



ROBERT HOLDSTOCK
MYTHAGO WOOD

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Stepping into Story: Narrative Grammar in Robert Holdstock's Mythago Cycle

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Each instalment of Robert Holdstock's Mythago Cycle means a journey into Ryhope Wood, a mysterious forest in Herefordshire where time and space expand and contract and figures from myth spawn to constantly relive their own legends. Quest narratives have long served as a major structural model for fantasy literature, but as W.A. Senior has argued, in the hands of Holdstock 'the quest fantasy is an ever-changing portal that leads us into the heart of the human condition.'¹ Unlike so many lengthy fantasy series, the Mythago Cycle does not stretch out one quest over multiple volumes; instead, Holdstock's books show connectivity, but each is mostly self-contained. From a far enough distance, each book seems similar enough: someone living outside of Ryhope Wood is somehow lured into the forest, encounters figures that somewhat resemble mythic heroes, and the book ends with some form of transformation for at least one character. Ryhope Wood's ever-shifting spatial dimensions change the temporal grammar of each quest to create distinct quest narratives that interrogate the relationship between humans and the stories we tell ourselves.

While the Mythago Cycle has enjoyed a healthy amount of scholarship, very little has considered the narrative structures within the novels, either individually or as a collection. I will examine the first three novels of the cycle: *Mythago Wood* (1984), *Lavondyss* (1988), and *The Hollowing* (1993). The common devices used within these novels will provide a general apparatus that can be applied to other texts in the series. For practical purposes I limit myself to just these three novels, though the rest of the series (*Gate of Ivory*, *Gate of Horn* (1997), *Avilion* (2009), and *The Bone Forest* (1991)) still inform my analysis.

Because the quest has served as the structural pillar for so much fantasy, definitions for the genre vary. The most useful definition comes from Senior: 'The structuring characteristic of the quest fantasy is the stepped journey: a series of adventures experienced by the hero and his or her companions that begins with the simplest confrontations and dangers and escalates through more threatening and perilous encounters.'² In each Mythago book, Holdstock provides the familiar structure of characters rushing into the wildwoods to save someone. Each quester encounters an expansive space within the forest's haunted borders, far larger than the six-mile perimeter suggests. Trials include dense foliage and magical disorientation, rapid seasonal changes, and the dangerous mythagos, embodiments of mythological characters. Eventually each novel ends in or near the heartwood, a space called Lavondyss, where the protagonist is so radically changed by their quest and Ryhope Wood's magic that they cannot return to their old world. Instead, they leave their world behind and take on mythological dimensions themselves.

Space, Time, and Narrative Grammar

A book series means the various instalments are connected by some shared thread, most often recurring characters. While characters do resurface throughout the Mythago Cycle, the primary connection between the texts is the mysterious Ryhope Wood. A patch of ancient, unspoiled forest in Herefordshire, its magical dimensions directly influence the human quests in each novel. Ryhope Wood can expand and reshape its landscape so that no two quests within are ever spatially the same. Additionally, the forest can manipulate the flow of time for any given zone within its borders, creating anachronisms that directly affect a character's journey. These spatiotemporal abnormalities transform an otherwise ordinary bit of woodland into a realm of story, 'a place of testing, survival, and sacrifice'³ which instigates the transformations each traveller undergoes.

Much of fantasy – especially the quest variety – tends to look outward to a much larger world, even if it is nothing more than a metaphor. Frodo must leave the Shire and walk across Middle-Earth to Mordor, encountering exotic lands such as Rivendell and Lothlorien. Ryhope Wood inverts this, taking the hero on an equally difficult and expansive journey, but inward-oriented. Thus the precursor to the quests Holdstock relates is the journey to the underworld. Ryhope Wood may thrive with sylvan life, but the novels regularly remind the reader of the decay that fills the forest. Ryhope Wood's mystical centre space, called Lavondyss, most closely relates to the afterlife; called 'the unknown region',⁴ we recognise it as 'the undiscovered country'⁵ spoken of by Hamlet. Holdstock has mentioned his fascination with underworld quests because they 'reflect journeys that we all take into our unconscious minds through dreams or even through our behavior at times'.⁶ Like Odysseus (who appears as a character in *Avilion*) and Aeneas, the heroes of Holdstock's cycle must make a journey into a realm of death and memory where experiential reality functions differently to attain knowledge otherwise unavailable.

