Works Cited

Bakhtin, Mikhail, and Caryl Emerson. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

Canetti, Elias. *Crowds and Power*. Continuum, 1981.

Fisher, Mark. *The Weird and the Eerie*. Repeater, 2017.

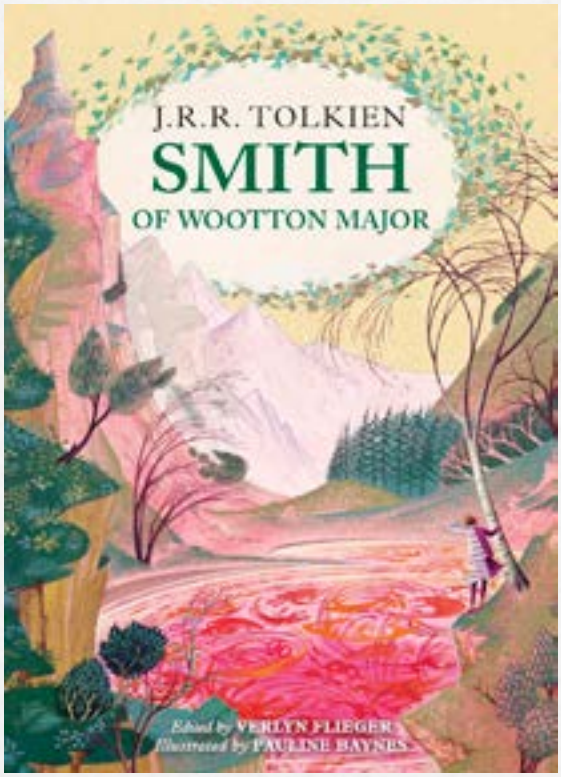
Miéville, China. *The City & The City*. Pan Macmillan, 2011.

Vandermeer, Anne, and Jeff Vandermeer. "Introduction." *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories*, Tordotcom Publishing, New York, 2011, pp. xv–xx.

About Hannah Mimiec

Hannah Mimiec is a part-time lecturer in law and part-time PhD student at the University of Dundee, currently researching narratives of policing in Weird fiction. They hold an LLB and an MLitt from the University of Glasgow, where they were part of the 2022/23 Fantasy MLitt cohort. When not thinking about tentacles, they are usually thinking about knitting.

Book Summary



Smith of Wootton Major (1967) is a late fairy tale by J.R.R. Tolkien. It tells of a small village where, every twenty-four years, a great Feast of Good Children is held. During one such feast, a fay-star—secretly baked into a cake by the humble apprentice Alf—is swallowed by a boy named Smith. When the star sets itself on his forehead, it grants him access to the realm of Faery. As Smith grows, he becomes a skilled blacksmith whose journeys into Faery leave him with glimpses of strange landscapes, enchanted beings, and even an encounter with the Faery Queen. Eventually, he must return the star, relinquishing its gift. The tale closes in quiet humility, emphasizing grace, stewardship, and the fleeting nature of wonder.

Where Enchantment Lies: Faery, Estrangement, and the Limits of Worldbuilding in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Smith of Wootton Major*

By Catherine Hall

This paper explores how J.R.R. Tolkien's *Smith of Wootton Major* achieves enchantment, not through detailed worldbuilding, but through narrative estrangement and emotional resonance. Through close analysis of the text and engagement with scholars such as Verlyn Flieger and Farah Mendlesohn, this paper argues that, unlike the richly mapped world of Middle-earth, *Smith* evokes wonder by remaining spatially vague and resistant to explanation. In doing so, *Smith* challenges conventional assumptions about the genre's reliance on intricate worldbuilding and reveals a different, more elusive mode of speculative captivation within Tolkien's broader literary legacy.

