

Life after Youth

Elves and Elders in Medievalist Fantasy Literature

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Abstract: *The Middle Ages, despite its real existence, is often seen and used by fantasy writers as a tabula rasa to engrave their imagined stories. Its seeming state of blankness due to its distant time and lack of recorded histories allows the period to be used as a background for imaginative creations of creatures, peoples, and stories to engage with social issues pertaining to specific periods and places as well as the same issues that arise in different forms depending on the period and location. This article explores J.R.R. Tolkien's works on Middle-earth and Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* to illustrate how fantasy literature engages with the concept of (eternal-) youth and ageing. While Tolkien disrupts the idealization of (eternal-) youth through the fates of humans and imaginative races, Kazuo Ishiguro presents the value, growth and meaningfulness of life up until its very end by having readers follow the quest of an elderly couple. Both Tolkien and Ishiguro illuminate the meaningfulness and value of the lives of the aged up until the brink of death.*

Keywords: *Ageing; Tolkien; Ishiguro; Neo-medieval; Fantasy*

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Fantasy of Youth

Romanticization of (eternal-)youth has often been discussed, questioned, and challenged in many literatures, such as in the genre of fantasy literature; this article will look specifically into how the topics of youth and ageing have been contemplated in specifically *medievalist* fantasy literature. Umberto Eco points out in *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays* that a longing for the medieval period began soon after the period ended, which caused it to “always [be] messed up in order to meet the vital requirements of different periods, [so] it was impossible for [the period] to be always messed about in the same way” (1973–1983: 65–68). In the same vein as Eco, Geraldine Heng argues that, “The fantasy of the medieval past itself, constructed and reinforced by postmedieval periods, delivers material effects: The fantasy of a pre-political, pre-racial, pre-nationalist, and pre-imperial time that is the Middle Ages—a zone of freedom [...]” (2003: 15)². Thus, the Middle Ages—“a zone of freedom”—has been reimagined and reproduced at different times in history to be used in ways its appropriators needed or wished to. Indeed, the use of the medieval period has many strengths, such as in invoking nostalgic feelings or nationalist sentiments, and for its seeming state of blankness or malleability; a period of time so distant and with too few

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- 2 This “zone of freedom,” I believe, is the reason that fantasy literature has often been associated with escapism and therefore ostracized from the academic realm. Tolkien's works have only started to be taken seriously in the past decade due to its continuing popularity. At the turn of the new century, when the work was chosen as “the greatest book of the twentieth century” in a survey conducted by a major bookstore in England and “the greatest book of the millennium” in Amazon.com, numerous literary scholars “retched and kvetched, wailed and flailed, gasped and grasped for explanations. One said that they had failed and wasted their work of ‘ed-u-ca-tion’” (Kreeft 2005:13). Many Tolkien scholars, such as Tom Shippey, Joseph Pearce, Peter Kreeft, Brian Rosebury, Bradley J. Birzer, Stuart D. Lee, Elizabeth Solopova, David Day, Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson have resisted the academic contention against the fantasy genre, and examined Tolkien's works through the lenses of medievalism, linguistics, Catholicism, mythology and fairy tales.

recorded histories that it could be used as a background for imaginative creations of creatures, peoples, and stories to engage with social issues pertaining to specific periods and places as well as the same issues that arise in different forms depending on the period and location, with an example being, one which J.R.R. Tolkien deemed significant, “Death and Immortality” (2000: 246).

Using medievalist fantasy literature, specifically J.R.R. Tolkien’s works on Middle-earth and Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant* as examples, this article will illustrate how medievalist fantasy engages with the concept of (eternal-)youth and ageing. In his works, Tolkien disrupts the idealization of (eternal-)youth through the fates of humans and the imaginative races of Hobbits and elves, as well as by writing older protagonists as great heroes who go on grand quests that change their lives. Kazuo Ishiguro presents the value, growth and meaningfulness of life up until its very end by having readers follow the final journey—or quest—of an elderly couple, Axl and Beatrice, and the elderly Sir Gawain, who joins them to fulfill his final duty. Both Tolkien and Ishiguro illustrate the potential of the aged for fruitful life and growth until the brink of their death as well as the value of such growth despite the elders’ proximity to death.