Journeys through Ryhope Wood's elastic spatiotemporal realm bring the hero into conflict with their innermost self because the forest is a reflection of the stories within their minds. The forest's shifting topography is inhabited with *mythagos* – meaning "'myth imago,' or the *image of the myth*'⁷ – figures of story culled from the unconscious minds of people who live near Ryhope Wood and even more so of those who venture within. Mythagos, whether as characters and creatures or the landscape itself, manifest via a process Senior has elsewhere termed 'abstraction': 'In Holdstock's mythago sequence, characters pull from the wood and concomitantly from their own unconscious to give form to airy nothingness. The inhabitants of the wood, such as the Hood, Twigling, Jacks, Shamiga, and so on, are ideas, inchoate desires, or needs clothed in bodies'.⁸ In this way a quest into Ryhope Wood truly does mean a journey 'into the heart of the human condition'⁹ because the entire wood-world outside the protagonist is actually a projection of their own mind and the purpose of the journey is a confrontation with the self.

Ryhope Wood is a place composed of story, and a quest within its borders means entering into story itself. The series' awareness of this invites us to consider the structure of both the tale that begins outside Ryhope Wood and the one entered when crossing the threshold. Narrative grammar is concerned with how a story deploys forces of space and time to influence interactions and affect the characters and their progression. In the Mythago Cycle, Ryhope Wood controls the grammar. The forest's ever-shifting, time-dilating, myth-bearing space 'functions as a character; here endowed with animate traits'¹⁰ and manifests its own will which

is set against the overt desires of the heroes. Characters are lured, barred, pushed along, and meet and interact according to the providence of the forest, or rather, according to the given myth summoned from the hero's own mind and imposed upon them by the forest.

Although I know of no other series that follows a structure like the Mythago Cycle, the novels still seem oddly familiar. Carroll Brown has argued that *Mythago Wood* follows the grammar of Joseph Campbell's monomyth: 'Had it not been written some 40 years prior to *Mythago Wood*, *Hero [With a Thousand Faces]* might easily be misconstrued as a particularly cogent analysis of that singular work.'¹¹ However, such a reading, at best, can only refer to the first book of the cycle, and even then we do Holdstock and ourselves a disservice because, as Senior counters, 'While Holdstock observes many of the standard stages of the monomyth or quest structure of genre fantasy, he alters them, often radically. In particular, he omits the final stage, which Joseph Campbell calls the "return and reintegration with society".'¹² So while some themes from the Mythago Cycle do reflect ideas and events from Campbell's specific quest taxonomy, Holdstock's stories serve better as a commentary upon Campbell's model.¹³ Still, Campbell's vocabulary can help identify certain motifs throughout the series, though his grammar is challenged.

Characterisation

One last ingredient to define before we consider the cycle's grammar is characterisation. Narrative-grammarians (such as Campbell) often define characters using Vladimir Propp's term *function*, referring to the social or cultural role a character fills within the story: Hero, Helper, and Villain provide a few easy examples. Alternatively, a character might have individualising traits. Brian Attebery argues that one of fantasy's strategies allows these two types of characterisation to occur within the same text. Using the example of Tolkien's Frodo, Attebery explains that he 'performs the role of hero, but he fits into that role only approximately; [...] Tolkien underscores Frodo's uncomfortable transformation from realistic character to story function with a few magical clues.'¹⁴ The Mythago books follow this design even more overtly than *Lord of the Rings*. Holdstock's protagonists 'step into the tale I'm telling out of their own stories.'¹⁵ The characters begin as very ordinary people who happen to live near Ryhope Wood but otherwise have no distinguishing qualities. Then, when they enter Ryhope Wood they transform to fulfil a story role. In *The Hollowing*, a researcher named Arnould Lacan explains that mythagos are 'often based on historical figures, more often on imaginary but *needed* figures, [that] had become an integral part of the human mind.'¹⁶ Put another way, they are defined and identified by their functions. The quest through Ryhope Wood is literally a transition from human character to story function.

Granted, Holdstock's characters typically begin their quests into Ryhope Wood as fractured souls, though to varying degrees. Always there is something lacking in their lives. The sense of a lack is not exclusive to the protagonist, and other characters' desires create tension and become a tool in the hands of Ryhope Wood to further manipulate the quest. In becoming mythic figures, characters do not attain mastery over the world (as a traditional Campbellian tale would have it), but rather they establish a new life within the forest, one that is ultimately simpler because it is function-based rather than fully autonomous.

Finally, characters in the Mythago Cycle are surprisingly active. Regardless of who narrates, even side characters tend to follow their own narrative path. While the plot may follow the protagonist almost exclusively, a significant portion of narrative tension develops

because different characters pursue their personal course and that causes collisions with others. However, activity does not necessarily equal agency, and different characters enjoy varying amounts of it. In *Lavondyss* we learn that mythagos, when they are not actively living out a given story, enjoy some degree of autonomy within the bounds of their general tropes, 'but when the pattern of legend tugs at them, they are helpless. They are called.'¹⁷ In contrast, humans 'are free of the calling. We are *not* of the dream stuff. We are alive.'¹⁸ The narrative needling of a prescriptive story, whether in a character's mythago nature, or because Ryhope Wood goads a human agent into acting out a myth, is also important to Holdstock's questions about how we relate to mythology.

Beginnings – The Edgewoods

Stepping back and viewing the Mythago books collectively, we recognise the story-world is divided into three general spaces, each with its own temporality: the world outside Ryhope Wood, Ryhope Wood itself, and *Lavondyss* at the wood's centre. The quests of each book in the series (with the exception of the final novel, *Avilion*) begin in the outer space and move toward *Lavondyss*.

Each novel begins by establishing two things: a lack within the hero's life, specifically of a family member, and a contrast between the world of the protagonist and the nearby Ryhope Wood, hinting at the forest as an otherworld. The protagonist finds him or herself in the position of an outsider looking towards Ryhope Wood. These serve as what Propp calls the absention and interdiction, respectively.¹⁹ These provide tension and the foundation for characterisation, as a lack means motive while interdiction gives the protagonist a script to violate, which makes the story tellable.²⁰

The plot of *Mythago Wood* begins when Steven Huxley returns to his childhood home after fighting in the Second World War. His older brother, Christian, has married Guiwenneth, who is absent; and their father, George, has died during the war. Such a setup seems typical of the folktale or monomyth, yet Holdstock complicates the matter through character tensions and the fact that the men begin as 'heroes' in the conventional sense of the post-War culture.

The actual quest of *Mythago Wood* does not begin until roughly two-thirds into the novel, though it is foregrounded throughout the early chapters. The primary marker for story progression throughout *Mythago Wood* is the characters' ability to advance from outside to inside the forest. In the opening chapters we learn that, as children, Steven and Christian used to follow a path into the forest, 'But the deep track just ends, and we always managed to get lost [...] What if I told you the forest had *stopped* us entering?'²¹ Such ominous conversations both augment Ryhope Wood's power over the narrative and hint at the structure at work. Because the forest has previously barred the brothers from entering but is now beginning to draw them inward, there has been a progression in the story – the 'stepped journey' that marks the quest structure.

Part Two sees Steven shifting his focus from saving Christian, who has been venturing into the forest to find Guiwenneth, to his own relationship with her, while Christian's focus shifts as well, suggesting that the forest has been preparing the brothers for the story roles it has chosen for them. Ryhope Wood's agency within each novel subtly permeates the plots and ultimately trumps the desires of the human characters, which decentralises their role in the narrative. As Farah Mendlesohn has argued, 'In portal fantasies [...] the travelers are

somehow important to the story that is told within the portal,' but in *Mythago Wood* 'Stephen [sic] is never important.'²²

Subsequent novels in the cycle, *Lavondyss*, *The Hollowing*, and *Gate of Ivory, Gate of Horn*, similarly foreground their quest plots by exploring the lives of the protagonists outside the forest before luring them into Ryhope Wood. *Lavondyss* focuses on twelve-year-old Tallis Keeton, who, as Kálmán Matolcsy points out, 'intuitively fuses with her environment in a permanent shamanistic trance.'²³ Her quest is marked by 'magical practices, trance, bones, birds, mirrors, the constant urge to enter the otherworld, and her ability of *oolerinnen*, "hollowing":'²⁴ ('Hollowing' is the ability to generate hollowings, holes in the forest's time-space that teleport characters to distant regions and times within Ryhope Wood, an important plot device for the remainder of the series.) Her quest is an act of self-creation through her own stories rather than having a tale pressed upon her. Having learned her older brother Harry is trapped within the forest, she sets out to save him, accompanied by the Jaguthin, mythagos of a band of noble horsemen. A mythago in the shape of a large hart that has functioned as Tallis's guardian transforms into a large hollowing to help her begin her journey. In this way, Tallis's quest looks like it will take the shape of a typical rescue adventure, with a band of loyal friends rallying to help their leader achieve their goal, beginning their journey with a magical guardian's assistance.

The Hollowing has a much shorter induction into the quest than its precursors. The novel follows Richard Bradley, who joins an expedition of researchers into Ryhope Wood after his son Alex seemingly dies in the forest. His quest continues the tradition of rescuing a loved one, but diegetic time is at its most fluid in this novel and events seem more fateful, looking forwards as well as back.

One last aspect of these beginnings worth examining is the role of layered narratives. Each novel follows a specific story, but each opens with some sort of metanarrative that provides guidance of some sort. George's journals provide guidance for Steven and Christian, teaching them about the forest's mechanics and the nature of mythagos. *Lavondyss's* prelude focuses on Tallis's grandfather Owen writing a letter explaining mythagos to Tallis, and in *The Hollowing* Richard is guided by *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. These texts create a cyclicity of story – George's own obsession with Guiwenneth forms a pattern for his sons, while Tallis replaces her grandfather as a repository of story.

Each Mythago novel begins in the space outside Ryhope Wood with the characters developing personal reasons to venture inward and gain some grasp of how the forest functions. These 'pre-quest plots' become part of the quest structure, preparing the quester with motive, knowledge, and a connection with the forest. Now we move to the main stage, that of the quests, within the forest.

The Quest Proper – The Wildwoods

As each character crosses the threshold from the world of experience into Ryhope Wood they begin their descent into the underworld, traveling into a secluded pocket of reality where past, present, and future meet and where memories manifest. That mythagos are often called 'ghosts' and certain portions of the wildwood 'geistzones' adds to the underworld feeling. In these journeys, 'the normal road of descent is through dream or something strongly suggestive of a dream atmosphere'²⁵ and dreams frequently describe the wildwood, most overtly when Tallis calls it 'a dream place.'²⁶

Ryhope Wood is not a realm of forgiving grace or holy light. In fact, Holdstock states that 'I'm not interested in legend and myth as we know it, but in what went before! What events, what *terrifying* and wonderful tales, now forgotten, were remembered sufficiently in *darker* ages to create what we think of as legend now.'²⁷ Holdstock's world is not just a conventional space where adversity is merely a hurdle to overcome, but rather a space for discovering the dark and hidden truths that have been forgotten. Ryhope Wood is where characters face a reckoning.

Crossing the threshold between the outer world and the haunted space of Ryhope Wood truly is a transitioning between worlds. The impossible space and erratic time constitute an entirely new realm, 'an actively defended anachronism' that serves as 'a locus of change'.²⁸ In Frye's terms, this transition of realms signifies a 'break in consciousness'²⁹ though I suggest relabelling it a 'break in reality' because the character enters an external space that manifests the abstraction of their inner world. The value of this space and a journey through its dreamscape is transformation, replacing elements of a character's mundane life with aspects of story.

There are two ways of entering Ryhope Wood: either through the edgewoods or via a hollowing. Once characters enter Ryhope Wood their stories conform to whatever structure the wood imposes. As Stefan Ekman has previously noted, the general shape of any quest through Ryhope essentially 'is the labyrinth, found in its simplest form in *Mythago Wood*'³⁰ though the design changes in each book. Steven's journey is simplest, partly because his motives are singular (namely rescuing Guiwenneth from Christian) and also because 'The path Steven follows through the forest in *Mythago Wood* twists and turns but never really leaves him with any choices'³¹ Steven and his friend Harry Keeton (Tallis's older brother) always move forward, following switchbacks that help create the winding effect of the labyrinth. 'Defensive zones'³² attempt to repel the questers using magical disorientation, frightening illusions, and powerful winds. Such trials of character are typical of the quest narrative, and in the Mythago Cycle these forge the character's identity into one of myth rather than testing what traits of endurance they already possess.

The singular focus of Steven's path not only leads him through space but also time, as time is the essential agent of change. