engaged. After visiting her, however, Tolkien was able to convince Edith to break off

⁶ The medieval Welsh and Finnish Tolkien learned at Oxford became the bases for his Elvish languages Sindarin and Quenya (Jones 31-32)

the engagement and marry him instead. Edith, an Anglican, converted to Catholicism because of the great importance it held for Tolkien; it was not unusual at the time for married couples to belong to different Christian sects, but she converted anyway, though not happily (Jones 32-34).

In 1915, Tolkien received a First Class Honours degree from Oxford (Jones 43). He married Edith on March 22 of 1915, only two and a half months before he was sent to France as a second lieutenant to fight in the First World War (Jones 45). Tolkien saw active duty in the Battle of the Somme, which lasted four and a half months, and he had to deal with the hardships of trench warfare and massive loss of life after having just spent his adolescence in the arms of academia (Jones 46). There can be no doubt that this experience profoundly affected Tolkien; he wrote in the introduction to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, “One has indeed personally to come under the shadow of war to feel fully its oppression...By 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead” (Tolkien, “Fellowship” 7).

By October of 1915, Tolkien had come down with “trench fever,” proper name pyrexia, a disease that manifested as a high fever, headaches, and leg pains and tended to come and go for around four months. He was hospitalized in France and then shipped back to Birmingham to recover. When he was well enough to go home, he moved in with Edith. For the duration of the war, Tolkien continued to relapse, preventing him from being sent back to France. In 1917, Edith gave birth to their first child, a son, John Francis Reuel Tolkien. It was around this time that Tolkien first began to put together the “history” of Middle-earth that would become *The Silmarillion* (Jones 48-50).

In 1918, Tolkien got a job defining five words in what would later be called the *Oxford English Dictionary*. To supplement his income, Tolkien tutored. He liked teaching so much that in 1920 he applied to be a Reader (ranked below a Professor but above a tutor) in English Language at Leeds University. Michael Hilary Reuel, the Tolkiens' second son, was born later that year (Jones 54-55).

While at Leeds, Tolkien and his colleague, Eric Valentine Gordon, set about producing a new translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. *Gawain* is a Middle English poem and part of the Arthurian Legends. The poem is extremely fantastical and focuses heavily on the mythological aspects of the story. The edition was published posthumously. It was long considered the definitive text of the poem (Jones 56-58).

In 1924, Tolkien was promoted and became a Professor of English Language at Leeds. Christopher Reuel Tolkien, the couple's third son, was born in November of that year. In 1925, Tolkien applied to the newly open position of Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford. It was the most prestigious position in his academic field and the odds were against his being hired. He noted in his application that he did not teach just ancient languages, but an appreciation for the literature they produced. Oxford offered Tolkien the position (Jones 61-63). In 1926, Priscilla Mary Reuel, the Tolkiens' only daughter and last child, was born (Jones 67).

While teaching at Oxford, Tolkien became good friends with C.S. Lewis. With a few other friends, they started the Inklings, a literary club where the members would discuss academic subjects and help each other with their writing. When Tolkien and Lewis first became friends, Lewis had recently gone from atheism, to

agnosticism, to essentially believing in a god. It was Tolkien, however, who convinced the man who would later give the world Aslan of the importance of Christ as more than a fairy tale (Jones 73-75).

In September of 1937, Allen & Unwin published Tolkien's first novel, *The Hobbit: Or, There and Back Again*. In only a few months, *The Hobbit* was a best seller (Jones 90-91). Allen & Unwin was very interested in publishing more books like it. Tolkien showed them *The Silmarillion*, but the absence of hobbits and the sections written in verse put them off. Tolkien was unsure of how to balance the comic tone of hobbits with the serious nature of what he had written to be Middle-earth's history. He started on the short story "The Long Expected Party" about Bilbo after his adventures in *The Hobbit*. This started Tolkien considering the Ring and its possible sources and powers. Over the next twelve years, Tolkien set about writing what would become the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Jones 93-94). In 1954 and 1955, when Tolkien was in his sixties, *The Lord of the Rings* was finally published. By his death in 1973, the books had become incredibly popular and profoundly changed the face of fantasy literature.

As with Wilde, Tolkien's exposure to the cultures, religions, and myths that so influenced his work began at an early age. His belief in and emotional attachment to Catholicism was intense and his joy in and affection for pre-Christian Germanic, Anglo-Saxon, and Celtic lore and language potent.

You Make My Creed a Barren Sham: Syncretism in Wilde's Poetry

While Wilde's poems often deal with only Christian themes or only Hellenic themes (or neither), many combine these elements. Wilde amalgamates themes, ideas, and paradigms from these two distinct religions. What he creates from them is a vision of the world that incorporates very different ideas, usually without tension. His poems do not set up a hierarchy, nor do they treat Hellenism as a historical preparation for Christianity. Though Celtic themes and imagery crop up occasionally, Wilde's work mostly deals with Catholicism – though, often, more broadly, Christianity – and Hellenism.

The poem "Santa Decca" (1881) portrays the Hellenic gods and the Christian God as coexistent. Though the first stanza actively positions Christianity as dominating Hellenism with "the Gods are dead... and Mary's son is King" (Oscar Wilde 716), the second stanza expresses a hope for Hellenism's rebirth with "yet – perchance... some God lies hidden in the asphodel⁷... The leaves are stirring: let us watch awhile" (Wilde 716). The mournful tone of the first stanza and the anticipatory tone of the second imply that the speaker of the poem longs for the rebirth of Hellenism that he is predicting. But there is no suggestion that the appearance of this dead god will destroy or undermine the power of Christ. Thus, Wilde does not set up Hellenism in opposition to Christianity; rather, he suggests that Christianity's opposition to Hellenism – the overwhelming nature of the religion that causes "the Gods [to be] dead" (Wilde 716) – is the problem. The

⁷ Asphodel is a flower sacred to the gods of the underworld, and its roots were said to be the food of the dead (Herder Lexikon 36-37).

speaker of the poem seems to hope for a world in which the kingship of Mary's son does not preclude the worship of the gods named in the first stanza.

There is also the slight suggestion of a Celtic outlook in "Santa Decca." Hellenism, in the form most readily accessible to a modern reader – through Homer, Sophocles, etc. – is a very urban religion. Yet, Wilde chooses to write "no longer do we bring/ To grey-eyed Pallas crowns of olive-leaves!/ Demeter's child no more hath title of sheaves... For Pan is dead... Young Hylas seeks the water-springs no more" (Wilde 716). Wilde uses specifically natural deities – Demeter and Pan by name, Persephone by implication – from a pantheon with few. Even when he mentions otherwise non-natural figures – Athena and Hylas – he refers to their connection to the natural world. Gods whose primary roles involve the natural world are much more characteristic of Celtic polytheism than Hellenic (Charles Squire 33). Thus, though Wilde is writing about Hellenism and an experience of Hellenic deities, the Celtic framework of the divine is still present.

The 1881 poem "The New Helen" deals with the religions as metaphorical sources rather than coexisting realities. The poem is about Lillie Langtry, Wilde's erstwhile muse, and is meant to draw a parallel between her and Hellenic and Christian tropes and characters (Richard Ellman 115). The narrator starts by asking, "Where hast thou been since [the Trojan war]? Why dost thou walk our common earth again?...For surely [you are Helen]" (Wilde 733). The second stanza posits that she may be Astarte⁸. The narrator asks, "didst thou rule the fire-laden moon? In amorous Sidon was thy temple

⁸ Astarte was a moon goddess of the ancient Mediterranean (Theodore Wright 448) who is strongly associated with the city of Sidon because – according to 1 Kings – Jezebel, a princess of Sidon, brought her worship to Israel (James F. Driscoll).

built” (Wilde 733). But in the third stanza he reverts to his original theory, “No! thou art Helen, and none other one!” (Wilde 733).

The fifth stanza of the poem continues to treat the Lillie figure as Helen, and imagines her hiding with Aphrodite and never seeing

The face of Her, before whose mouldering shrine
To-day at Rome the silent nations kneel;
Who gat from Love no joyous gladdening,
But only Love’s intolerable pain,
Only a sword to pierce her heart in twain,
Only the bitterness of child-bearing. (Wilde 734)

The “Her” of this passage is the Virgin Mary, her “shrine... at Rome,” the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore in the Vatican. Wilde depicts Mary as a sorrowful figure who suffered for being the chosen mother of God. He draws attention to the divine nature of Christ by using the same term, “Love,” for both God the father and God the son. In the first instance there is also a play on words, with the term “gat” being used as both a past tense for “get” and a shortening of “begat.” Thus the word “Love” here refers to God the father who both gave Christ to Mary and begat him by her. In the second instance, “Love” is the possessor of “intolerable pain” and thus God the son. Wilde draws attention to Mary’s bond with her child by phrasing the sentence such that she “gat...only [Christ’s] intolerable pain.” The inclusion of the figures of Mary and Aphrodite in this stanza as separate people with whom Lillie cannot interact is notable since in later stanzas the Lillie figure is made analogous to both of them.

In the seventh stanza, the speaker becomes a Christ figure, comparing his feelings at losing the Lillie figure with “the thorn-crown of pain” (Wilde 734). But, in the ninth stanza, he associates the Lillie figure, through the story of her birth, with both Christ and Aphrodite. Lillie is said not to have been “born as common women are!// But, girt with

silver splendour of the foam,/ Didst from the depths of sapphire seas arise” (Wilde p.734) as Aphrodite was, and at her “coming some immortal star...blazed in the Eastern skies/ and waked the shepherds” (Wilde 735) as it did for Christ.

The tenth stanza begins with the lines “Lily of love, pure and inviolate!/ Tower of ivory! Red rose of fire!” (Wilde 735). For the first time in the poem, the Lillie figure is actually called “Lily”, and the use of her name, if slightly altered in spelling, serves to strengthen the feeling that this poem is tied to a *real* woman. But in those very same lines, the Lillie figure is aligned with Mary; the quotation above is taken from the litany of the Blessed Virgin (Ellman 116).

The purpose of all this mingling and multiplying seems to be to force readers to reevaluate their relationship to the stories and characters. What is notable about the blending of mythologies in the poem is that Wilde does not privilege one over the other: both are treated as sources for metaphorical references; characters from both are used seemingly without distinction. Each time Lillie is referred to as a classical or biblical character, she is being assigned those characters’ attributes; Wilde is relying on his readers’ associations with the characters he is referencing. There is thus no conflict in equating Lillie to both Mary and Jesus, no conflict in describing Aphrodite and Mary as separate characters from the Lillie figure and then equating her to them, no conflict in calling Lillie Langtry Helen and Aphrodite and Mary and Christ.

In “Panthea” (1881), Wilde intertwines religious registers more closely than in “The New Helen.” Though the majority of the poem is spent discussing the Hellenic deities, in a few instances the poem shifts suddenly to include Christian terms and ideas.

Wilde also blends Hellenic and Celtic nature spirits with the line “the goat-foot Faun/The Centaur, or the merry bright-eyed Elves” (Wilde 783).

After using only Hellenic terms and referring to only Hellenic gods, the speaker of the poem says, “we oppress our natures, God or Fate/ Is our enemy” (Wilde 781). While “Fate” or the Fates feature prominently in Greek mythology (Lexikon 192), the use of the singular “God” pulls the reader immediately from Hellenism into a monotheistic world.

The speaker again moves into monotheism when he says “God sleeps; and heaven is high” (Wilde 782), just after discussing the withdrawal of the Hellenic gods. Wilde negates both Hellenic and Christian conceptions of the afterlife in a single stanza: “no ferry-man...Nears his black shallop to the flowerless strand,/ No little coin of bronze can bring the soul/Over Death's river...the dead rise not again” (Wilde 782).

Oddly, given how predominantly Hellenic “Panthea” is, the last two lines of the poem end on a Christian note. The speaker says, “We shall be/ Part of the mighty universal whole,/ And through all aeons mix and mingle with the Kosmic Soul!” (Wilde 784). Though the spelling of “Kosmic” implies a reference to its Greek root (κοσμος), the idea of one’s soul joining with all other souls (through God) is decidedly Christian.

The most intriguing phrase in “Panthea” is “daedal-fashioned earth” (Wilde 784) because it doesn’t fit into any pre-existing creation story. The Christian creation god is God the father, the Hellenic one Chaos (Lexikon 63). Daedalus is best known for designing the Cretan Labyrinth (Lexikon 79-80). By using the phrase “daedal-fashioned earth,” Wilde seems to be comparing the Hellenic Daedalus to the Christian God. In this way, with a single word, Wilde draws attention to God’s role as designer and craftsman.

Sometimes Wilde's thematic mixing is slight and almost unnoticeable, as in "Phedre" (1881). In describing the world of the dead from which the addressee of the poem has returned, Wilde writes, "For thou wert weary of the sunless day,/ The heavy fields of scentless asphodel,/ The loveless lips with which men kiss in Hell" (Wilde 777). "The heavy fields of scentless asphodel" Wilde describes are a Homeric vision of the land of the dead. By combining one of the attributes of the Hellenic afterlife with the Christian Hell, Wilde is eliminating the division between the judgment-based Christian afterlife and the more neutral Hellenic afterlife⁹. Despite how different the two visions are, Wilde sees no need to choose one, opting instead to conflate them and write about both.

The intricate blending of Celtic and Catholic themes can be clearly seen in Wilde's poem "Requiescat," (1881). Written in 1874, seven years after the death of his nine-year-old sister Isola (Jarlath Killeen 25, 27), "Requiescat" is a tender poem that exhibits Wilde's interest in both Catholicism and Irish folk-Catholicism by presenting a dual understanding of death. The poem is book-ended by words strongly associated with Catholicism: the title, "Requiescat," is Latin for "rest;" the appendix, "Avignon,"¹⁰ is a

⁹ The standard vision of the Christian afterlife imagines Heaven as a place of eternal happiness for those who were good on Earth and Hell as a place of eternal pain for those who were bad or evil on Earth. The Catholic afterlife also includes Purgatory, a place of temporary suffering where one's sins are purged prior to entry into Heaven. The ancient Greek afterlife is imagined as a single location where souls who have forgotten their lives on earth spend eternity. The only exceptions are heroes, who go to the paradisiacal Elysian Fields as a reward, and those who have challenged the gods, who are tormented in various ways (Sisyphus, for example).

¹⁰ It is a common misconception that the word "Avignon" appears at the end of the poem because Wilde was there when he wrote it (Jerusha McCormack 60). In fact, Wilde did not travel to Avignon until 1875, the year after he wrote "Requiescat," and only added the word when the poem was published in 1881 (Killeen 30).

city known for its Catholic shrines (Killeen 30). Within the text itself, there arises a curious anxiety regarding the permanence of this rest.

The poem begins by noting the presence of the dead girl with “she is near” and “she can hear,” yet ends by insisting “she is at rest/ Peace, peace, she cannot hear” (Wilde 747). This anxiety may be due to an Irish folk-Catholic belief¹¹ that children must be buried in their father’s land to achieve peace (Killeen 29-30). Isola was, instead, buried where she died, and Wilde may have felt that his experience of grief for her, his constant feeling that “she is here,” was a kind of haunting caused by improper burial (Killeen 30).

Wilde tries to fix this impropriety in several ways within the poem. The first is by celebrating his sister’s life with a display of sexuality. The wakes performed in the west of Ireland in this era were highly sexual celebrations – including orgies and public sex acts – meant to ensure the peace of the dead (Killeen 32). Isola got no wake of any kind, which only intensifies the worry caused by her incorrect burial. Wilde brings sexuality into the poem in a subtle way: the rhyme scheme and meter of “Requiescat” are taken from Thomas Hood’s 1844 poem “Bridge of Sighs” about the death of a prostitute (Killeen 33). Wilde’s second method of pacifying his sister’s spirit is to end the poem with “Avignon.” This last comment takes the place of an “Amen” at the end of a prayer and ends the poem on a traditional Catholic note. Thus Wilde uses a Catholic invocation to fix an Irish folk-Catholic problem, showing that he is not treating the two forms of the religion as mutually exclusive.

¹¹ This bit of folklore was described in detail in *Ancient Legends*, a book Lady Wilde wrote based on her husband’s notes. It is, thus, more than likely that Oscar Wilde would have been familiar with it (Killeen 8, 29).

Some of Wilde's poems seem mostly Christian thematically but have a distinctly Hellenic tone to them. In "Sonnet (Written in Holy Week at Genoa)" (1881), Wilde contrasts the sorrow of Christianity with the happiness of Hellenism without favoring one over the other. Wilde wrote the poem while in Italy in 1877 but the speaker, unlike Wilde himself, has already been to Greece (Peter Raby 58). He talks about being in Italy and experiencing great beauty and how "life seemed very sweet" (Wilde 728). Then, when he hears a "boy-priest...singing... 'Jesus...has been slain'" (Wilde 728), he is reminded of the sorrow he feels at Christ's sacrifice and declares,

Ah, God! Ah, God! those dear Hellenic hours
Had drowned all memory of Thy bitter pain,
The Cross, the Crown, the Soldiers and the Spear. (Wilde
728)

For all that the speaker here clearly believes in Christianity, it is of note that Hellenism is not painted as a sinful distraction luring the speaker away from Christianity. Rather, the "Hellenic hours" are called "dear" and under Hellenism's influence "life seemed very sweet." Thus, though different ways of life, Hellenism and Christianity can co-exist within one believer.

Wilde's 1881 poem "The True Knowledge" is similarly mostly Christian with only the slightest mention of Hellenism. He prefaces the poem with a Euripides quotation that translates: "It is inevitable that life should be harvested like a crop that is ripe, and that one man should die while another lives" (Wilde 813). The rest of the poem is addressed to the Christian God. Wilde repeats, as the first half of the first line of each stanza, "thou knowest all" (Wilde 813). In the second stanza, he writes:

...I sit and wait,
...Till the last lifting of the veil
And the first opening of the gate (Wilde 813)

The “lifting of the veil” and “opening of the gate” are references to the Apocalypse (derived from the Greek for “unveiling”) and the gates of heaven. The content of the poem, therefore, references a faith with which the speaker of the epigram could have had no contact. Wilde combines these expressions of seemingly disparate cultures – the epigram and the poem itself – in order to point to the common thread of faith in the ancient text and more modern Christian teachings.

Some of Wilde’s mostly Christian poems show a much stronger Hellenic influence. In “Ave Maria, Gratia Plena” (1881), Wilde compares the impregnation of Mary by the Christian God to the impregnation of Danae and Semele by Zeus.

Was this His coming! I had hoped to see
A scene of wondrous glory, as was told
Of some great God who in a rain of gold
Broke open bars and fell on Danae:
Or a dread vision as when Semele
Sickening for love and unappeased desire
Prayed to see God's clear body, and the fire
Caught her brown limbs and slew her utterly:
With such glad dreams I sought this holy place,
And now with wondering eyes and heart I stand
Before this supreme mystery of Love:
Some kneeling girl with passionless pale face,
An angel with a lily in his hand,
And over both the white wings of a Dove. (Wilde 727)

The narrator is in a “holy place” – perhaps a church – looking at a typical scene of the Annunciation and is reminded of two Hellenic myths. The first, the “scene of wondrous glory,” is the myth of Danae who, imprisoned by her father, was impregnated by Zeus in the form of a “rain of gold” and later gave birth to Perseus (Lexikon 80). The second, the “dread vision,” is of Semele, the mother of Dionysus, being burned alive after Hera tricks her into asking her lover, Zeus, to appear in his true form (Lexikon 264). The narrator

says that he had “hoped to see” one of these types of scenes but instead sees a “supreme mystery of Love.” Though the poem does imply that the Christian myth is more fulfilling to the speaker than its Hellenic counterpart, it puts Christian and Hellenic imagery on the same plane. The myths are being contrasted, but are not placed in opposition: Wilde never negates the Hellenic myths; he merely points to the fundamental differences between the three visions of divine impregnation. Perhaps most importantly, Danae and Semele are not treated as preparation for Mary, they are simply very, very different.

“On the Sale by Auction of Keats’ Love Letters” (1886) aligns the poet Keats with both Endymion and Christ, thereby commutatively equating the latter two. Though the title says that the poem is about the “Auction of Keats’ Love Letters,” the first line of the poem itself claims that “these are the letters which Endymion wrote” (Wilde 815). In the second stanza, Wilde writes,

Is it not said that many years ago,
In some far Eastern town, soldiers ran
With torches through the midnight, and began
To wrangle for mean raiment, and to throw
Dice for the garments of a wretched man,
Not knowing the God's wonder, or His woe. (Wilde 815)

Here the poem compares the scene of bidding for Keats’ letters to the scene in the New Testament where men gamble for Jesus’ clothing. This comparison would make the poem straightforwardly Christian in register were it not for the association made in the first line. The equation of Christ to Endymion serves to Hellenize Christ. This is a step beyond a simple mixing of themes; this is a conflation of mythological figures from different paradigms.

This Hellenizing of Christ happens again – in a much more convoluted way – in “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” (1898). Wilde uses such universal terms as “each man

kills the thing he loves” (Wilde 844) and “all men kill the thing they love” (Wilde 860) to show that the murder the hanged man committed is a symbol for the sins of man (George Arms 0). The mention of the “gallows tree/With its adder-bitten roots” (Wilde 846) is tree-and-serpent imagery that alludes to the fall from grace and reinforces the universality of the “kills... loves” lines by emphasizing mankind’s common guilt (Mildred Anderson 87). The hanged man is thus allegorically aligned with Christ.

The hanged man is also homoeroticized by the poem. Until very shortly before Wilde was sentenced, people convicted of homosexual acts were given the death penalty (Kevin Kopelson 33). Because of this, the link between homoeroticism and death, particularly by hanging, was prevalent in the minds of Victorians (Kopelson 54). Additionally, Kevin Kopelson argues in “Wilde’s Love-Deaths” that Wilde further Hellenizes the hanged man through his use of the love-death trope. Wilde’s protagonist commits a crime of passion; he “kill[ed] the thing he love[d]” (Wilde 844). This excess of love both led to the death of his wife and, in the poem, to his own. Kopelson argues that since the love-death trope is very popular in many homoerotic myths (e.g. Apollo and Hyacinth) with which the Victorians were familiar, and that the trope was applied to relationships deemed “transgressive” (35) – like adulterous and homosexual relationships – the trope would immediately call homosexuality to mind (33-35). By associating the hanged man (who is already a Christ figure) with the love-death trope and the death penalty, the poet is associating Christ with homoerotic activity.

As is evident from his comment to Harris in prison that “[he was] a Greek born out of due time” (Frank Harris 199), Wilde still thought of same-sex love and desire as intrinsically linked to Hellenism, as he had been taught at college. Thus, by

homoeroticizing Christ, Wilde is also Hellenizing Him. In fact, Kopelson also argues that, through his use of the love-death trope, Wilde is drawing attention to the homoerotic themes in Christian iconography (54).

Nowhere is Wilde's amalgamating tendency expressed to greater effect than in "The Sphinx" (1894). Begun during his time at Oxford (Killeen 35), "The Sphinx" draws heavily from Poe and Swinburne (Ellman 36). The poem tells of a student who is being watched by "A beautiful and silent Sphinx" (Wilde 833). Faced with her silence, the student begins to ask her about her millennia of life. He wonders what mythological and historical happenings she has witnessed, what lovers she has had. Eventually, he gets angry at her, crying, "Why are you tarrying? Get hence! I weary of your sullen ways,/ I weary of your steadfast gaze" (Wilde 841). The poem ends with a pessimistic view of Christ's sacrifice:

...leave me to my crucifix,
Whose pallid burden, sick with pain, watches the world
with wearied eyes,
And weeps for every soul that dies, and weeps for every
soul in vain. (Wilde 842)

When "The Sphinx" was finally published, Wilde said, "My first idea was to print only three copies: one for myself, one for the British Museum, and one for Heaven. I had some doubts about the British Museum" (Jonathan Fryer 84-86). Though clearly said in jest, this quotation implies that Wilde saw nothing sacrilegious about his poem, even the last stanza; Wilde thought that his depiction of the student's pity of Jesus and love of the far nobler-seeming mythological past was inoffensive even to the Christian God.

The poem clearly combines many different mythologies in the student's imaginings of the Sphinx's life, but Wilde also mixes myth in a subtler, more intricate

way. Many of the creatures described in the poem have complex backgrounds with multiple cultural sources. By choosing to write about these creatures, Wilde is drawing his readers' attention to the similarities he seems to believe all systems of mythologies share.

The first and most important of these creatures is the Sphinx. The dominance of Egyptian references in the poem implies strongly that this is meant to be an Egyptian sphinx; Egyptian Sphinxes are inherently male (Lexikon 273), but the sphinx in the poem is addressed as female. This Sphinx, then, must be either Syrian or Greek (Lexikon 273). But then it is strange that she is pictured mostly in Egypt. The nature of the Sphinx is hard to resolve because it is meant to be unresolvable; her background is intentionally mysterious. The basilisk is another complex mythical creature that appears in the poem (Wilde 834). Though a classical monster mentioned in the writings of Pliny (Thomas Bulfinch 355), the basilisk is of more complex origin than one might imagine. Its body is a composite of the traditional dragon with the brightly colored birds of the Far East (Heinz Mode 130). For the Gryphon (Wilde 835), it is its meaning that has changed over time, not its form. It originated as an Egyptian monster (Mode 127) but became a common symbol in heraldry and was even incorporated into Christian iconography (Mode 127-128). Ammon, the mythic figure the student finally settles on as the Sphinx's lover (Wilde 836), is already complicated mythologically, but Wilde complicates him still further. The Egyptians worshiped the ram-headed Ammon as the god of Thebes (Mode 263), but the Romans believed that Jupiter, fleeing the Titans, hid in Egypt disguised as a ram, and that the Egyptians began worshiping him (Bulfinch 158). Wilde then refers to Ammon as "the hornéd god" (Wilde 837). Though, as a ram, Ammon *does*

have horns, that particular construction is the epithet for Cernunnos, a Celtic fertility god (Mode 73).

Along with combining mythologies within single characters, Wilde – throughout “The Sphinx” – mentions any and all possible myths. The student asks the Sphinx to sing to him of such varied things as “Thoth...and moon-horned Io...the Jewish maid who wandered with the Holy Child...[and] Adrian’s gilded barge” (Wilde 834). These few examples, all of which appear in the space of eight lines, exemplify the patchwork nature of “The Sphinx[’s]” content. The Egyptian Thoth (Mode 278), Greek Io (Lexikon 151), Christian Holy Child, and Roman Hadrian (Lexikon 24-25) are all part of the amorphous mythic and historical past that the Sphinx represents. The poem creates a very clear sense of this past in all its jumbled glory and impels the reader, like Wilde, to accept it all as one. Christian mythology is treated, in the student’s musings of the past, as only one of a number of coexistent mythologies. Even in setting Christ apart, the student places Him in a multi-religious context: “Only one □ God has ever died. □ / Only one God has let His side be wounded by a □ soldier’s spear” (Wilde 839); Christ is “one” of many.

In the end, the student asks to be left to his crucifix – to Catholicism¹² – but he speaks ill of it. He tells the Sphinx, “You make my creed a barren sham” (Wilde 842) and describes Christ as “weep[ing]...for every soul in vain” (Wilde 842). While it may seem that Wilde is criticizing Catholicism, he is, instead, criticizing exclusionary religion. That the Sphinx makes a “sham” of the student’s “creed” is telling. Had Wilde meant simply “belief,” he could have just as easily used the word “faith;” it scans equally well as “creed.” But, he uses “creed,” a word that usually refers specifically to “the

¹² The crucifix – a cross with Christ, crucified, on it – is a symbol used by Catholics but not, generally, Protestants.

general belief of the Christian Church¹³” (The Oxford English Dictionary). Wilde may even be specifically referring to the Nicene Creed – a statement of belief that opens with “We believe in one God” (Joseph Wilhelm). In either case, the implication is that the Sphinx poses a challenge not to belief in Christ, indeed, His trip to Egypt is counted among her memories, but to belief in *only* Christ – in only Christianity.

In his poems, Wilde creates a world where various mythological characters coexist; it is implied that the world of Wilde’s poems is the world of the reader. Wilde also actively Hellenizes Christ more than once. Wilde does not treat the pre-Christian religions as though they were nothing more than a source for allusion or as imperfect early versions of a truer, Christian understanding of divinity. Instead, he presents all the religions he references as equal and as non-mutually exclusive. “The Sphinx” shows that Wilde is aware of the inherent contradictions in believing in both monotheistic and polytheistic religions at once. The student’s break down when he is unable to reconcile the beauty of his religious inclinations with the realities of Catholicism is poignant and possibly meant to reflect Wilde’s own experiences.

¹³ The Oxford English Dictionary gives as the first definition of “creed:” “1. A form of words setting forth authoritatively and concisely the general belief of the Christian Church, or those articles of belief which are regarded as essential; a brief summary of Christian doctrine: usually and properly applied to the three statements of belief known as the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds. (the Creed, without qualification, usually = the Apostles' Creed.)” This definition was in use until at least 1891. “The Sphinx was published in 1894.

The Fauns Also He Blessed: Wilde's Longer Works

Wilde's longer works also exhibit his religious amalgamations. This chapter discusses the play *Salome* and the short story "The Fisherman and His Soul." Unlike the poems in the previous chapter, both of these longer works take place in a reality that is distinct from our own and from Wilde's. *Salome* is set in a fantastical version of ancient Judea, and "Fisherman" takes place in an unnamed fairytale world. This makes the blending of religions in the works more figurative than it is in Wilde's poems. In *Salome*, Wilde interlocks Aristotelian dramatic theory with a gospel story. In "Fisherman," Wilde actively argues, through his fairy tale, for a worldview that fits the "pagan" into the Christian.

Wilde's 1891 play *Salome* combines the Christian with the ancient Greek by taking a story from the gospel and telling it in such a way as to evoke the classic Aristotelian definition of Tragedy. Wilde is not so wedded to either of his sources – the gospel or the *Poetics* – as to follow it to the letter, but divergence from each is done under the influence of the other.

It is clear from Wilde's letters that he read a wide variety of ancient Greek plays; he quotes and references everything from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris* and *Hippolytus* (Rupert Hart-Davis 22, 508, 621) to the *Poetics* itself (Hart-Davis 15). Of the *Poetics* with regard to Christianity, Wilde wrote,

Christ's place is indeed with the poets...Shelley and Sophocles are of his company. But his entire life also is the most wonderful of poems. For "pity and terror" there is nothing in the entire cycle of Greek Tragedy to touch it. The absolute purity of the protagonist raises the entire scheme to a height of romantic art...and shows how wrong Aristotle was when he

said in his treatise on the Drama that it would be impossible to bear the spectacle of one blameless in pain. (Hart-Davis 477)

Here Wilde is referencing Aristotle's most basic definition of tragedy,

an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear¹⁴ effecting the proper purgation of these emotions. (Aristotle 21-23)¹⁵

From this it is clear that Wilde saw Christ's story – and potentially other Christian stories in general – as part of larger non-culture-specific dialogue about drama. Thus, when Wilde wrote a play version of the story of Salome and John the Baptist, it is no surprise that it so closely follows Aristotle's theories; Wilde did not consider Aristotle's opinions to be confined to his cultural and religious milieu. Aristotle wrote, "Every Tragedy...must have six parts, which parts determine its quality – namely, Plot, Character, Diction, Thought, Scenery, Song... The Plot, then, is the first principle, and as it were, the soul of the tragedy: Character holds the second place" (Aristotle 23, 27). In *Salome*, the two most important aspects of Aristotelian tragedy have their roots in a Christian story and the remaining four aspects are strikingly similar to ancient plays.

"By plot I...mean the arrangement of the incidents," Aristotle specifies. "[The poet] may not indeed destroy the framework of the received legends...but he ought to

¹⁴ The "pity and fear" here and the "pity and terror" in the Wilde quotation are simply alternate translations of the terms *eleos* and *phobos*. There is great debate about the appropriate English translation for *eleos*, but given that Wilde opted to translate it as "pity," it must be assumed that this is the meaning he ascribed to the word when reading it in Greek.

¹⁵ The translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* used for this paper is S.H. Butcher's from 1895. While Wilde would have read the *Poetics* in the original Greek, Butcher's translation gives a solid sense of how Wilde would have understood the language. Butcher was Wilde's contemporary and, at the time of publication, a former fellow of Wilde's alma mater, Oxford.

show invention of his own, and skilfully adapt the traditional material” (23, 47). Wilde makes several changes to the biblical story of Salome; William Tydeman and Steven Price write, in their history of the play,

[One] variation on a familiar theme is Wilde’s handling of Herod: here his agreement to grant the dancer anything she asks *precedes* the performance and is quite casually formulated. But some have argued that Wilde erred in having Herod make the ‘rash promise’ prior to Salome’s exhibition, and so deprived the dance of its main motive, namely the seduction of Herod.

(9)

But this rearrangement does not, in fact, deprive the play of anything. In the biblical formulation of the story, the space between the fateful promise and the revelation of Salome’s desire is quite short. Aristotle considers “reversals of fortune, and recognition scenes” to be “the most powerful elements of emotional interest in Tragedy” (25-27); thus Wilde stretches the time between Herod’s mistake and his moment of recognition of that mistake in order to make the impact of the eventual request scene greater. The dramatic irony inherent to a story this popular also works to Wilde’s favor; the audience knows what Salome will ask for. Therefore, the more time between the promise and the request, the longer the audience is anticipating the result. Thus the dance is not, as Tydeman and Price note, a time for the audience to watch Herod be seduced – and be seduced themselves – but a long period of held breath and dread.

Wilde’s choices as well as his changes shape this story into an Aristotelian tragedy. Along with what Aristotle calls “reversals of fortune and recognition,” “A third part [of Plot] is the Tragic Incident...The Tragic Incident is a destructive or painful action such as death on the stage, bodily torments, wounds and the like” (Aristotle 39). While every version of the story – including paintings – has Salome presented with John/Iokanaan’s head, Wilde’s choice to have his heroine “*seize[] it*” and cry “Ah! thou

wouldst not suffer me to kiss thy mouth, Iokanaan. Well! I will kiss it now. I will bite it with my teeth as one bites a ripe fruit...¹⁶” (Oscar Wilde 90) makes the scene all the more grotesque. This added grotesqueness exaggerates what would already be a terrible moment and makes it a true Aristotelian tragic incident.

Several characters in *Salome* go through a reversal of fortune. Aristotle specifies, “The change of fortune should be...from good to bad. It should come about as the result not of vice, but of some great error or frailty, in a character...” (43). Herod, Iokanaan, and Salome all experience this downfall and for each of them there is a precise moment where – due to a behavior that is central to their character – their fate is sealed.

Herod’s great frailties of character are his lust for his stepdaughter and his fear of the supernatural. The latter is, ironically, also what makes his killing of Iokanaan a reversal of fortune for Herod, since his reason for protecting the man is, “He is a holy man. He is a man who has seen God” (Wilde 77). But this fear of the supernatural, combined with the aforementioned lust, leads him to say:

Salome, Salome, dance for me. I pray thee dance for me. I am sad tonight...When I came hither I slipped in blood, which is an ill omen; also I heard in the air a beating of wings...I cannot tell what that may mean...I am sad tonight. Therefore dance for me...If thou dancest for me thou mayest ask of me what thou wilt, and I will give it thee. Yes, dance for me, Salome, and whatsoever thou shalt ask of me I will give it thee, even unto the half of my kingdom. (Wilde 83)

So, Herod sets himself up for Salome’s demand of “The head of Iokanaan” and brings about his own downfall (Wilde 86).

Iokanaan’s great error also contributes to this moment. When Salome begs of him, “I am amorous of thy body, Iokanaan!...Suffer me to touch thy body” and then,

¹⁶ *Salome* was originally written in French. All quotations are taken from Lord Alfred Douglas’ translation into English.

“Suffer me to touch thy hair” and “Suffer me to kiss thy mouth” over and over, he continually rebuffs her (Wilde 72-74) leading her to plot his death. But the idea that his chastity is an error or frailty is truly anti-Christian.

There are two ways to take Wilde’s formulation of the story in this way. First, one could see this as an example of Wilde purposefully disrupting the moral norm of the time – for all that he was a Christian, he was also a sensualist and it is not unreasonable to think that this depiction of chastity is a critique thereof. Second, this could very well be an example of Wilde’s amendment to Aristotle’s theory about a blameless sufferer. Thus, while Iokanaan’s behavior contributed to his downfall, this behavior was not an error or frailty. Instead, “The absolute purity of the protagonist raises the entire scheme to a height of romantic art” and “Aristotle was [wrong] when he said...that it would be impossible to bear the spectacle of one blameless in pain” (Hart-Davis 477).

Lastly, Salome, too, is an instrument of her own demise. Her great frailty is her morbid lust for Iokanaan, and by continuing to insist on his head as a reward despite Herod begging her to change her mind, Salome takes the first step towards her execution. Herod says “She is monstrous...In truth, what she has done is a great crime. I am sure that it is a crime against some unknown God” (Wilde 91). The second step comes with the actual kissing; she says, “Ah! I have kissed thy mouth, Iokanaan, I have kissed thy mouth. There was a bitter taste on thy lips. Was it the taste of blood?” and Herod gives the order for her death upon “*turning round and seeing Salome*” (Wilde 91). And so, both chastity and inappropriate – incestuous, morbid – lust function as great errors and frailty in *Salome* and both bring about the downfall of their possessors.

Character is the second most important aspect of tragedy, and Wilde’s characters

follow Aristotle's formula quite precisely. Aristotle writes,

In respect of Character there are four things to be aimed at. First, and most important, it must be good...the character will be good if the purpose is good...The second thing to aim at is propriety. There is a type of manly valor; but valor in a woman, or unscrupulous cleverness is inappropriate. Thirdly, character must be true to life...The fourth point is consistency: for though the subject of the imitation, who suggested the type, be inconsistent, still he must be consistently inconsistent. (51)

While Wilde's characters' speech and behavior make them seem outlandish, their basic motives are recognizably human and, therefore, very true to life. Similarly, though strange, the characters are consistently characterized. The propriety of the characters with regard to their genders and social positions is complicated by the biblical setting and the Victorian audience, but there is no character who truly challenges any of these norms; even in her lust, Salome is the typical seductive and obsessed woman.

But not all of the "Tragic" characters can claim the most important element, goodness. In Wilde's version of the story, it is only Iokanaan who is truly good, and this is likely entirely intentional. Wilde made an enormous change to the story when he made Salome lustful and self motivated; Tydeman and Price comment, "Tradition and other versions of the material had postulated a Salome in love with the Baptist, but Wilde's originality lies in having his princess overcome with pure physical desire for Iokanaan's body rather than moved by admiration for his fine character or fearless preaching" (8-9). Tydeman and Price also note, "Wilde's Salome is no longer made the instrument of her mother's destructive designs on the Saint as in many other versions; she pursues her own vendetta, not that of Herodias" (9). Had Wilde opted to keep Salome a lover of Iokanaan's character and a dutiful daughter, she could easily have been considered a good character. It is not unreasonable to suggest, then, that this shift was done

intentionally to contrast Salome and Herod's lack of this essential tragic quality to Iokanaan's possession of it. Thus, while their storylines have everything else necessary to make them tragic, Salome and Herod simply cannot be Aristotelian tragic heroes.

But the necessity for goodness seems to come out of Aristotle's optimism; he writes, "pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves" (43). But, if we "ourselves" are not good, can fear be aroused by the misfortune of a bad character? Thus the extent to which the pity and fear of the audience are aroused by the stories of Iokanaan, Herod, and Salome is the measure of the audience's personal goodness. Wilde, a great lover of challenging conventional morals, purposefully wrote *Salome* to be forgiving to the titular character in order to show just how bad people really are.

Popular understanding holds Aristotle's "Thought" – "the faculty of saying what is possible and pertinent in given circumstances [,] found where something is proved to be or not to be, or a general maxim is enunciated" (Aristotle 27) – to refer to the general theme or themes of the play. The Thought in – or behind – *Salome* is distinctly Hellenic in tone, rather than Christian. Cruelty, power, lust, wealth, all are dealt with in Christianity – though usually with a different tone than that with which they are addressed in *Salome* – but the theme that most clearly identifies the Thought of the play as Hellenic is justice.

In biblical Christian stories, justice is typically meted out in the afterlife by God and, accordingly, the Gospels of Mark and Matthew make no mention of Salome's death (The Holy Bible, King James Version). For the Ancient Greeks, the afterlife – with a few exceptions – bore no relation to morality or virtue. Thus, in their literature, justice is

delivered on Earth. Salome's execution in Wilde's play is an act of justice; she is punished for ordering the murder of a holy man. Wilde's addition of a scene in which justice is enacted in the realm of the living is evidence of the Hellenic influence on the Thought of *Salome*.

The fourth element of Aristotelian Tragedy is diction. Aristotle clearly defines ideal diction:

The perfection of style is to be clear without being mean. The clearest style is that which uses only current or proper words... That diction, on the other hand, is lofty and raised above the commonplace which employs unusual words. By unusual, I mean words that are rare or strange, metaphorical, extended,- anything, in short, that differs from the normal idiom. Yet a style wholly composed of such words is either a riddle or a jargon... A certain infusion, therefore, of these elements is necessary to style; for the rare or strange word, the metaphorical, the ornamental, and the other kinds above mentioned, will raise it above the commonplace and mean, while the use of proper words will make it perspicuous. (77-79)

The dialogue of *Salome* walks this fine line perfectly. Wilde's use of archaic English in simply constructed, often quite short sentences – “Thou wilt be passing fair as a queen, Salome, if it please thee to ask for the half of my kingdom” (Wilde 83) – balances Aristotle's desire for “lofty” and “unusual” words while still being clear enough to avoid puzzling the audience. The heavy use of metaphor and simile – “I have opals that burn always, with a flame that is cold as ice... I have onyxes like the eyeballs of a dead woman” (Wilde 88) – also act as elevators, providing the “ornamental” element Aristotle describes.

Aristotle never fully explains the importance of his category of “Song” or how he means it. Apparently “it is a term whose full sense is well understood” (Aristotle 23). The closest he comes to illuminating Song's importance is to say, “Tragedy... is an imitation of an action ... in language embellished with each kind

of artistic ornament... By 'language embellished,' I mean language into which rhythm, 'harmony' and song enter" (Aristotle 21). Despite Aristotle's vagueness regarding song, *Salome* does have a very musical, poetic quality to its dialogue. Tydeman and Price note that, "...some have...questioned its [the play's] claim to the title of play, arguing that there is a better case for treating it as a prose poem" (10) and Wilde himself referred to the play as a "beautiful coloured, musical thing[]..." (Hart-Davis 492).

Another quotation that is often considered to be part of the discussion of song is, "The Chorus too should be regarded as one of the actors; it should be an integral part of the whole, and share in the action" (Aristotle 65). While it might seem that there is no Chorus in *Salome*, in fact the Chorus has just been even more fully integrated into the narrative than Aristotle suggests. The opening scene is an excellent example of this integration. The Young Syrian, the Page, and the two Soldiers speak in turns instead of in unison, and they express themselves more realistically than a Greek Chorus, but they serve the same function; they introduce the scene and the characters and even set the stage for one of the main conflicts in the play by commenting on the arguments between the Jewish sects. Indeed there are many, many figures in *Salome* that don't quite do enough to be considered characters. Rather, they are interchangeable representations of the world surrounding the main characters; the discussion of Iokanaan and Elias that takes place between five enumerated Jews (Wilde 77-78) is not meant to build the personality of Fourth Jew relative to Fifth Jew and Another Jew. These figures represent a general concept of Jewish thought

regarding Iokanaan, much as the Choruses of Sophocles and Euripides act as the voice of a city.

Aristotle all but dismisses the importance of scenery – often translated “Spectacle” – to the play, saying it has “an emotional attraction of its own, but, of all the parts, it is the least artistic, and connected least with the art of poetry. For the power of Tragedy...is felt even apart from representation and actors. Besides, the production of scenic effects depends more on the art of the stage manager than on that of the poet” (27-29). But Wilde goes a step beyond Aristotle’s expectations and makes his poetry into an act of Scenery and Spectacle. Salome doesn’t just look beautiful, she is described beautifully: “She is like a little princess who wears a yellow veil, and whose feet are of silver. She is like a princess who has little white doves for feet. One might fancy she was dancing” (Wilde 65). Iokanaan, too, is described as well as seen: “It is his eyes above all that are terrible. They are like black holes burned by torches in a tapestry of Tyre. They are like the black caverns where the dragons live, the black caverns of Egypt in which the dragons make their lairs... He is like a thin ivory statue. He is like an image of silver” (Wilde 71). Instead of displaying his wealth, Herod describes it in words that are worth a thousand images: “I have a collar of pearls...They are like unto moons chained with rays of silver. They are even as half a hundred moons caught in a golden net. I have amethysts of two kinds; one that is black like wine, and one that is red like wine that one has coloured with water” (Wilde 88).

In typical Wilde fashion, *Salome* is a Christian story told in an ancient Greek way. Where the play deviates from the basic Christian story, it is to make it a better tragedy by Aristotle's standards; where it deviates from Aristotle's theories it is to make the play more modern and to use it to challenge those theories along with Christian concepts of morality. The plot of the play is Christian in that it is taken from the Gospels, but it is told such that it fulfills the *Poetics*' demands on plot. Wilde even changes elements of the plot to better suit Aristotle's theory. He also creates a pure Iokanaan whose great flaw is his purity. This is a direct challenge to Aristotle's belief that the tragic protagonist cannot be too good. The characters in *Salome* are also Christian in origin and they are written so that they fulfill all of the qualifications of character laid out in the *Poetics*, save Herod's and Salome's lack of "goodness." Again Wilde changes the story and again he challenges Aristotle – this time, his idea that people are good and therefore will only feel for characters that are good as well. Aristotelian "thought" in *Salome* is overwhelmingly Hellenic; by presenting justice enacted on earth (again, by changing the story) and not in the afterlife, Wilde is blatantly altering the story to be more Hellenic and less Christian. Wilde simply follows Aristotle's lead with his use of diction, and with his use of song, Wilde takes Aristotle's theory to the highest degree. Wilde creates a pseudo-chorus that "share[s] the action" and is an "integral part of the whole" (Aristotle 65) by making them appear as individual characters and having them speak line by line rather than in unison. And, lastly, though scenery is much less important than poetry to Aristotle, Wilde makes his poetry scenic, thus completing his arduous task of writing an Aristotelian tragedy that is simultaneously more Aristotelian than the work the *Poetics* suggests and utterly, utterly Christian.

In his short story, “The Fisherman and His Soul,” published in 1892 in *The House of Pomegranates*, Wilde positions the Hellenic within the framework of the Christian by reconfiguring the relationship between Evil and Soullessness. In the more common cultural model, the Souled and the Soulless would fall into the categories of Good and Evil respectively¹⁷. Yet in “Fisherman,” Wilde presents a new dichotomy in which both Good and Evil are the province of the Souled and the Souled alone. The Soulless exist in a state exempt from Good and Evil; in a way, the Soulless are pre-Fallen. By portraying the Soulless Hellenic world as Edenic rather than Satanic and by ending the story with a strong statement that God’s love extends to the creatures of that world, Wilde is creating a world that includes all the best aspects of the two religions: the all-encompassing love and compassion of Christ and the beauty and innocence of the mythical pastoral.

The world described in “Fisherman” is simultaneously Christian and Hellenic. Not only do creatures from both mythologies exist (the Witch, Satan, fauns and mermaids), but they interact with one another. More importantly, they interact ideologically.

Good and Evil are represented in the story in the twin characters of the Priest and the Witch. Though one might assume that the Witch is soulless, the dialogue of the story shows that she is not. The Priest mentions only the Sea-folk, fauns, and “beasts of the field” when he discusses soullessness with the Fisherman (Wilde 250-251) and the Witch herself says of the Fisherman’s desire to be rid of his soul, “that is a terrible thing to do,” (Wilde 252) and later, “Be it so...It is thy soul and not mine. Do with it as thou wilt”

¹⁷ The character of the Priest gives voice to this perspective when he describes the soulless characters as “vile and evil [and] accursed” (Wilde 251).

(Wilde 255), implying strongly that she is still in possession of her own. Thus, at the very beginning of the story the readers are asked to shift their view of Good and Evil to the “Fisherman” model where they are both found in Souled creatures. This idea is reinforced later as, when the two are separated, it is the Fisherman’s *Soul* that experiences corruption and only when the Soul re-inhabits the Fisherman does the Fisherman behave evilly. The position of Soullessness, then, usually synonymous with evil, must be re-evaluated. The Priest declares

...as for the Sea-folk, they are lost, and they who would traffic with them are lost also. They are as the beasts of the field that know not good from evil, and for them the Lord has not died...vile and evil are the pagan things God suffers to wander through His world. Accursed be the Fauns of the woodland, and accursed be the singers of the sea!...They are lost, I tell thee, they are lost. For them there is no heaven nor hell, and in neither shall they praise God's name. (Wilde 250-251)

Thus Soullessness is associated solely with Hellenic creatures at the start of the story. Later, when the Fisherman cuts his Soul away to join them, he is described as “Bronze-limbed and well-knit, like a statue wrought by a Grecian” (Wilde 256). But, for all the Priest’s protestation, the Fisherman is clearly happy with his mermaid and, in his Soulless state, is kept pure enough to be shocked by the evil of his soul when they do re-combine. Thus, even before the end of the story, the reader is invited to question the Priest’s assertions. The idea of a state of being where one is devoid of both Good and Evil comes directly from Genesis; prior to eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil, Adam and Eve were in this innocent state. Thus, the Hellenic creatures – the Sea-folk and fauns – are aligned with a pre-fallen Adam and Eve. One could even suggest that Wilde is aligning the world of Hellenism – the ancient Greece imagined by Victorian society – with Eden.

This image of God-blessed Hellenism is further reinforced by the ending. When the flowers from the Fisherman's and Mermaid's grave affect the Priest, he finds himself preaching "not of the wrath of God, but of the God whose name is Love" (Wilde 272):

And in the morning...he went forth with...a great company, and came to the shore of the sea, and blessed the sea, and all the wild things that are in it. The Fauns also he blessed, and the little things that dance in the woodland, and the bright-eyed things that peer through the leaves. All the things in God's world he blessed, and the people were filled with joy and wonder. (272)

So the Hellenic world is redeemed in the end by being included as part of the Christian "God's World."

But even an ending about Christ's all-encompassing love is not wholly Christian. A strong connection is made between the love that the fisherman puts so much importance on when he turns his soul away and the love that ultimately redeems them and causes the priest to bless the soulless Hellenic creatures. But this love is linked to the Hellenic myth of Paris and the apple. On their first meeting after being separated, the soul says to the Fisherman, "Do but suffer me to enter into thee again and be thy servant, and thou shalt be wiser than all the wise men, and Wisdom shall be thine. Suffer me to enter into thee, and none will be as wise as thou" (Wilde 260). But the Fisherman replies, "Love is better than Wisdom...and the little Mermaid loves me" (Wilde 260). The Soul tries again the next year, offering a magic Ring, saying, "He who has this Ring is richer than all the kings of the world. Come therefore and take it, and the world's riches shall be thine" (Wilde 264). But, again the Fisherman declares that "Love is better than Riches...and the little Mermaid loves me" (Wilde 265). The Fisherman chooses Love over the Soul's offerings of Wisdom and Riches, much as Paris chose Aphrodite's offer of Love over Athena's offer of Wisdom and Hera's offer of Power and Wealth in the

myth of Paris and the apple. In fact, the only way for the Soul to tempt the Fisherman away is with an offer similar to that of Aphrodite: he says, “In a city that I know of there is an inn that standeth by a river...[in it] a girl whose face was veiled ran in and began to dance before us. Her face was veiled with a veil of gauze, but her feet were naked. Naked were her feet, and they moved over the carpet like little white pigeons. Never have I seen anything so marvellous, and the city in which she dances is but a day's journey from this place” (Wilde 265). The Fisherman fails not in choosing Love above all else, but in choosing to dally with a false approximation of Love.

By structurally linking the love of Christ to the love of Aphrodite, Wilde is subverting his own subversion; not only does he cast the Hellenic world as a sort of innocent Eden of Soullessness loved by God as much as the current Christian world, he is drawing a direct parallel between God's greatest gift to man and the province of a Greek goddess. By including the latter method of mixing, Wilde avoids placing Hellenism *only* within Christianity – an inherently subordinate position. In addition, by referencing Aphrodite, Wilde works the actual *gods* of Hellenism into the story without disrupting the tone of the fairy tale. It is much simpler to imagine including the creatures of the Hellenic pastoral into a monotheistic world if one is not forced to consider that the mythology in which they appear is a product of a religion – a polytheistic one. But Wilde complicates the basic message of the story by making clear that very fact.

In his longer works, Wilde's blending takes on a more determined tone than in his poems. Whereas the poems *present* to the reader Wilde's amalgamating tendency, *Salome* and “The Fisherman and His Soul” explain it. In *Salome*, Wilde uses Hellenism and Christianity to enhance one another and through the beauty of the product makes a

compelling case for the benefits of this sort of combination. In “Fisherman,” Wilde fully integrates Hellenism into Christianity by figuring Hellenic “soullessness” as Edenic innocence. He resists the neatness of this model by making a subtle reference to the myth of Paris and the apple and linking God’s love to Aphrodite’s. This serves to draw attention to how the meshing of a monotheistic religion and a polytheistic religion can never really be neat.

A Past, Pagan But Noble: *Beowulf* and *The Lord of the Rings*

It is not surprising that Tolkien, as an Anglo-Saxon scholar, had strong opinions about *Beowulf*. In his essay “Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics” (1936), Tolkien lays out his then revolutionary perspective on the epic poem. He pays close attention to the representation of religion in the poem, noting that the ideological tension for the author was due to his position in history. Tolkien agrees with the majority of *Beowulf* critics who date the poem to the Age of Bede (8th century CE). The author, therefore, was writing in a “time of fusion” (J.R.R. Tolkien, “Monsters” 20), when Christianity¹⁸ was the dominant religion in Britain but the pre-Christian, polytheistic past was still recent enough to have clear cultural power. Tolkien writes, “In the poem I think we may observe not confusion, a half-hearted or a muddled business, but a fusion that has occurred *at a given point* of contact between old and new, a product of thought and deep emotion” (Tolkien, “Monsters” 20). Clearly this was not the milieu in which Tolkien wrote *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955). But, as further similarities show, Tolkien specifically structured the novels to be like the poem. That the religious tension in *The Lord of the Rings* mirrors that in *Beowulf* is no accident; Tolkien was explicitly trying to recreate the mood of *Beowulf*.

¹⁸ Since *Beowulf* was written prior to the Schism between East and West in the early Christian church, the term “Catholic” cannot rightly be applied. But the form of Christianity practiced in England at the time would later come to be called Catholicism after the split with the Eastern Church.

The narrative layers of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy are key to the success of this Beowulfian effect. Tolkien greatly stresses the importance of the *Beowulf* poet choosing as a subject a legend from the past¹⁹. Tolkien wrote,

In *Beowulf* we have...an historical poem about the pagan past...[The author] cast his time into the long-ago, because already the long-ago had a special poetical attraction... The whole must have succeeded admirably in creating in the minds of the poet's contemporaries the illusion of surveying a past, pagan but noble and fraught with a deep significance—a past that itself had depth and reached backward into a dark antiquity of sorrow. (Tolkien, “Monsters” 26-27)

It is clear that in order to achieve the mood of *Beowulf* in *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien needed not just to create a mythical land that resembles the past of the real world, but to give his work temporal “depth” with the frame of a narrator who exists in the world of Middle-earth and could place the main story in his own past.

At the start of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the narrator – depicted as the author of an historical account – goes into detail about his sources in constructing the text; he notes the Red Book (Frodo’s account) in its many copies and various sources from “the libraries at Bucklebury and Tuckborough” (Tolkien, “Fellowship” 24). He comments that, “Those days, the third age of Middle-earth, are now long past...” (Tolkien, “Fellowship” 11). Here Tolkien firmly places his fiction not only within a larger history of Middle-earth, but in the “past” – the narrator’s voice is speaking from the “present.” The narrator infrequently breaks out of the action of the story directly with such occasional asides as, “His name is remembered in no tale; for he himself had forgotten it” (Tolkien, “King” 164). More often, it is the narrator’s *tone* that reinforces this sense of

¹⁹ Unlike many other critics, Tolkien did not consider *Beowulf* a poetic retelling of a wonderful legend written by an irrelevant author, but rather took the perspective of an author and considered the legend of Beowulf a choice in subject made by “a poet who set out to *write* a poem” (Tolkien, “Monsters” 21).

historicity. With such statements as, “Thus came Aragorn, son of Arathorn, Elessar, Isildur’s heir, out of the Paths of the Dead...” (Tolkien, “King” 123), Tolkien gives the impression that the narrator is writing to an audience familiar with the story he is telling. There is also the implication that the reader is or should be aware of more Middle-earth history than existed for public consumption at the time of publication²⁰.

Tolkien imagined the mythology and culture of ancient England to be similar to that of ancient Scandinavia. He wrote, “Of English pre-Christian mythology we know practically nothing. But the fundamentally similar heroic temper of ancient England and Scandinavia cannot have been founded on (or perhaps rather, cannot have generated) mythologies divergent on this essential point” (Tolkien, “Monsters” 21). Therefore, the pre-Christian mood that Tolkien drew upon when crafting with *The Lord of the Rings* was that of Norse mythology. Tolkien refers to this overarching culture as “Northern.”

In *Beowulf*, Tolkien writes, the Northern religious theme of courage and cosmic warfare mixes productively with Christianity. To explain the Northern vision of the cosmic war and its end result, Ragnarok, Tolkien quotes William Paton Ker’s *The Dark Ages*: “The Northern Gods...have an exultant extravagance in their warfare...*they are on the right side, though it is not the side that wins. The winning side is Chaos and Unreason...but the gods, who are defeated, think that defeat no refutation* (ellipses mine).” Tolkien adds, “And in their war men are their chosen allies, able when heroic to share in this 'absolute resistance, perfect because without hope” (Tolkien, “Monsters”

²⁰ The subsequent posthumous publishing of *The Silmarillion* (1977) and *The Children of Hurin* (2007), Tolkien’s personal letters and notes, not to mention unofficial resources such as websites and Wikipedia entries, have changed the modern readers’ experience of the texts since questions about the back story can, in fact, be answered with a small effort.

21). Monsters, in Northern myth, are manifestations of these evil forces of Chaos and therefore “the foes of the gods” (Tolkien, “Monsters” 22).

The Christian vision of the end of the world and the cosmic war is quite different mostly because Christianity considers the end of the world to be part of God’s plan. Therefore, a purely Christian perspective of the cosmic war would lack the pre-Christian, Northern pessimism: “The tragedy of the great temporal defeat remains for a while poignant, but ceases to be finally important. It is no defeat, for the end of the world is part of the design of Metod, the Arbiter who is above the mortal world...and the real battle is between the soul and its adversaries” (Tolkien, “Monsters” 22). And the monsters of old “became inevitably the enemies of the one God” (Tolkien, “Monsters” 22).

As noted earlier, the *Beowulf* poet wrote during “a time of fusion” (Tolkien, “Monsters” 20) between the then-dominant Christianity and fading pre-Christian, “Northern” polytheism. Therefore, though likely a Christian himself, the *Beowulf* poet does not represent a purely Christian perspective; “[he] is still concerned primarily with *man on earth*, rehandling in a new perspective an ancient theme: that man, each man and all men, and all their works shall die...this theme plainly would not be so treated, but for the nearness of a pagan time. The shadow of its despair, if only as a mood, as an intense emotion of regret, is still there” (Tolkien, “Monsters” 23).

In the *Lord of the Rings* series, Tolkien reproduces the prominent themes he saw in *Beowulf*. As in Northern mythology, men (and hobbits) wage the war against evil on Earth. While no deities directly involve themselves with the battle, there is a sense among the warriors that theirs is the side of righteousness, and neither the “author” of *The Lord of the Rings* the historical document nor Tolkien makes any move to challenge this

impression. Also, the assistance of the wizard Gandalf and the nearly-divine Galadriel enhance the sense that the fight for Middle-earth is important on a cosmic scale. Much as in *Beowulf*, the monsters – everyone from the orcs to Sauron himself – are evil, and the enemies of good. But, again, as with *Beowulf*, they are not two-dimensional allegorical figures. The Orcs desire souls no more than *Beowulf*'s dragon does, and Sauron wants tangible power over Middle-earth, not to spread evil in a metaphysical sense. The only character, if it can be so called, that acts on the metaphysical plane is the Ring and, even then, evil is a characteristic of the Ring, not a goal. The representation of the end of the world in *The Lord of the Rings* is not the Christian rapture, but is closer to the Norse Ragnarok, in which Chaos wins the cosmic battle. But despite this “shadow of despair,” the apocalypse is averted, the side of good wins, and the Christian spirit infuses this success.

Tolkien wrote:

Almost we might say that [*Beowulf*] was (in one direction) inspired by the debate...shall we or shall we not consign the heathen ancestors to perdition?...The author of *Beowulf* showed forth the permanent value of that *pietas* which treasures the memory of man's struggles in the dark past, man fallen and not yet saved, disgraced but not dethroned. (Tolkien, “Monsters” 23)

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien clearly creates characters that are not “consign[ed]...to perdition.” Like the characters in *Beowulf*, they cannot be Christian soldiers because they have no knowledge of Christ. But as in *Beowulf* they are depicted as not yet saved rather than damned; their “heathen”ness is not a bar to their goodness. This will be discussed further in the following chapter.

In “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics,” Tolkien also examines Greek mythology and how the Greek gods differ from the Northern:

... we may...contrast the 'inhumanness' of the Greek gods...with the 'humanness' of the Northern...In the southern myths there is also rumour of wars with giants and great powers not Olympian...But this war is differently conceived. It lies in a chaotic past. The ruling gods are not besieged, not in ever-present peril or under future doom...The gods are not the allies of men in their war against...monsters... In Norse, at any rate, the gods are within Time, doomed with their allies to death. Their battle is with the monsters and the outer darkness. They gather heroes for the last defense... (Tolkien, "Monsters" 25)

Though *The Lord of the Rings* is based mostly in Northern and Christian tradition and mythology, there are two characters that seem to be Tolkien's nod to the very different religious ideology of Beowulf's southern neighbors: Tom Bombadil and Goldberry.

The exact nature of Tom Bombadil and his wife Goldberry is heavily debated among fans and critics of *The Lord of the Rings*. They do not really seem to fit with the rest of Middle-earth and their oddity is compounded by what little of Tom is revealed at the Council of Elrond. Elrond comments that Tom's Elvish name means "oldest and fatherless," and Gandalf that "He would not have come" to the council (Tolkien, "Fellowship" 278). Gandalf explains "the Ring has no power over him. He is his own master. But he cannot alter the Ring itself, nor break its power over others...if he were given the Ring, he would soon forget it, or most likely throw it away. Such things have no hold on his mind" (Tolkien, "Fellowship" 279).

Though Bombadil shares many characteristics with Tolkien's vision of Greek gods, he is not meant to actually *be* a Greek god; he does not represent them as a whole, nor is he the Middle-earth version of a specific god. In fact, the only resemblance he bears them is in the eyes of Tolkien; Tom shares with the Greek gods that which Tolkien identifies as their primary difference from their Northern counterparts. Like the Greek gods, Tom and, one must assume, Goldberry are removed from the cosmic struggle

between good and evil because they are simply neither. And, like the Greek gods, Tom and Goldberry are not good or evil; they are kind; they have personality traits rather than alignments. That Middle-earth includes creatures inspired by Greek mythology as well as Northern is strange but potentially telling. It may be a function of Tolkien's personal belief in Christianity – all *other* cosmologies can coexist in fiction just as their believers did in real life. Or, it could be a way to draw attention to the prominence of the Northern mood in the rest of Middle-earth.

Thus we can see that not only does *The Lord of the Rings* clearly come from the same mind as the man who wrote “Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics,” but that the two are intimately related, especially in their treatment of religion. The *Lord of the Rings* series is, in many ways, Tolkien's attempt to mimic the *Beowulf* poet. His use of Northern and Catholic themes comes not, as might be supposed, from the author's love of Anglo-Saxon culture and personal belief in Catholicism, but rather specifically from this relationship to *Beowulf*. This makes “Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics” a useful tool for understanding the ways in which specific religious leitmotifs and themes play out in *The Lord of the Rings*. The next chapter will discuss some of these themes and analyze them in light of “Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics.”

History, True or Feigned:

The Balance of Religions in *The Lord of the Rings*

The effect of *Beowulf*'s inspiration to Tolkien can be felt throughout the *Lord of the Rings* series. Catholic themes and “Northern”²¹ themes in the trilogy are not mutually exclusive, nor are they in competition with one another for primacy. The themes overlap and are used by Tolkien to enhance one another. The world of Middle-earth is simultaneously entirely Christian and entirely Northern.

The image of the cosmic struggle between Good and Evil being played out on the physical plane is common to Northern and Christian mythology. From Siegfried's dragon to St. George's, the mythical representation of this fight takes place on Earth. But the mythologies differ in their depiction of the struggle's end. As Tolkien notes, in Norse – and, he assumed, Anglo-Saxon – mythology, (most of) the gods and heroes are defeated in Ragnarok, and the world, as we know it, ends. While the Christian world also ends in an epic battle, neither God nor His human allies suffer for it; the good join God in heaven. Since this result is guaranteed by prophecy and promise, the important struggle for a Christian is not the one between his God and the forces of evil, but the one within himself to choose the side of good. The Christian God is also figured as having designed the world's end rather than having fallen prey to enemy forces. Thus, the two religions have very different moods, particularly in their visions of the future. The Northern religion has a pessimistic tone due to its expectation of ultimate defeat. Christians, on the

²¹ For a discussion of Tolkien's use of the term “Northern” in reference to Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian mythology see Chapter Three.

other hand, believe that if they are good enough, they will be rewarded, giving the religion a more optimistic tone.

The physical war between Good and Evil in *The Lord of the Rings* is, therefore, neither wholly Christian nor wholly Northern in character. The final battle, also, derives from an intricate mix of its sources. In the days leading up to the final battle in *The Return of the King*, the battle is figured as Ragnarok. The characters are fearful of losing, and Gondor is in crisis when the battle starts. Merry is told that the sun “will not rise today...Nor ever again, one would think under this cloud” (J.R.R. Tolkien, “King” 74), and a messenger later tells Theoden:

It comes from Mordor...It began last night at sunset...I saw it rise and creep across the sky, and all night as I rode it came behind eating up the stars. Now the great cloud hangs over all the land between here and the Mountains of Shadow; and it is deepening. War has already begun.
(Tolkien, “King” 74)

Andy Dimond notes in his essay “The Twilight of the Elves: Ragnarok and the End of the Third Age” that “Ragnarok’s influence is manifest in Tolkien’s sampling of some of the Norse iconography and the use of symbols common to Ragnarok and other apocalyptic traditions” (Jane Chance 181). He particularly notes that the “swallowing” of the sun, the fear of eternal darkness, is central to Ragnarok and that Tolkien also “borrows the notion of decline and decay preceding the final battle; he projects a doomed world” (Chance 181).

However, the side of Good wins the battle *and* the war, and the rest of the book is closer in tone to the Christian Apocalypse. Aragorn’s crowning is reminiscent of the Second Coming of Christ:

But when Aragorn arose all that beheld him gazed in silence, for it seemed to them that he was revealed to them now for the first time. Tall as the

sea-kings of old, he stood above all that were near; ancient of days he seemed and yet in the flower of manhood; and wisdom sat upon his brow, and strength and healing were in his hands, and a light was about him. (Tolkien, "King" 246)

Along with symbolizing hope and rebirth, Aragorn's physical description is Christ-like. The healing hands²² and halo-like light²³ are clear indicators of his Christ-like status. Furthermore, the description of Aragorn as "ancient of days" and "in the flower of manhood" and with "wisdom [on] his brow" harkens to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit of the tripartite Christian God²⁴. The exodus of the Elves (along with Bilbo and Frodo) to the Grey Havens is simultaneously similar to the rewards of the righteous after the Last Judgment of Christian prophesy and the death of many of the gods after Ragnarok in Northern mythology.

In Tolkien's writing, as in *Beowulf*: "The shadow of its despair, if only as a mood, as an intense emotion of regret, is still there. The worth of defeated valour in this world is deeply felt...all glory (or as we might say 'culture' or 'civilization') ends in night" (Tolkien, "Monsters" 23). The Northern mood of "despair" and idea of the ephemeral nature of men and their works permeates the end of the series. Tolkien repeatedly reminds the reader that this will be the end of the third age of Middle-earth. At last, "Elrond and Galadriel rode on; for the Third Age was over and the Days of the Rings

²² "And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man which was blind from his birth...he spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and he anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay, and said unto him, Go, wash in the pool of Silo'am... He went his way therefore, and washed, and came seeing" (The Holy Bible, King James Version, John 9:1-7).

²³ "[H]is countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength" (The Holy Bible, King James Version, Revelation 1:16)

²⁴ The Athanasian Creed explains the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity as follows: "there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Ghost is all One, the Glory Equal, the Majesty Co-Eternal." (James Sullivan)

were passed, and an end was come of the story and song of those times” (Tolkien, “King” 309). Thus, the depiction of the great battle between good and evil in *The Return of the King* is a blend of its Northern and Christian sources.

Like the physicality of the cosmic struggle, the physicality of the monsters and magic in *The Lord of the Rings* is a blending of influences. As noted in the previous chapter, Tolkien’s monsters are modeled after what he admired in *Beowulf*’s monsters. In “Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics,” Tolkien explains that the shift from the Anglo-Saxon to Christian view of the end of world caused a shift in the role of monsters: in the Northern cosmology, men and gods were joined against monsters. When the Christian God replaced the Northern ones, the monsters of old became His enemies as well. But, since the Christian religion, as Tolkien explains it, imagines that “the real battle is between the soul and its adversaries” (Tolkien, “Monsters” 22), “the old monsters became images of the evil spirit or spirits, or rather the evil spirits entered into the monsters and took visible shape in the hideous bodies of the *pyrsas* and *sigel-hearwan* of heathen imagination...But that shift is not complete in *Beowulf*” (Tolkien, “Monsters” 22-23), Tolkien argues. Therefore, he presented the shift as incomplete in *The Lord of the Rings* as well; his monsters are somewhere between self-motivated, evil creatures and embodiments of the idea of evil.

Tolkien strongly resisted allegory in his writing²⁵, finding it overly simplistic. In his forward to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, he wrote:

...I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so...I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many

²⁵ Nevertheless, Tolkien acknowledged that “any attempt to explain the purport of myth or fairytale must use allegorical language” (Tolkien, “Letters” 145).

confuse ‘applicability’ with ‘allegory’; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author. (Tolkien, “Fellowship” 7)

Therefore, he liked the lack of “allegorical homily in verse” (Tolkien, “Monsters” 23) in *Beowulf*. He wrote,

Grendel inhabits the visible world and eats the flesh and blood of men... The dragon wields a physical fire, and covets gold not souls; he is slain with iron in his belly. Beowulf's *byrne* was made by Weland, and the iron shield he bore against the serpent by his own smiths: it was not yet the breastplate of righteousness, nor the shield of faith for the quenching of all the fiery darts of the wicked. (Tolkien, “Monsters” 23)

Tolkien saw a clear cultural shift take place with the inception of Christianity in England. Where before Christianity, literature depicted characters who were *people* with motivations that could be judged good or evil, after, characters became representatives of good or evil in the story. Where before, a weapon or piece of armor could be strong because it was strong, after it would be strong because it stood for an idea that had strength against the idea the hero fought. Tolkien strikes an excellent balance in *The Lord of the Rings* between the straightforward Northern influence and the representative Christian²⁶ influence; the monsters and objects of his stories waver between existing only as part of the narrative and having a clear extrapolative value.

For example, Sauron could be seen as the representation of all things evil in the stories (though the inclusion of Shelob in the world of Middle-earth resists this reading), but evil is neither his motivation nor his goal. His lust for power causes him to do evil things, and his disregard for these evil actions make him an evil character, but he is not the Christian devil figure, bent on spreading evil through the world. Indeed, when

²⁶ It should be noted that the cultural shift Tolkien attributed to Christianity might have simply been a product of the passage of time.

Gandalf explains to Frodo why Sauron would want to enslave the residents of Hobbiton, it is not because Sauron wants their souls or because the desire to enslave is somehow inherent to him. Instead, Gandalf attributes Sauron's desire to the very human motives of "malice and revenge" (Tolkien, "Fellowship" 58), the implication being that Sauron would avenge himself on those who had kept the One Ring from him.

The Orcs, too, are given qualities much more human and less allegorical than one might expect. While they are by no means good, they have dreams and plans beyond mindlessly following Sauron's orders. Their human motivations become clear in the occasional exchange between Orcs, as in this dialogue between Shagrat and Gorbag in *The Two Towers*,

"...But the war's on now, and when that's over things may be easier."
[Said Gorbag]
"It's going well, they say." [Said Shagrat]
"They would," grunted Gorbag. "We'll see. But anyway, if it does go well, there should be a lot more room. What d'you say?-if we get a chance, you and me'll slip off and set up somewhere on our own with a few trusty lads, somewhere where there's good loot nice and handy, and no big bosses." (Tolkien, "Towers" 347)

While these Orcs' vision of happiness may make them bad, or even evil, the fact remains that they are motivated by happiness, not evil. Furthermore, Sauron uses his Orc army as an army – they help him in the acquisition of power. Just as Sauron is no devil, the Orcs are not imps corrupting human souls for their master.

But Sauron and his armies are not the only representation of evil in the series. The giant spider, Shelob, is described as one of the "other potencies...in Middle-earth, powers of night...old and strong" (Tolkien, "Towers" 329). She is clearly monstrous, and evil in her own way, but it is of note that she is not part of the "evil" with which the free people of Middle-earth are at war: "Little she knew of or cared for towers, or

rings...” (Tolkien, “Towers” 333). This diversity of evil helps Sauron resist the allegory his character could otherwise fall into; Sauron cannot be the representation of all evil in the story since he isn’t even the *only* evil *within* the story.

The magical objects in *The Lord of the Rings* vary in their place on the continuum from Northern straightforwardness to Christian allegory. Frodo’s Mithril chain mail shirt is, granted, somewhat magical, but it is simply “a small shirt of mail. It was close-woven of many rings, as supple almost as linen, cold as ice, and harder than steel. It shone like moonlit silver, and was studded with white gems” (Tolkien, “Fellowship” 290). The shirt protects Frodo on his quest and even acts as proof of death in *The Return of the King*, but – like Beowulf’s armor – it is not a “breastplate of righteousness.”

The Elven *lembas* bread, however, functions both as a useful quest tool and as an allusion – if not a full allegory. The Elves explain that *lembas* “is more strengthening than any food made by Men...Eat little at a time and only at need...One will keep a traveler on his feet for a day of long labour” (Tolkien, “Fellowship” 385). It assists the heroes in their journey, particularly Sam and Frodo, but it also resembles the Catholic host. Though clearly the Elves make no claim of transubstantiation, the idea of a food that nourishes the soul and helps the heroes continue their battle against evil is notably Christian in nature.

Aragon’s sword, Anduril, is unique in the series because it is symbolic within the diegesis. The sword does not mean very much to the reader – perhaps a reminder of other mythical swords²⁷, but nothing particular. To the inhabitants of Middle-earth, however, Anduril is the sword spoken of in the prophecy of the return of the King; it is

²⁷ Arthur’s Excalibur, Siegfried’s Notung

the “blade” of “Renewed shall be blade that was broken,/ The crownless again shall be king” (Tolkien, “Fellowship” 182). Aragorn is fully aware of the symbolic power of his sword, and uses it in tense moments to prove his heritage. At the council of Elrond, he declares, “Here is the Sword that was Broken!” (Tolkien, “Fellowship” 259). While the character’s speaking voice may not have conveyed the capitalization of the text, Tolkien’s intent is clear: this particular sword carries cultural, symbolic meaning to these characters. Later, Tolkien pushes this idea one step further with hyphens when Aragorn says “the Sword-that-was-Broken shall be re-forged ere I set out to war” (Tolkien, “Fellowship” 289). Having an object whose symbolic power is diegetic is a clever way to represent the delicate balance between plot and allegory – Northern and Christian.

The figure of the Ring of Power is similarly not merely allegorical. Like many other aspects of the series, the One Ring also owes its character to various cultural sources. In *The Gospel According to Tolkien*, Ralph C. Wood traces the idea of the Ring of Invisibility back to the likely source of Plato’s *Republic*. In the story, Wood writes, Socrates claims, “the doing of good needs no external threat or reward. Goodness is so inherently satisfying...that it requires no compensation” (Wood 68). Glaucon tells the story of Gyges, who did terrible things while wearing a ring of invisibility, in order to “demonstrate[] what happens when human nature is not constrained” (Wood 68). In this story, the ring itself is not bad; it is the power not to be seen or judged that corrupts the wearer. This is perhaps the reason why Tolkien’s evil Ring’s only readily apparent power is to turn its wearer invisible; invisibility is the precursor to corruption.

Corruption is, after all, the main effect of the One Ring. While magical rings feature prominently in Northern mythology²⁸, Tolkien's Ring is clearly based in the Christian cosmology (possible ancient Greek inspiration notwithstanding); the Ring is a tempter, to give in to it is to sin. All of the Great Rings are presented as powerful corrupters of souls; Gandalf says to Frodo:

A mortal...who keeps one of the Great Rings, does not die, but he does not grow or obtain more life, he merely continues, until at last every minute is a weariness...Yes, sooner or later – later, if he is strong or well-meaning to begin with, but neither strength nor good purpose will last – sooner or later the dark power will devour him. (Tolkien, "Fellowship" 56)

While the Great Rings – and the One Ring in particular – are given a greater sense of agency than Gyges' ring in Plato's story, they are still not technically conscious. The corruption of the wearer is a function of having worn it, not of an act of specific temptation on the part of the Ring; the Ring is not a Satan figure, but pure sin.

Interestingly, while Tolkien figures the Ring as evil, the text does not blame the people who succumb to its pull. Boromir is redeemed by his sacrificial death. After killing "twenty at least" Orcs in defense of his companions, he tells Aragorn, "I tried to take the Ring from Frodo...I am sorry. I have paid...I have failed" (Tolkien, "Towers" 16). But, Aragorn declares, "No!...You have conquered...Be at peace!" (Tolkien, "Towers" 16). This absolution is both kind to Boromir and a clear message to the reader: giving in to the Ring does not make one past redemption. Even Frodo's eventual fall and unwillingness to destroy the Ring do not prevent him from being given a place on the ship to the Grey Havens (Tolkien, "King" 309). Gollum's weakness in the face of the Ring's power is also explicitly treated as human (or hobbit) frailty rather than a

²⁸ For example: Odin's Draupnir, Andvarinaut.

predisposition to evil. Gandalf says of him, “I think it is a sad story...and it might have happened to others, even to some hobbits that I have known” (Tolkien, “Fellowship” 63). Gollum is pathetic in the most genuine sense of the word and, though he is never truly able to break free from the Ring, his accidentally noble death – falling into the fires of Mordor and taking the Ring with him – provides his arc with a somewhat redemptive, if not wholly satisfying, conclusion.

Thus, the text offers its characters ultimate forgiveness despite the non-Christian setting and its pre-Christian basis. And so, like the *Beowulf* poet, Tolkien does not “consign [his] heathen [characters] to perdition” (Tolkien, “Monsters” 23). This, more than anything else, speaks to the Christian nature of the series; that the text extends the forgiveness that so characterizes the religion to characters that live in a world without it is the ultimate Christian theme.

Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* seamlessly incorporates the themes he identifies as Northern with Christian themes. While his deep love of, and desire to imitate, *Beowulf* seems to have had a strong impact on the religious mixing in the series, the exact ways in which he goes about achieving his effect are original and impressive; *The Lord of the Rings* is not simple retelling of *Beowulf*, it is a unique work that feels as though it was written in a “time of fusion” despite having been written when Northern culture and religion had all but died out.

Conclusion

Wilde and Tolkien share both a tendency to combine religious influences and a history of having this blending ignored by critics. Though the two authors combine different religions and in different ways, they share the peculiar quality of noncompetitive representations of multiple religious sources.

Wilde mostly combines Hellenic and Christian, specifically Catholic, themes. He occasionally uses Celtic themes as well. In the poems examined in this thesis, Wilde depicts a world – implicitly the world of the reader – where the various gods and concepts of divinity from Hellenic, Christian, and Celtic tradition can coexist. His poems notably do not privilege one religion over the other. In Wilde’s 1891 play *Salome*, he explores the idea that Hellenism and Christianity enhance one another. In the 1892 short story “The Fisherman and His Soul,” Wilde goes even further than in either his poems or *Salome*. While the poems explore a blended Christo-Hellenic world, and *Salome* shows how the two cultures could improve upon one another if brought together, “Fisherman” explores the actual rationale for seeing the two religions as combinable while simultaneously questioning that very logic.

Wilde often depicts Hellenic and Christian mythology and religion as equally valid in a single poem. In “Santa Decca” (1881), the Hellenic gods and the Christian God coexist. The only religious anxiety in the poem is focused on the question of whether the Hellenic gods will return after Christianity has seemingly chased them off. However, Wilde does not imply that, should the gods return, Christ would lose any power. In “The New Helen” (1881), Wilde treats the myths and mythical figures of Hellenism and Christianity equally as he compares them to Lillie Langtry. “Panthea” (1881), though

mostly Hellenic, also includes some Christian terms and ideas. In “Phedre” (1881), Wilde depicts the afterlife as a combination of the Christian model and the Hellenic model. Despite the fact that this is a paradox – the models are too different to apply to a single place, however imagined – Wilde’s combination passes without comment in the poem. In “Sonnet (Written in Holy Week at Genoa)” (1881), Wilde depicts Christianity as sorrowful and Hellenism as joyous. But the religions are not framed as competitive, and the speaker of the poem does not choose one over the other. In “The True Knowledge” (1881) Wilde uses a Euripides quotation to reflect upon an otherwise Christian poem. In “Ave Maria, Gratia Plena” (1881), Wilde describes three instances of divine impregnation, those of Danae, Semele, and Mary. Though the speaker of the poem feels more fulfilled from Mary’s story, her Hellenic counterparts are never negated or depicted as blasphemy, nor are they treated as the lesser precursor to Mary’s ultimate truth.

The best example of Wilde’s myth mixing is “The Sphinx” (1894). In this poem, the speaker asks a sphinx about her many lovers, suggesting various mythological creatures along with animals and gods. Many of these potential lovers have complicated historical resonances and do not clearly derive from a single mythology. He asks her to describe the things she has seen, including, “Thoth...and moon-horned Io...the Jewish maid who wandered with the Holy Child...[and] Adrian’s gilded barge” (Oscar Wilde 834). Within the world of the poem, Egyptian gods, cursed Greek women, Christian messiahs, and Roman emperors all exist together. The speaker of the poem later asks the Sphinx to leave him to his crucifix, though he describes Jesus as “weep[ing]...for every soul in vain” (Wilde 842). Throughout the poem, various mythologies, Christian

included, are presented as equally valid and as having taken place concurrently.

However, in the end, the student realizes that the syncretic religion the Sphinx represents is antithetical to the monotheism of Catholicism. He tells the Sphinx that she “makes [his] creed a barren sham” (Wilde 842) and begs her to leave. It is of note that Wilde began “The Sphinx” while still in college. The thoughts and emotions of the student may well have been autobiographical.

Wilde also occasionally Hellenizes Christ in his work. In “On the Sale by Auction of Keats’ Love Letters” (1886) he simultaneously depicts Keats as both Endymion and Christ, drawing a parallel between the mythic figures. In “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” (1898) Wilde makes it clear that the hanged man is a Christ-figure. He also implies a homoeroticism to the hanged man’s story by using Victorian associations with the death penalty and the love-death trope. While not all instances of homoeroticism in literature are Hellenic, Wilde’s quotations with regard to the ways in which he felt persecuted make it clear that, for him, Victorian anti-homosexuality was akin to anti-Hellenism. Thus, for the author, if not for every reader, the homoerotic Christ figure of the hanged man is also Hellenic.

Wilde amalgamates Hellenism and Christianity very differently in his play *Salome*. The play uses Aristotelian dramatic conventions to tell a story from the Bible. Wilde does not follow either source to the letter; he changes aspects of each to suit the pairing. While the Hellenic and Christian influences in Wilde’s poems are blended together to produce a single world, the influences in *Salome* interlock; Wilde changes his Christian source to enhance the Hellenic and challenges his Hellenic source to enhance the Christian.

In “The Fisherman and His Soul” we see a continuation of the project in the poems (the majority of which were published a full decade earlier). Where the poems, for the most part, simply describe a world where Christianity, specifically Catholicism, and Hellenism are co-existent, “Fisherman” tries to explain how they could be blended. Wilde fits Hellenism into Christianity by making theological space for it; he depicts the “pagan” world as innocent, or pre-fallen. Wilde also links the two religions directly by symbolically pointing to the similarity between the Christian God’s love and the Hellenic Aphrodite’s. By bringing an actual Greek god into the story, if obliquely, Wilde complicates the story and resists the tidiness of the over-arching message. In “Fisherman” as in “The Sphinx,” Wilde seems acutely aware of the effort it takes to combine separate religions in the way that he does.

The fact that Wilde’s interest in amalgamation takes so many forms is telling. The combining of Hellenic and Christian religions, mythologies, and cosmologies was clearly a literary project that extended throughout his life.

Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955), like Wilde’s “Fisherman” story, does not take place in the world of the reader. Instead, Tolkien constructs a world that is both “Northern” and Christian in character and in plot; he uses the cosmologies of the two cultures to create a single world that incorporates both. This world is specifically a fantasy imitation of the world in which *Beowulf* takes place. Tolkien’s comment that his obviously Northern-influenced work is “fundamentally Catholic,” coupled with his personal deep belief in Catholicism and his fascination with *Beowulf* and the period of transition between Northern religion and proto-Catholicism in which it was written,

imply that Tolkien, like Wilde, did not see the religions about which he wrote as incongruent.

Tolkien wrote his *Lord of the Rings* series in large part in imitation of *Beowulf*. From his essay “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics” (1936) we know exactly what his opinions of the ancient poem were. Tolkien seems to have been particularly inspired by the way that religion works in *Beowulf*. Because of when the poem was written, and perhaps because of choices made by the author, *Beowulf* – according to Tolkien – is a product of an incomplete shift from “Northern” religion and culture to Christian.

Tolkien saw the shared idea of cosmic war as one of the best examples of productive religious mixing in *Beowulf*. Accordingly, the cosmic war is central to *The Lord of the Rings*. The cosmic war in *Lord of the Rings*, as in both Northern and Christian mythology, takes place in the physical world. In *The Return of the King*, Tolkien uses images associated with the Northern Ragnarok – the end of the world in which the forces of chaos defeat the gods and men – early in his description of the final battle to come. Later, once the battle has been won by the side of good, the imagery takes on the tone of the Christian Apocalypse – a more optimistic vision of the end of the world in which goodness and God prevail.

Tolkien considered the *Beowulf* poet’s treatment of allegory to correctly balance his Northern and Christian influences. While pre-Christian, Northern poetry lacked allegory – things just *were*; they didn’t represent anything else – and Christian work written after *Beowulf* was allegorical to the point of comedy, *Beowulf* had just enough of each for Tolkien’s taste. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien strikes a similar balance. The character of Sauron is an excellent example of this; while Sauron is clearly representative

of evil in a larger sense, he is not the devil of a medieval morality play. Rather, Sauron is a character with personal motivations and goals that are construed as evil by the main characters and the text itself.

Tolkien was also concerned with how the Christian author of *Beowulf* dealt with the question of his pre-Christian subjects' goodness and salvation. He praised the *Beowulf* poet for not "consigning" his "heathen" characters "to perdition" (J.R.R. Tolkien, "Monsters" 23). The text of *The Lord of the Rings* is, similarly, endlessly forgiving. Though these characters live in a non-Christian world based heavily on a pre-Christian one, Tolkien infuses the story with a sense of Christian forgiveness; succumbing to the evils of the Ring does not make one beyond redemption.

Though Tolkien's religious amalgamations are the result of his basing his work on a period of religious transition, they are no less remarkable than Wilde's. A large part of Tolkien's love for *Beowulf* – and, it must be assumed, his desire to mimic the poem – was due to the balance the *Beowulf* poet struck between Northern and Christian tones, cosmologies, and cultures. Thus, by choosing to symbolically return to that time of transition by putting himself in the position of the *Beowulf* poet, Tolkien is displaying a preference for a time when the two religions were more integrated.

Both Wilde and Tolkien make a point in their work to bring together distinct religious paradigms. Though most critics have opted to focus on only a single religious source, it is in the authors' mixing that we see some of the most interesting and imaginative contemplations on culture, religion, and mythology in their works. For both authors one of the strong motivations for this combining seems to be their emotional

attachment to their religious sources. In examining their lives, we can see that the threads that appear in their work weave throughout their experiences and relationships.

Wilde's and Tolkien's most interesting similarity, though, is not so much that they *do* combine these sources but *how* they combine them and to what end. Literature has no end of examples of writers using religions of past cultures to enhance their otherwise Christian or secular works with metaphor, simile, and allusion. But, for Wilde and Tolkien, the integration of Christian and pre-Christian sources is deeper; the sources genuinely share space in the authors' works. One is not used to elevate the other; the lessons of pre-Christian myth are not meant to be extrapolated to apply to a Christian world. Nor does one religion transcend or displace the other. In the end, Wilde and Tolkien each combined things that he loved and, while they may not have always loved them equally, they treated them with equality in their writing. Though certainly not the only valid reading of a given text, authorial intent is an important analytic lens. Looking at the ways Wilde and Tolkien use religions and the roles those religions played in their lives opens up new avenues for criticism of their texts. More importantly, those avenues also *lead* somewhere new; by looking only at a single religious source in Wilde's or Tolkien's work previous critics have missed entire layers of meaning.

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