






A DELUSION UNMASKED

by


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Idle-earth is an experience of wonder amidst evil, and of hope arising out of tragedy. When one reluctantly closes a Tolkien book, one looks about with fresh eyes at the wonder and hope that exists in our own world. Yet Kathleen Jones would deny this vista to children!



Some of the reasons that Kathleen gives are rather poorly argued: drawing sweeping generalisations from selective instances, and confusing her own personal beliefs with fact. It must have been too much fantasy which caused the appalling piece of arrogant ideology appearing in the form of her article "The Use and Misuse of Fantasy" (Mallorn 23), quotes from which are suffixed with "(KJ)". I hope to unmask these apparent delusions.



Tolkien discussed fantasy, including its relation to children, directly and at length in his essay "On Fairy Stories". I recommend this essay for those who are interested in this topic, but although Kathleen may not agree with my recommendations, she does not even appear to have considered Tolkien's essay. Rather, she seems to prefer to ridicule Tolkien's private beliefs; to misrepresent his fictional works; and to avoid defining key terms which are central to her inferences.

Fantasy

One might define Fantasy as work of Art of the Imagination, containing an element of the supernatural or the unlikely. It is thus distinguished from 'ordinary' fiction. Fantasy is of course inanimate, in the sense that it has no will of its own, and its effect largely depends upon the minds of those to whom it is exposed. Humans, and particularly children, are fortunately not all of one mind: the world would be pretty boring (intellectually), if it succumbed to the propaganda of some extreme political or religious belief. (Propaganda, by the way, can never be acceptable as a form of education!) Diversity, whilst natural, is of course a two-edged sword, and must be tempered with tolerance. Fantasy is also natural, but it too is two-edged, and must be tempered with reality.

Whereas Kathleen admits that fantasy does have some advantages in its "recreational value" (KJ), she overlooks its full potential as re-creation, and relegates it to mere "recreation" (KJ). But if fantasy is relaxing, how can it also be "distressing"? (KJ) If fantasy provokes discussion, why should it be denied to a supervised classroom? Kathleen often "appears lost in a maze from which it seems impossible to extricate" her (KJ).

Children

It is no wonder that Kathleen cannot fathom Tolkien out, when seemingly her delusion leads her to see things that he never wrote. Tolkien did not say that LotR was unsuitable for

children. In fact, he wrote (in Letter 122), it was "not for children (though that does not mean wholly unsuitable)." In other words, Tolkien was not aiming at any particular age group. He emphasised this in a number of other letters, such as N° 215, where moreover he stated, "Children's tastes and talents differ as widely as those of adults." The distinction between children and adults is arbitrary, and generalisations are dangerous.

Perhaps I indulge as I refer to Tolkien's observation that people become interested in LoTR from about age 10 onwards, for LoTR was my 'precious' 10th birthday present. I was neither "horrified" nor "distressed", but I think that I was "changed". However I did not then know that, as I was entering Tolkien's world, he was leaving ours. My 10th birthday was on August 31st 1973.

Doubtless I did not fully appreciate LoTR in that first reading, but if Kathleen is right, I am still missing something, and so perhaps it should be a 'set' book after all! Tolkien's astonishment on learning that his tale had become a 'set book' (in Belgium) is revealed in Letter 165. The actual passage contains question and exclamation marks around the phrase, indicating to me that Tolkien wasn't quite sure what to make of the situation. He doesn't mention children at all. What is clear from other letters, is that he was concerned that his book, if 'set', would lose its entertainment value. Nevertheless he grudgingly conceded (in Letter 329): "Some readers will (I suppose), wish to... analyse it, and... they are, of course, at liberty to do these things - as long as they have first read it." I myself have attempted to analyse LoTR, but it has proved elusive, and so I am resigned to its magic.

Teaching through Fantasy

Fantasy cannot set out to teach anything, especially religion and morality. LoTR does not even attempt to do so! Although fantasy may seem realistic at the time (indeed it must necessarily be so), the absurdity of the fantastic element is immediately apparent afterwards (except to a deluded person). Moreover, because fantasy contains infinite possibilities, everybody is going to perceive something different. For example, some people see chauvinism, martyrdom and violence in LoTR, whereas I see trees, bravery, and the struggle against tyranny and temptation. Everyone is learning a different lesson!

Beliefs

As for teaching religion, LoTR hardly mentions the subject. Religion is a system of faith in some ulterior purpose in life. It must necessarily involve belief in some supernatural element: something that is over, beyond or pervading the 'facts' of everyday life. 'Supernature' is not necessarily fantastic, because fantasy is ultimately surreal: inconsistent with the real world (and thus incapable of supporting religion). The masculinity of God, for example, is not a fantasy. But nor is it a fact. It is entirely a matter of belief. Thus Kathleen is deluded if she pretends that she knows God's sex, and falls into the same trap that she accuses others of falling into when she says: "It is presumptuous and arrogant to take for granted that 'our' side is bound to be right..." (KJ) Kathleen goes even further, to the point of ridiculing others' belief with comments like, "incredible as it seems today" (KJ).

Kathleen may be amazed to learn that it was none other than her martyr Jesus who taught us to pray to "Our Father". He introduced the idea, comforting to many, of a personal, forgiving Father god, rather than the impersonal vengeful Lord god of the Old Testament. Jesus doubtless (and naturally, as Kathleen points out) had an ultimately greater love for his mother than for Joseph; his use of "father" was "intended only to reflect the prevalent ideas of the time" (KJ).

It is not belief in God (as a person or whatever) that causes trouble in the world, but rather the attempts to impose one person's beliefs on another. Jesus gave us guidelines for living: a framework based on love; unfortunately the Churches which succeeded him have, until quite recently, imposed Rules.

Naturally people doubt their own beliefs from time to time. The intelligent mind is continuously analysing information, and the conclusions reached fluctuate with updates. Thus the fact that Tolkien held

conflicting beliefs at different times in his life only proves to me that he was human, and intelligent at that. Simple minds (Kathleen's "layfigures"?) on the other hand accept blindly and do not question. Tolkien held many beliefs and opinions which I do not happen to share, for example Roman Catholicism, but clearly that Church afforded him a refuge (and inspiration). It was only a "trap" (Letter 306) on those occasions when he felt that his refuge was under siege. In this sense Imladris was a "trap" when it was besieged by Sauron; it was not inherently a bad place!

Frodo and Jesus

Kathleen is trapped in her own delusion if she thinks Frodo's example of heroism was worthless because it occurred in a fantastic world. Surely his heroism is all the greater because it was despite supernatural forces! Frodo's resemblance to Jesus of Nazareth is rather far-fetched. Frodo was not of lowly birth but belonged "to the master class" (KJ), which Kathleen later admitted to "prove" a different point! Frodo was not apprenticed in any trade. He was a scholar of the arts, whereas Jesus only studied (Biblical) law. Although Frodo tautologically "enjoyed himself in convivial company" (KJ), he "more often wandered by himself". (LoTR, I.1.11)

In any event, how could Tolkien "punish" (KJ) any of his characters: how can you punish a fantasy? Tolkien wrote to entertain: the crises facing each character, especially Frodo in whose hands (or on whose finger) lay the fate of Middle-earth, were there for dramatic effect. The last climax is (debatably) the coronation, but the story does not "fizzle out" (KJ), but draws the threads out to their bittersweet ends.

I suspect that Kathleen may be disappointed with LoTR because there are no legions of "honest Marxists" (KJ) being battered to death, nor any token liberal dissenters, nor sufficient spirited women to liberate the mediaeval world.

Women in Middle-earth

Tolkien's attitude towards women arose from the times and circumstances in which he was educated (Biography: Pt.II, Ch.5 ["Oxford"] and 6 ["Reunion"], and Pt.4, Ch.4 ["Jack"].) It is therefore understandable even if it is no longer accepted. Unfortunately Kathleen oversimplifies Tolkien's attitude, conveniently ignoring, for example, how Galadriel (who incidentally instituted the White Council) makes Celeborn look a fool. Lobelia Sackville-Baggins was never ridiculous; for many years she was feared among Hobbits, and later became highly respected. She was in fact an exception among Hobbits (of both sexes), who according to Frodo were as a rule "too stupid and dull for words" (LoTR, I.1.2).

Ilúvatar exhibits no discernable male or female characteristics, and indeed is only referred to in LoTR as "the One". The use of "He" (in IS) not only imparts a sense of historical depth (in the Biblical tradition), but is the only generic pronoun acceptable in English when referring to a human (or other) being. I note that the Elves usually call on Eilbereth: a female god. Even among Elves, it was not the done thing for women to travel about alone, and so we have no female Istar. And yet, though of lesser wisdom than many wizards, lóreth knew more about herbs than the equally loquacious Herb-master!

Now Sauron was not an equal-opportunity employer, and so made wraiths of nine kings, who doubtless were a more plentiful (and vainglorious) than queens. Perhaps Sauron had learnt something from his impasse with Shelob (although he should have remembered what her mother did to his old master). Thus his soldier-orcs (the only kind we meet) are also male. The females are at home raising the spawn.

Evil, Politics and Appearances

Tolkien was not under any delusions about Orcs in the real world. Frodo and Sam could dress up as Orcs in the darkness of Mordor, but no "human being could be that bad" as to have their mentality. When Tolkien wrote of "some Orc" seizing the Ring, he was obviously using a colloquial metaphor, as many people use in everyday language, for example: "You silly cow!" and Frodo when he said: "Gollum... is as bad as an Orc." (LoTR, I.1.11). Tolkien was usually careful in his choice

of words, but doubtless relaxed in his more private correspondence. But he certainly did not associate evil with ignorance or size: the Hobbits throw Kathleen's theory right out of the window! In any event, "nothing is evil in the beginning. Even Sauron was not so." (Elrond at his Council, LoTR, I.2.II)

It is the dislike of power which underlies Tolkien's concept of evil and politics. It also underlies LoTR, wherein those that fail the test of temptation are punished. Hitler's abhorrent greed for power unquestionably failed the test. His stature was irrelevant. Kathleen turns her blind eye to several "tall gentlemanly scholars" (KJ) who yielded to temptation: Melkor, Sauron, Saruman, and many Noldor and Númenóreans. Aragorn, who was on the "good" side, was neither particularly scholarly nor good-looking, although he was tall.

Kathleen appears not to appreciate Tolkien's concept of power, and therefore misunderstands Tolkien's rare discussion of politics in Letter 52. There he is in fact describing an ideal situation, which is approached most closely not by Gondor but by the Shire's "no police and no government" (Letter 210). In Tolkien's ideal situation, the monarch is "unconstitutional" in the sense that there are no Controls or Rules; the monarch is not a dictator but is purely symbolic: an ineffectual "stamp-collector". Certainly this is not a "fantasy of the Middle Ages"! (KJ) Tolkien was under no delusion, and admitted that in practice his solution had a "fatal weakness". (Even the benevolent dictatorship founded by King Elessar succumbed to a "New Shadow": Letter 256.)

The solution which Kathleen seems to propose is Marxism, that form of socialism which has been seen to be wide open to dictatorship and capitalism. Moreover, a number of fatal weaknesses in its basic philosophy have been discovered by Prof. Karl Popper and Others (The Open Society and Its Enemies, 1st published 1945 by Routledge & Keegan Paul; 5th Edition 1966).

However I do not agree with the solution that Tolkien proceeds to, that is, "back to the trees" (Letter 83). Technology can be of great benefit, but must be at harmony with nature. Indeed technology is the only way whereby the excesses and disasters of past technology can be reversed; I look forward to the day when books are made of waste material and the lamps are lit by solar power, thus enabling trees to live without fear of the axe.

Violence, Swords and Warfare

Kathleen continues to misrepresent Tolkien on the subject of violence. His legends do not glamorize violence any more than they glamorize peace. Vast tracts of LoTR are devoted to the landscapes of Middle-earth, and their inhabitants, histories and flora. Tolkien was certainly not impressed at the "preference for fights" apparent in an early film proposal of LoTR (Letter 210)! The film eventually produced ignored Tolkien's criticism on this point, and, by the way, contains as many blood-dripping swords as Kathleen could desire. My impression from LoTR (the book) is that swords were not exclusive to the gentry, but instead were general issue in the armies. LoTR covers a period of war, and doubtless it was common to wear military uniforms (including swords) when in public. In the Shire, however, swords were quite rare. Bilbo's was hung on the mantelpiece - he was certainly not expected to wear it! The reception upon their return to the Shire of the Hobbits in their "outlandish gear" certainly is evidence that there was no such expectation.

When Bilbo's hand strayed to Sting in his altercation with Gandalf, this was no upper-class habit, but was the influence of the Ring. The Shire gentry did not customarily wear swords to feasts or any other ceremonies, thus Frodo did not wish to wear one at the Field of Cormallen. Doubtless he once again felt "strangely rustic and untutored" upon being advised of Gondorian protocol, and he immediately took a small sword to comply. His only reluctance (on this occasion) was in accepting Sting which he had given to Sam. In times of danger, Frodo willingly bore a sword, but was less hasty in drawing it than (say) Merry and Pippin. Surely Frodo's example in this respect cannot be "very bad" for "the young" (KJ).

The "young in mind of whatever age" (KJ) are, according to Kathleen, to learn of the ideas of other

times as something to be contradicted by the teaching of realities. Does this mean the past is unreal? Kathleen seems to prefer that the young shouldn't learn of warfare at all: that it never existed. How serious can this proposal be? It is a nightmare of Orwellian censorship! Alternatively, Kathleen suggests that children are taught the "full implications" (KJ) of war. But surely the full implications include past experience. In any event, no book can contain the full implications of anything. LoTR does not even pretend to do so. Moreover, the full implications of war can only be learnt by physical experience of it. Suffer the little children! Not Kathleen nor I "would align myself with any power having such intentions" (KJ) (Kathleen's discussion of warring intentions in fact misquotes the article by Jessica Yates in Mallorn 21, for Jessica only suggested war as a last resort). Unfortunately, children must be prepared to cope with the violence seemingly ingrained into this world. (Otherwise they'll receive a nasty shock on their coming of age.

Many children will see more violence on television than is good for them. They would think LoTR is tame. However LoTR does not neglect the unglamorous and unsavory aspects of warfare. An example is the discovery by the folk of Minas Tirith of the disfigured and disbodied heads of their friends. A great sense of sadness pervades all the wars of Middle-earth; the War of the Ring (per se) was particularly futile, except to distract Sauron.

Good v Evil

The situation of the War of the Ring was desperate, and had a polarising effect. But things weren't as black and white as painted by Kathleen's Orwellian interpretations. The Rohirrim had cruelly treated the Woses. The Hobbits went overboard with the Scouring of their Shire. Elves were generally apathetic. On the other hand, Gollum nearly repented - and in fact saved the day. Then there was that unfortunate soldier of Harad. Sam wondered "if he was really evil of heart, or what lies or threats had led him on the long march from his home..." (LoTR II.4.IV) And, caught in the middle, were many doubters, spies and rebels, "despised and rejected" (KJ) by at least one side or another.

Squaring out Tolkien's statements on the matter is quite easy if you don't distort it. He distinguished (in Letter 193) the cause, from those who (claim to) support it: "To anyone not blinded by partisan fanaticism, the rightness of the cause will not justify the actions of its supporters [where those actions] are morally wicked."

Breeding

Kathleen implies some moral wickedness in respect of "inbreeding". We are all related to a certain extent, being descended from a relatively small number of ape-man ancestors. By definition we are confined to breeding within our own species, and this is further exacerbated by marriage within one's race, creed and locality. But only the Ptolemies and the Hapsburgs so narrowed their pools of genes as to breach their cetacean dynasties. In Middle-earth, it was the Númenóreans who thought they were too good. Ultimately their "Kings made tombs more splendid than houses of the living, and counted old names in the rolls of their descent dearer than the names of their sons." (LoTR II.4.V)

A construction of the pedigree of any of the Hobbits leaves many gaps open for the input of "fresh" genes. Hobbits were keenly interested in both paternal and maternal relationships. (Indeed, in my experience it is only the most snobby genealogists that become obsessed with the male line.) Nevertheless family trees require some ordering. It is usual to group families under common ancestral pairs, but instead of referring to "the Descendants of Harry and Rose Goatleaf", it is simpler to refer to "the Goatleaf Family". Common characteristics of appearances or habit may be discerned in a family group, but except in some medical cases these are the stuff of small talk and in-jokes. The characteristics often change or peter out over the generations, but within living memory are sufficiently recognisable to maintain the tradition. Tolkien frequently expressed (e.g. Letter 165) that he had more in common with his multitude of Midland

GANDALF: Well, Mr. Chairelf, members of the Council, I'm afraid it is too late to talk of site visits.

ERESTOR: That's a relief, at any rate! We've got the Recreation and Leisure Committee meeting scheduled for next week, and the Finance and General Purposes group. Er - why is it too late?

GANDALF: I'll tell you. I took the chance of having a look at the place on my last journey down to Mordor, and Mr. Gorthaur and his extended household have already been very busy, it seems. Barad-dûr has already been rebuilt on the old site and from what I could see it did not look like a residential development or a tourism enterprise at all. If you give planning permission at all it will have to be retrospective.

ARWEN: They can't just go ahead with it like that! Not before we've heard the views of the Gondor Civic Society and the Friends of the Númenóreans, not to mention the County Surveyor!

ELROND: In that case we must take some severe action. I think we must go so far as to authorise the Clerk to send an

enforcement notice to this Mr. Gorthaur-Annatar - I really don't like the sound of him, do you? - for the demolition of this building, and give him a month or so to comply with it. And keep an eye on him to see what he is up to. That is, unless anybody feels like declaring war? Aragorn?

ARAGORN: Not just yet, Mr. Chairelf. I doubt if that is an authorised procedure under the Town and Country Planning Acts. Could we refer the possibility of military action to the Policy and Resources Committee and request them to keep it under consideration as a possible future action option, and set up a contingency revenue provision? After all, it is nearly lunch-time.

ALL: Agreed.

ELROHIR: Was there a seconder, Mr. Chairelf?

end.

Margaret Askew,
with some assistance
from Brin Dunsire.

A Delusion Unmasked (end)

ancestors than with any distant German or Viking ancestors in the thin male-line. There is no nation or creed without blood on its hands; nevertheless I am both proud and ashamed of all those that I am connected with. (They range from Ireland into Europe, praying to Canterbury, Rome and Jerusalem).

The Immigrants

Even the Hobbits had some blood on their hands, and I think Kathleen is right in giving "some" sympathy to the unfortunate immigrants: "just poor bodies running away from trouble." (LotR III.6.VII) However there was "room enough for realms between Isen and Greyflood, or along the shorelands south of the Brandywine" (ibidem). The Shirefolk and Breelanders would have been pleased to assist genuine refugees to settle these new realms, especially in return for help against the Ruffians. Mutual benefit would have also been achieved through eventual trade; indeed mutual benefit is the reason why trade occurs - not because one party is "less favoured, even starving"! (KJ) The Ruffians in the Shire were not starving for long, for they became the Gatherers, and so they had no need to continue "begging or stealing food" (KJ). Surely Kathleen should be "justifiably proud" (KJ) of the Hobbits, "enduring poverty and rejection" (KJ) by the Ruffians in "refusing to renounce" (KJ) their desire for "peace and quiet and good tilled earth", especially those "steadfast" (KJ) rebels the Tooks.

Peaceful Endings

The Ruffians were in fact offered peaceful solutions, but rejected them. The Hobbits could do little else that what they did. The deal that the Ruffians ultimately received was rather restrained considering the treatment that they had doled out to the Hobbits. Bill Ferny (whose description Kathleen confuses with his lodger) in particular got off lightly, considering the treason he committed against the Breelanders. In all, I think that the peace achieved by Frodo was amazing in the circumstances. Hobbits could have been so impressed by Saruman's inability to stab Frodo (his mail being hidden) that they might form the impression they were invincible. However while Tolkien wanted his story to "fade", leaving the characters "behind, one after the other" (LotR III.6.VII), he needed drama to maintain interest until the End at the Grey Havens. The dispatch of Saruman (who in fact, was exiled by Frodo, although he did not live long enough to enjoy it) suited both these purposes, and perhaps another, that is, to have Saruman punished. Frodo's illnesses also maintained some drama whilst the Shire was being restored about him and until Sam was set up. It is my belief that Frodo was released from his illness by a lengthy convalescence in the Blessed Realm, rather than by an early death there.

Frodo's fate is quite unusual among heroes; indeed LotR's departures from (what was) convention, form



one of its appeals. Frodo is like many people in (real) history whose achievements receive only nominal or limited recognition in their own lifetime. LotR gives the sense of a tale from the past, and yet also belongs to our time because now is when the proper recognition of Frodo's achievements is being realised. There was very little that King Elessar could have done to assist Frodo. The Shirefolk would be even more suspicious than Butterbur of this new King.

In due course the Shirefolk doubtless became used to the idea of the Return of the King, but Frodo had to go over the Sea before this. In the meantime it is quite possible that the Hobbit population exploded; indeed, they began to settle the Westmarch for a start. They may well have migrated to other lands, but doubtless remained "unobtrusive" (LotR Prologue). Eventually however their numbers dwindled, and they "now avoid us with dismay" (ibidem).

There is some confusion however about that first Hobbit baby boom. It was recorded that all children born that year were "fair to see" (LotR III.6.IX) no matter the colour of their hair. It was also recorded that many of these children also had an otherwise rare golden hair, but this did not make them more beautiful. The recorder in fact seemed to have a preference for black hair (Lúthien).

Conclusions

Just when I thought that Kathleen and I were approaching common ground (the family of mankind etc.) she reverts to her old tricks of misrepresenting Tolkien, stating that he condoned "atrocities committed by the 'right' side"! (KJ) Tolkien was not a perfect man. Nor are his works perfect (he himself admitted this: Letter 153), but he certainly did not mean any harm by them (ibidem).

For myself I don't believe that LotR is ever capable of distorting reality; those that would be disturbed by it would have to have a very fragile mentality in the first place. Kathleen Jones is by no means disturbed (or at least I don't think so), and indeed makes some valid points in bringing some controversial subjects into the open. However in some places she seems a little confused. Most people become trapped at one time or another; it's helpful to have the delusion unmasked at an early opportunity, otherwise the ground will "seem to be giving way beneath the feet" (KJ).

Fantasy like all things should be taken in moderation: one should not relegate it to mere entertainment, nor (on the hand) should one get addicted to its potency. The film LotR produced the uncharacteristic philosophy, "A single dream is more powerful than a thousand realities." When Martin Luther King said, "I have a dream", the whole world hushed.