Fantasy evokes for many images of expansive secondary worlds with rich histories inhabited by imaginary beings who speak invented languages and possess unique cultural traditions. Much of this can be attributed to J.R.R. Tolkien, who established the foundations of the modern fantasy genre with his Middle-earth legendarium. Some readers may thus be surprised when they stumble upon the last story Tolkien wrote in his lifetime, the 1967 fairy tale *Smith of Wootton Major* (*SWM*). This story about a young boy who receives a fay-star, which grants him access to the land of Faery, is unlike Tolkien's more popular works, being relatively brief and seemingly simplistic. Still, it has engendered numerous interpretations, with scholars disagreeing on whether the story should be read as allegorical or autobiographical (Chance, Shippey, Kocher). Most persuasive, however, is Verlyn Flieger's suggestion that *Smith* is the "practical application" of Tolkien's seminal essay "On Fairy-Stories," offering readers "a glimpse into Faery" (Flieger 65, Flieger and Shippey 187). Yet the story offers little information about that land. In fact, Smith's adventures make up less than a third of the story, and Faery is only sparsely described, remaining spatially indeterminate. The refusal to guide readers through Faery reveals that *Smith* represents a different mode of subcreation—one that creates enchantment through estrangement and emotional resonance, the affective force of Smith's wonder and longing, rather than the "impression of depth" characteristic of his Middle-earth legendarium (Shippey, *Road* 228-229). In doing so, the story can challenge current assumptions about fantasy's reliance on detailed worldbuilding and expand our understanding of Tolkien's legacy.

Faery appears accessible to Smith through the woods—a place that often acts as a gateway to the otherworld (Flieger, *A Question of Time* 250)—but how exactly Smith enters this land remains unclear. Smith is shown the way by the fay-star, but readers are left behind. Indeed, though Smith is physically within Faery and experiences the land with his own eyes, the narrative describes the landscape only fleetingly, maintaining a distance between readers and Faery: "he walked… in the woods and meads of fair valleys, and by the bright waters in which at night strange stars shone and at dawn the gleaming peaks of far mountains were mirrored" (*SWM* 20). Additionally, the story begins by describing "a village, not very long ago for those with long memories, nor very far away for those with long legs" (*SWM* 3). Tolkien suggests that Wootton Major—and perhaps the entire story world, including Faery—is near in time and space. However, this is only so for "those with long memories" and "long legs," which implies the opposite: that this land is far away, in a distant time. Thus, while a story's first sentence typically situates readers in time and space, Tolkien intentionally disorients them.

In addition to depicting a world that resists being pinned down, Tolkien denies readers any form of guide to help them make sense of this strange land. Farah Mendlesohn maintains that in portal-quest fantasies—in which characters leave a familiar home and journey into a new land—readers expect a guide (13). Although Mendlesohn's framework does not map strictly onto the story, Smith's entry into the unfamiliar land of Faery leaves readers in need of direction. Flieger sees Smith as the readers' guide, but if that is so, he is a very poor one (68). Indeed, he once comes across the King's Tree, but it is said that "he never saw that Tree again, though he often sought for it" (*SWM* 24). Smith is similarly disoriented when the Faery Queen summons him: "he had little memory of the ways that he had been taken, for often he had been blindfolded by mist or by shadow" (*SWM* 31). The personification of the mist and shadows suggests that the land itself can decide when to reveal or obscure some of its secrets. As a result, Smith is unable to return to the places he once visited, making him an unsuitable guide. Another common "guide" noticeably absent from *Smith* is a map. Maps, which hold an important place in Tolkien's oeuvre, define the limits and vastness of a Secondary World and function as "a companion on the reader's journey through an alien landscape" (Ekman 14-15). In *The Lord of the Rings*, the map that precedes the main text allows readers to follow the characters' journeys and understand

how far they have travelled. In contrast, in the accompanying essay to *Smith*, Tolkien writes that "Faery is a vast world in its own right, that does not depend for its existence upon Men, and which is not primarily nor indeed principally concerned with Men" (*SWM* 129). The absence of guides in *Smith* thus makes sense: Faery does not need to explain itself to outsiders.

Without any sort of guide, readers have no proper sense of what Faery really looks like and how to orient themselves in it. Instead, they are left to experience the land through the emotional impressions it leaves on Smith. Indeed, though Smith forgets many details of his travels, some of them "remained in his mind as wonders and mysteries that he often recalled" (*SWM* 22). Significantly, in this passage, the wonders are not described to readers; the emphasis is on Smith's enchantment itself. The emotional impact of Faery is connected to the sense of "arresting strangeness," which Tolkien maintains is a crucial element of fantasy (*Fairy-Stories* 60). This "arresting strangeness" is most vividly expressed through the King's Tree, described as bearing "leaves and flowers and fruits uncounted" and whose "light was like the sun at noon"; it is not a tree found in Smith's world, nor one readers would encounter in the Primary World (*SWM* 24). Among the fleeting glimpses of Faery throughout the story, the King's Tree stands out as one of the most detailed sights in the land, which speaks to how deeply it captivates Smith. His response to the King's Tree exemplifies how the narrative creates enchantment by emphasizing otherness and inviting readers to share in Smith's wonder. As Tolkien writes, Faery "contains many things…the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it…and *ourselves…when we are enchanted*" (emphasis added, *Fairy-Stories* 32). Rather than offering a world to be mapped, *Smith* invites readers to lose themselves in a strange and unknown land. The lack of explanations is thus not a storytelling flaw; it is precisely where enchantment originates.

Tolkien, and *The Lord of the Rings* in particular, are landmarks in the fantasy genre—as Brian Attebery identifies when placing that book at the core of his "fuzzy set"—but also a landmark of fantasy worldbuilding (12-14). Yet *Smith* shows that the magic of Tolkien's works is not solely attributed to the vastness of Arda, the world of Middle-earth. In this tale, he presents Faery as a world that resists mapping and eludes explanation, reminding us that fantasy can enchant not only through detailed worldbuilding, but by simply embracing the strange and unfamiliar.

Works Cited

Attebery, Brian. *Strategies of Fantasy*. Indiana University Press, 1992.

Chance, Jane. *Tolkien's Art: A Mythology for England*. Revised edition, University Press of Kentucky, 2001.

Ekman, Stefan. *Here Be Dragons: Exploring Fantasy Maps and Settings*. Wesleyan University Press, 2013, ProQuest Ebook Central. Accessed October 22, 2023.

Flieger, Verlyn. "When Is a Fairy-Story a Faërie Story?" *Green Suns and Faërie: Essays on Tolkien*, Kent State University Press, 2012, pp. 65-73.

———. "Pitfalls in Faërie." *A Question of Time*, Kent State University Press, 1997, pp. 227-253.

Flieger, Verlyn, and T.A. Shippey. "Allegory Versus Bounce: Tolkien's 'Smith of Wootton Major.'" *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 12, no. 2, 46, 2001, pp. 186-200. JSTOR. Accessed October 20, 2023.

Kocher, Paul H. *Master of Middle-earth: The Fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Houghton Mifflin, 1972.

Mendlesohn, Farah. *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. Wesleyan University Press, 2008. ProQuest Ebook Central. Accessed October 22, 2023.

Shippey, T.A. *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, Houghton Mifflin, 2001.

———. *The Road to Middle-earth*, New York, Houghton Mifflin, 2003.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *Smith of Wootton Major.* ed. By Verlyn Flieger, HarperCollins, 2015.

———. *Tolkien on Fairy-Stories*. Ed. By Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson, HarperCollins, 2008.

About Catherine Hall

Catherine Hall (she/her) holds a BA in English Literature from McGill University and graduated from the Fantasy MLitt at the University of Glasgow in 2024, where she received the Wat Dryhope Award. Since 2020, she has been the executive editor for the Science Fiction and Fantasy review *ImaginAtlas*. Her research focuses on J.R.R. Tolkien, representations of Dwarves in fantasy, and fan culture.