Mortality as a Gift in Tolkien’s Middle-Earth

J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, begins with the announcement of the celebration of Bilbo Baggins’s a hundred and eleventh birthday. Bilbo, who is the hero of the book’s prequel, *The Hobbit* is described to be famous not only for his sudden disappearance and reappearance with riches, but also for “his prolonged vigour” (1954a: 21):

Time wore on, but it seemed to have little effect on Mr. Baggins. At ninety he was much the same as at fifty. At ninety-nine they began to call him well-preserved; but unchanged would have been nearer the mark. There were some that shook their heads and thought this was too much of a good thing; it seemed unfair that anyone should

possess (apparently) perpetual youth as well as (reputedly) inexhaustible wealth. 'It will have to be paid for,' they said. 'It isn't natural [...]!' (ibid: 21)

Describing Bilbo's "perpetual youth" on top of his wealth as being "unfair," Bilbo is the envied subject in the Shire just as he would be in our societies. However, the envying Hobbits are not only right to say that "It isn't natural," as Bilbo's youth comes from the power of an evil magic Ring. Bilbo does indeed pay for it, as he is not happy with the eternal look of youth that the Ring has given him. In fact, when Bilbo describes how he feels to Gandalf before he departs the Shire, home of Hobbits, for good, he says: "I am old, Gandalf. I don't look it, but I am beginning to feel it in my heart of hearts. *Well-preserved* indeed!' he snorted. 'Why, I feel all thin, sort of *stretched*, if you know what I mean: like butter that has been scraped over too much bread. That can't be right. I need a change, or something'" (original emphasis ibid: 34). Contrary to everyone's belief, Bilbo feels bitterness towards his "Well-preserved" body as it is not how he feels mentally. He does not simply wish to find a place where he would be able to "rest" away from bothersome relatives and other Hobbits, but where he would like to finish his book with the ending lines, "*and he lived happily ever after to the end of his days*" (original emphasis ibid: 34), insinuating his expectation that he will, one day, hopefully, pass. Bilbo's journey, however, does not end even at the end of *The Lord of the Rings* when he is a hundred and thirty-one years old. In fact, the last of Bilbo we see is his travel to Valinor, home of the gods. Though he is barely able to stay awake due to his old age, he joyfully says, "I think I am quite ready to go on another journey" (1955: 337), exemplifying that one's life continues as long as they continue to live it. Bilbo's life and his attitude towards extra longevity and youth is connected to a prevalent and important theme in Tolkien's works on Middle-earth, such as in *The Silmarillion*³.

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- 3 Amazon has recently adapted the appendices of *The Lord of the Rings* into a show titled, *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* (2022-), although much of its stories seem to be inspired rather than adapted. The show does depict the corruption of many Númenóreans who hate the elves and wish to enslave the elves, though the reasons are not elaborated on. Some scenes do engage with the

The Silmarillion is a collection of mythologies of Middle-earth, which includes the creation of Middle-earth and of its peoples such as the elves, dwarves and humans. It is in the third part of this book that what Tolkien called “the real theme” of his works— “Death and Immortality” (2000: 246)—are explicitly presented. The third part of this book, titled “Akallabêth,” or “The Downfall of Númenor,” narrates the downfall of the most noble and blessed humans, who are called “Númenóreans.” Númenóreans, who were created after the elves. Númenóreans were not given the immortality that the elves had, but nonetheless were given long life spans of hundreds of years as well as stronger bodies that are immune to diseases. Although the Númenóreans were happy and satisfied with their lives for many centuries, they began to envy the elves for their immortality. In our ageist perspective, such sentiment may seem natural. However, as shown by the title of this section, “The Downfall of Númenor,” Tolkien believed that envying the elves’ immortality was the downfall of these humans, as he writes that mortality, not immortality, was the “gift” bestowed to men. Moreover, he claims that many including the elves will come to, in reverse, “envy” the mortality of men: “Death is their fate, the gift of Illúvatar [the One God], which as Time wears even the Powers shall envy” (1977: 36). Contradicting the romanticization of eternal youth and immortality, Tolkien describes immortality as though it is a curse:

[...] the children of Men dwell only a short space in the world alive, and are not bound to it, and depart soon whither the elves know not. Whereas the Elves remain until the end of days, and their love of the Earth and all the world is more single and more poignant therefore,

topic of elven time in relation to mortals’ time. In one particular scene between Elrond, an elf, and Durin IV, a dwarf, who are friends, Durin is upset that Elrond had been absent from his life for twenty years, and his negative feeling exacerbates when Elrond asks, “Has it been only twenty [years]?” Durin angrily responds, “Twenty years may be the blink of an eye to an elf! But I’ve lived an entire life in that time!” (Hutchison 2022). However, the theme of ageing and time is not a striking theme that the show engages with, at least in the first season.

and as the years lengthen ever more sorrowful. For the Elves die not till the world dies, unless they are slain or waste in grief (and to both these seeming deaths they are subject); neither does age subdue their strength, unless one grow weary of ten thousand centuries; and dying they are gathered to the halls of Mandos in Valinor, whence they may in time return. But the sons of Men die indeed, and leave the world [...]. (ibid: 36)

More than anything, immortality results in sorrow or weariness for the elves; such as that of seeing the world itself pass before them, and that which is so intense it could result in their deaths, although even after death they do not truly die like humans do. This fate does not bring joy to the Elves, as exemplified through the elf Míriel, who, after giving birth, no longer wished to live, but could not truly die because her soul would live even after leaving her body (ibid: 63–65). Thus, for Tolkien and his elves, preserved youth and immortality do not necessarily bring joy.

Ungrateful for the gift of mortality bestowed upon them, envy overpowers the Númenóreans's minds, and they confront the gods and elves, and express their desire for immortality. However, the only response they receive is that they should accept their fate and gift of mortality just as the elves accept their fate and the consequences of immortality, which is "neither reward nor punishment, but the fulfilment of their being" (ibid: 315–7). Dissatisfaction towards the answer grows overtime, and as a result, so does "madness and sickness" which did not affect them before (ibid: 328). Such result insinuates that the real madness and sickness is the unyielding desire for immortality which caused the Núméóreans "to seek wealth rather than bliss" (2000: 155)⁴ and lead to their complete downfall of rebelling against their creators and being forever exiled away from the blessed land of Númenór to the continent

4 Tolkien has used the word "sickness" to describe greed in *The Hobbit* while narrating the fate of the Master of Lake-town: "Bard had given him much gold for the help of the Lake-people, but being of the kind that easily catches such disease he fell under the dragon-sickness, and took most of the gold and fled with it, and died of starvation in the Waste, deserted by his companions" (1937: 305).

of Middle-earth. Mortals in Middle-earth who find a way for immortality are only able to achieve a “counterfeit” one, “lead[ing] the small to Gollum, and the great to a Ringwraith” (ibid: 286), neither who eternally exists as fully Hobbit nor human but as a ghoul or a wraith. Thus, although Tolkien sympathizes with the human desire for immortality, he warns against the reality of such fantasy.

Life After Youth

Stories dealing with a hero's journey usually have young protagonists who, like in a bildungsroman, grow physically and in mind through the experiences they have gained and relationships they have built in their journey. These stories end with the hero(es)'s coming-of-age and maturity into adulthood, in its own vague “and she lived happily ever after,” as life is assumed to be stagnant once old. Such trope in literature has created a stereotype that life ends after one reaches adulthood. However, Tolkien's works do not follow this trope; most of the heroes in Tolkien's works are not children and are, at the least, middle-aged. In other words, for Tolkien, life *can* and in some cases *will* begin at a later age or continue despite old age.

In *The Hobbit*, Bilbo is fifty years old when Gandalf—an elderly wizard—appears with a group of mostly elderly dwarves to take him to a quest to find the dwarves' long-lost treasure as well as territory by defeating the great dragon, Smaug. Before Gandalf appeared, Bilbo was “considered very respectable” by other Hobbits because he was a Baggins, and “they never had any adventures or did anything unexpected” (1937: 2). Just like his father, a stereotypical middle-aged person, Bilbo, in his comfortable hobbit-hole, “had in fact apparently settled down immovably” (ibid: 3). When asked—or demanded—to go on the adventure with the dwarves, Bilbo declines and feels a pinch of regret having done so, but convinces himself that he has made the right decision saying to himself, “Don't be a fool, Bilbo Baggins! [...] thinking of dragons and all that outlandish nonsense at your *age*!” (ibid: 28) Though there is no doubt that Bilbo refused to go on the adventure because he felt settled in his life,

this thought reveals that Bilbo refuses mostly because of his age. Eventually, Bilbo does go on the journey to become a hero of the quest, and despite his older age, returns to his home a changed Hobbit who has a wider perspective on the world, later visiting elves, spending time with dwarves and writing poems. Gandalf notices such change and exclaims, “My dear Bilbo! [...] Something is the matter with you! You are not the hobbit that you were” (ibid: 302). The only way that the Hobbits can accept Bilbo’s change after his return is to consider he had perhaps lost his mind, as “few believed any of his tales” and would call him “queer” and “Poor old Baggins” (ibid: 304). The Hobbits’ discomfort of Bilbo is not unlike the perspective people may have of old people who do not abide to societal rules of what ageing and the aged should look like, but as the narrator—or Tolkien—writes, “I am sorry to say [Bilbo] did not mind” (ibid: 304). Indeed, Bilbo departs on his final adventure when turns a hundred and thirty-one when he sets sail to Valinor.

Bilbo is not the only middle-aged protagonist who goes on an adventure and returns changed and emotionally matured. As aforementioned, aged and older characters such as Gandalf, most of the dwarves, and Bard who slayed the dragon Smaug, have all played major roles in *The Hobbit*. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo Baggins sets out from the Shire to destroy the Ring at the age of fifty just like his uncle Bilbo. Other characters like Aragorn, the King of Gondor, is eighty-seven⁵, Boromir, the first-born of the Steward of Gondor, is forty-one. Another noticeable character is Théoden, the King of Rohan, who is seventy-one years old.

Théoden had been ill-advised by a servant of the corrupted wizard, Saruman, for a long period of time which causes his mind and body to stiffen, and becomes witless and weak as elderly men are deemed to be. However, once the veil of ill-advice lifts, he swiftly regains his sanity and strength as he was under a spell. As his conscious returns, and Théoden notices that “It is not so dark,” Gandalf answers, “No [...] Nor does age lie heavily on your shoulders as some have you think”

5 Hobbits are considered to come-of-age at the age of thirty-three and Aragorn is a descendant of the Númenórean line, so that even as a human he lives to be two-hundred and ten.

(1954b: 127), urging Théoden to not let age trick him into undermining his strength. Still, Théoden laments his survival as he hears the news of many deaths including the death of Boromir, exclaiming, “Alas for Boromir the brave! The young perish and the old linger, withering” as “He clutche[s] his knees with his *wrinkled* hands.” Immediately after the description of Théoden’s hands, Gandalf responds, “Your fingers would remember their old strength better, if they grasped a sword-hilt” (ibid: 129), again emphasizing that Théoden’s age should not deter him from his potentials. Soon after, Théoden proves Gandalf right, “As his fingers took the hilt, it seemed to the watchers than firmness and strength returned to his thin arm” and “they looked at their lord in amazement” (ibid: 130). Théoden dies fighting in a great battle, after he plays multiple great roles in saving his people.

This is not to say that Tolkien writes that only the old can play significant roles, as that itself would be stereotyping the aged into the wise and know-it-all. Furthermore, there are younger characters who play big roles, such as Éowyn, who is twenty-four. For Tolkien, age should not be a determining factor in an individual’s value, and both the old and young are neither perfect and equally prone to human mistakes and faults. Ageing does not necessarily mean growth for the young, as the young can be stagnant and unchanging as Bilbo was until he turned fifty. Likewise, the old will be witless and weak if they decide to remain so like Théoden did until Gandalf reminded Théoden’s strength. Simultaneously, Tolkien does not romanticize eternal youth as he writes of the elves’ envying of human mortality and through Bilbo’s fatigue of life not only despite, but also because of the deceitful youthful appearance.

Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant* as Fantasy

Set in a post-Arthurian England, Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant* mainly follows the story of two Britons, Axl and Beatrice, who are an elderly couple. With their memories clouded by a mist, the couple sets out on a journey to find not only their son, but also the memories they have lost. While on this journey, the couple gets roped into a larger quest to

defeat the dragon, Querig. When this work was published, Ishiguro was not sure how his work would be received, and wondered whether people would consider it a work of fantasy (Alter 2015). Many fantasy writers such Ursula K. Le Guin, Lev Grossman and David Mitchell responded by confirming that *The Buried Giant* is, indeed, fantasy (ibid; Cain 2015) despite Ishiguro's lack of intentionality⁶.

Notwithstanding his unintentional entrance to the fantasy realm, the reason Ishiguro chose to set *The Buried Giant* in a medieval past is the same as those writers' who cho(o)se to use medievalist fantasy for its "zone of freedom." Richard Rankin Russell agrees, though not specifically regarding *medievalist* fantasy, in Ishiguro's choosing of fantasy which "enables [Ishiguro] to explore the territory of 'universal human experiences'" (2021: 305). Explaining his choice of his book's setting, Ishiguro stated that "The Buried Giant's fantasy setting served as a neutral environment [...]" (Cain 2015) and that the setting is a "historical never-never land, so that it could be applied to all kinds of settings" (Russell 2021: 305). Similar to Tolkien, the medieval setting offered Ishiguro the space to write about what he believes to be universal themes.

The Elders in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*

One of the most striking themes in Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* is the loss and (re-)gaining of memory; not only on a national level, but also on an individual level with the focus on elderly characters. More specifically, the memories of these individual are tied to the memories of the nation and vice versa. Ishiguro claims, "I wasn't just interested in nations [...]" and that question about when do we need to remember, when do we need to forget things. I was also interested in that same question applied to a marriage" (2015b). The main protagonists of *The Buried Giant* are an elderly married couple, Axl and Beatrice, seeking for answers about their past which they have forgotten much of, but as readers are to quickly find

6 "And by and large I've rather enjoyed my inadvertent trespassing into the fantasy genre, too, although I wasn't even thinking about *The Buried Giant* as a fantasy – I just wanted to have ogres in there!" (Gaiman 2015)

out, *not due to ageing*. Like Bilbo, Frodo, and many other characters from Tolkien's works, the story revolves around old characters' journey and quest, rather than that of the young. Axl and Beatrice's goal is to reunite with their son, which turns into a quest in which they encounter knights, an ogre, and eventually Querig, the dragon they must slay to recover their lost memories. Thus, at the forefront of the story is the journey of a couple whose lives and memories are entangled with other individuals and communities whom, together, form a nation; most importantly, the elderly couple goes on a quest in which their relationship grows instead of wither, and in which they gain memory instead of losing it⁷.

At the beginning of the story, it is easy to fall into the trap of believing that Axl and Beatrice are suffering from memory loss due to their age. After all, readers are first introduced to the elderly Axl questioning himself and the community he lives in, and his inability to answer any of these questions, as he suffers from memory loss. When Axl remembers something while others do not, he is "almost ready to admit he had been mistaken [...]. He was after all an ageing man and prone to occasional confusion" (2015a: 9) and doubts his own memories because he believes it is a result of his ageing. With the ageist bias and with Axl's amnesia, it is easy to presume that Axl may be suffering from dementia or Alzheimer's. However, as though foreseeing and challenging the bias

7 An important article written in regards to Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* and ageing is Sarah Falcusa and Maricel Oró-Piqueras's "Ageing without Remembering: Neomedieval Fantasy, Memory and Loss in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*." This article argues that "What is significant about this novel's exploration of memory, trauma and history, however, is the way it links cultural and national memory to individual experience, the life course and generational identity, making ageing itself central to the exploration of time and history in the novel" (2020: 5). Naturally, the article elaborates on the generational relationships in connection to memory, trauma and history, the empowerment of the aged and the questioning of the youths' futurity. Meanwhile, I will focus specifically on how Ishiguro uses three elderly characters in order to subvert the trope of quests-for-youths in literature, how he reflects ageism in societies, uses readers' ageist biases to challenge ageist notions of mental and physical frailty in *The Buried Giant*.

judgment, the narrator asks, “You may wonder why Axl did not turn to his fellow villagers for assistance in recalling the past,” and proceeds to explain that the memory loss is caused by a mist which everyone suffers from collectively: “[...] in this community the past was rarely discussed [...] it had somehow faded into a mist [...]. It simply did not occur to these villagers to think about the past—even the recent one” (ibid: 7). Ishiguro also clarified in an interview that in this imagined medieval Britain, there is “some sort of memory loss nothing to do with ageing or you know, dementia” (2015b). Rather, Axl is the one who has the most memories. For example, he remembers a red-haired woman who used to heal people in the village, and Marta, a child who went missing, both of whom nobody else seems to recall. He also experiences other “steady run of such puzzling episodes” (2015a: 7–12) in which only he remembers someone or something. Thus, contrary to ageist biases, Axl is the one who has the strongest memory.

The attitude of villagers towards Axl and Beatrice as elderlies is also disparaging. The narrator strongly insinuates that Axl and Beatrice have been pushed to live at the outer border of the village, “where their shelter was less protected from the elements and hardly benefitted from the fire in the Great Chamber where everyone congregated at night” because of their old age. Axl suspects that he and his wife may have lived closer to the Great Chamber when they were younger (ibid: 5). Additionally, candles, which are distributed to younger villagers, are not given to the old couple. Depriving them of candles angers Beatrice, who generally has a sweet temperament. She complains to Axl:

“It’s an insult, forbidding us a candle through nights like these and our hands as steady as any of them. While there’s others with candles in their chamber, senseless each night from cider, or else with children running wild. Yet it’s our candle they’ve taken, and now I can hardly see your outline, Axl, though you’re right beside me” (ibid: 9)⁸

8 It is possible that candles could have been taken from them for specific reasons. For example, though not fully elaborated, there is an incident when Beatrice almost lost one of her nice cloaks in a fire which might have caused villagers to believe that she was not to be trusted with a candle. Nonetheless, from the

Although Beatrice notes that she and Axl are as productive and healthy as anyone else, they are still deemed less worthy of the warmth and light from both the Great Chamber due to their age.

The couple's anxiety about being perceived as useless is demonstrated when Beatrice rushes her husband back to work as he is already considered "slow": "Then go on with your business, husband, for I'm sure they'll be complaining again how slow you are at your work, and before you know they'll have the children chanting at us again." Although Axl rebukes, "I've never heard a word of such complaint and I'm able to take the same burden as any man twenty years younger," and Beatrice responds that she was just "teasing" (ibid: 15–16), that the couple have been pushed to the edge of the village and are revoked of having candles insinuate that Beatrice may be right, and that the couple is not a valued part of the community even despite the fact that "advanced though they were in years, [they] had their burden of daily duties" in the village (ibid: 27).

The villagers' maltreatment of the elderly couple reaches a climax when a child gives Beatrice a candle and the villagers try to take it from Beatrice by force, while others in the crowd watch with "amusement," "shouting" and "laughter" as the old woman wrestles with all her power to protect "a squat, somewhat misshapen candle" (ibid: 20–21). When the pastor of the village arrives to the scene, instead of showing empathy, he orders people to take the candle from Beatrice and feigns kindness once the candle is taken from her using her old age as an excuse for her behavior: "Leave Mistress Beatrice in peace and none of you speak unkindly to her. *She's an old woman who doesn't understand all she does*" (ibid: 22). After the debacle, once the crowd disperses and the old couple are left alone, Axl asks Beatrice why she is so fixated on the candle when they had lived without one for so long, Beatrice simply responds, "They think us a foolish pair, Axl," indicating that it is not the candle itself that Beatrice truly wants, but basic human respect and rights. Beatrice claims that

villager's short-term memory of not even remembering the lost child, Marta, it is difficult to say that they would remember such small incident to the point in which they would ban an elderly couple from having candles.

if they had their son with them—someone younger—he would be able to protect them (ibid: 23). This event becomes the final catalyst which triggers Axl and Beatrice to set out on the journey to a neighboring village to reunite with their son, which they kept forgetting or pushing off, as they believe that people would treat them more respectfully if they had someone *younger*, their son, to protect them. In short, the couple departs the village because, although they have the most comprehension and memory regarding the village and its inhabitants, they are neither treated with respect nor dignity due to their age which is a reflection of ageism prevalent in societies.

Quests of the Elders: The Axl, Beatrice, and Sir Gawain

The Buried Giant challenges most mainstream literature where the protagonists are children or young adults and in which their lives, stories and growths seem to end once they become adults. Similar to Bilbo and Frodo in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, Axl and Beatrice initially set out of their village to find their son and *unexpectedly* end up becoming part of an important quest which is to determine not only their own fate, but also the fate of their nation and peoples. Although the old couple's original goal was to reunite with their son, their desire to remember their shared memories becomes more important for them which results in their joining the quest to kill Querig once they find out that the dragon's breath is the cause of the mist.

Axl and Beatrice's determination to aid in the quest to kill the dragon was provoked by their desire to regain their memory. The old couple resists against the natural urge to blame their loss of memory on ageing. Although the couple is eager to regain their memories, they do sometimes wonder if their love is stronger due to the fact that there are events which they do not remember. Nevertheless, trusting in the strength of their love, the old couple keeps pushing forward. This decision causes the old couple to experience adventures from fairy tales such as, out of many things, smuggling a young knight, Wistan, and a boy, Edwin, past Briton's soldiers who wish to capture or kill them, meet with the leg-

endary Sir Gawain, escape a monastery of corrupted people through an underground tunnel, combat a monstrous hound and fight pixies.

After the many adventures, stereotypically unsuitable for an old couple, Axl and Beatrice finally reach the dragon with Sir Gawain and Wistan. After witnessing Wistan slay Querig, the old couple remembers what were forgotten as the mist which had caused people's mysterious loss of memories dissipate. Once their memories fully return, the old couple remembers the event which caused the breach in their relationship: Beatrice's infidelity which led their son to leave and eventually die from a plague. This remembrance, however, does not end the couple's relationship, but instead makes it stronger as they are able to accept the past events and understand that they have grown out of the spite they had for each other, as their love also grew. Such possibility of growth until death is portrayed with the couple's final conversation with each other and their respective private conversations with the boatman as they must part due to Beatrice's final journey with the boatman to the island where their son awaits⁹.

Of course, their journey is not glamorized in any way as the couple experiences many drawbacks due to their aged bodies. For example, the old couple takes up the difficult detour up a mountain in order to visit Father Jonus, who is known for his medicine, in a monastery due to a physical illness Beatrice suffers. They also take longer to reach places due to their aged bodies which becomes more explicit once the young boy, Edwin, joins their journey and often becomes frustrated by the couple's sluggishness. At the beginning of their journey together, Edwin asks himself, "[...] why travel with these two elderly Britons who required rest at each turn of the road?" and thinks, "they had so far been kind [...], but they were frustrating companions all the same" (2015a: 92–93). Nevertheless, as Edwin and the couple experience tribulations together, the boy grows to, if not love the couple, respect them and accept them as people who are more than just a burden. Even Wistan who is vengeful towards all

9 The boatman in *The Buried Giant* resembles Charon. In Greek mythology, Charon is the ferryman who carries the dead souls across the river Acheron or Styx to the afterworld. The island therefore symbolizes the afterworld.

Britons grows to respect the old couple's kindness and tenacity, as does the legendary Sir Gawain. Thus, although the story is of an elderly couple's final journey together, it is not of deterioration, but of living, growing, venturing and being affected by and affecting others until the brink of death.

Another notable elderly character in *The Buried Giant* is Sir Gawain. Ishiguro's Sir Gawain is the same legendary knight who is the nephew of King Arthur. Axl and Beatrice run into him soon after they depart the second village with Edwin and Wistan. The moment Sir Gawain enters the narrative, the couple becomes part of a bigger legend—the remnant of the Arthurian legend. Sir Gawain in *The Buried Giant*, however, is not the young and mighty Sir Gawain as popularly known from the Arthurian legend, but an elderly—though not frail—knight, who remains to fulfill his uncle's final order to defend the dragon until his death. Ishiguro dedicates two chapters of Part III of the book with Sir Gawain's internal thoughts, titled, “Gawain's First Reverie” and “Gawain's Second Reverie” giving weight to the significance of the character.

Despite the fact that Sir Gawain is a legendary knight, he is depicted as a normal elderly person, with his body having been also susceptible to ageing. The first impression of Sir Gawain is through Axl's perspective, in which his outer appearance presents a frail old man:

Axl saw that the knight was no threatening figure. He appeared to be very tall, but beneath his armour Axl supposed him thin, if wiry [...]. The face protruding from the armour was kindly and creased; above it, several long strands of snowy hair fluttered from an otherwise bald head. He might have been a sorry sight, fixed to the ground, legs splayed before him [...]. (ibid: 104–105)

Axl's view of Sir Gawain is almost as though of an old man who is decaying, with the realistic depiction of the legendary knight's ageing becoming almost a rude awakening to the readers that the legendary Sir Gawain is, after all, just an old man.

However, although Sir Gawain's aged body even requires Axl and Beatrice's help “to bring the old knight [himself] to his feet” (ibid: 114), readers—alongside Axl—must reassess the rash judgment as we are

soon to discover that Sir Gawain is no weak man: “when finally he straightened to his full height in his armour and pulled back his shoulders, he was an impressive sight” (ibid: 114). Sir Gawain often proves his vigor and skills in moments such as when he sees the monstrous hound and laughs at it (ibid: 175). Regardless of what Sir Gawain says, the characters draw a hasty conclusion that the old knight has failed to kill the monster when they see monster’s body running even after Sir Gawain swung his sword. However, they soon find out that Sir Gawain had actually successfully cut off the monster’s head and it was only its body running, once again dispelling the belief that the old knight is weak.

In the same vein, ageism in *The Buried Giant* deceived its people into assuming that Sir Gawain’s weakness is what kept Querig alive, as the belief is that Sir Gawain was the one entrusted to slay the dragon. However, it is later revealed that Sir Gawain used the ageist bias against others and feigned this weakness, as his actual role is to defend the dragon. Sir Gawain’s reveries expose that both age and the weight of his guilt—having been the cause of so many deaths—has worn the old knight down to the point that he is almost looking forward to his death. Nevertheless, as Axl and Beatrice are determined to see the dragon killed, Sir Gawain is determined to defend the dragon (ibid: 214). Sir Gawain perseveres even knowing that he must fight the powerful and younger knight, Wistan.

Despite his awareness of his physical disadvantage due to his aged body, Sir Gawain is still able to analyze Wistan’s combat movements to find a “small weakness” he believes might give him a chance for victory (ibid: 205). Wistan understands the advantage of his youthful physique and accepts Sir Gawain’s request to let them begin the combat with their weapons unsheathed, as Sir Gawain’s slower body would ensure his loss otherwise. Although Sir Gawain eventually loses, he was given the chance to die with dignity and Wistan acknowledges that it was the most difficult combat he had fought (ibid: 292). Thus, although Sir Gawain is a knight from the legends, his ageing was not glamorized as the consequences of ageing was not undermined. Simultaneously, rather than depicting a helpless old knight, *The Buried Giant* depicts a knight who set out on a quest in his youth, and whose quest continues even after age-

ing. Similar to Axl and Beatrice, Sir Gawain is but an old man still living and going through life-changing journeys while in the midst of an extraordinary quest. In short, Axl, Beatrice and Sir Gawain's lives continue as aged people's and are not less valuable, significant, impactful or uneventful than those of younger; even the final word, experience, and change of mind at the brink of death are invaluable.

Fantasy of Ageing in Fantasy

With the colossal success of *The Lord of the Rings*, the eternally young, beautiful and healthy Tolkienesque elves have become prevalent in popular culture. However, the popularized version of elves is stripped of the complexity of eternal youth and life which Tolkien explicitly highlights in *The Silmarillion*. Such simplification is ironically a result of our like-mindedness as the Númenóreans of Middle-earth, who romanticized and envied the elves' eternal life and youth without considering its implications and consequences. As Tolkien wrote succinctly in a letter answering a question about elves, "they were not unageing or unwearying [...] a burden may become heavier the longer it is borne" (2000: 325) which is also echoed in Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* when Sir Gawain reflects on the fatigue he feels ageing due to the weight of his guilt. Indeed, ageing does not simply mean a deterioration of the physical, but also eternally bearing the accumulation of burdens such as regret and loss.

One notable medievalist fantasy writer who has taken a step farther than Tolkien in deromanticizing the longevity of elves is Andrzej Sapkowski—"the Polish Tolkien" (Purchase 2019)—in his *The Witcher* series. Also set in an imaginary medievalist fantasy world, unlike in Tolkien's Middle-earth from which the elves sailed away to a haven, the elves in Sapkowski's world stayed in the same world as humans, dwarves and halflings who are equivalent to Tolkien's Hobbits. Although the initial instinct may be to believe that the elves are respected as the wise, in Sapkowski's world, they are overpowered by humans who kill the elves, take their lands and enslave them. The elves who survived must suffer the

longevity of their lives hiding from and fighting humans who have also affected nature itself: "The sun shines differently, the air is different, water is not as it used to be. The things we used to eat, made use of, are dying, diminishing, deteriorating" (1993). Sapkowski's elves must suffer either their slaughter or must die with the world.

Rather than placing the elves who are physically youthful and wise in mind at the center, Tolkien instead chooses older and commonplace characters who are past their middle-age, such as Bilbo and Frodo as the main protagonists of his works. Furthermore, for Tolkien, although older in age, these characters are not the wiser: realistically depicting old people who lived insular lives in naïveté or ignorance, Bilbo and Frodo are rather like children despite their older ages. Unlike little children or young adults going on adventures and returning home wiser after experiencing trials and tribulations and accomplishing goals and quests, it is the aged characters who go on such journey and return home wiser.

Similarly, Ishiguro's main characters are elders who go on a great journey which change their lives, albeit right before their deaths. Impending death is not reason for individuals to sit and wait for it to arrive. The lives of the aged continue, be it amongst themselves or younger people, and their lives continue to have an effect, just as they continue to be affected by life. Death is not something that the aged passively to resign to, but an occurrence which must be accepted; until death arrives, the aged too, will and should live. Thus, exemplified by Tolkien's and Ishiguro's medievalist fantasy works, the concept of ageing has been a prevalent conversation in the genre and will continue to remain so as the genre itself opens boundless spaces for such timeless topic.

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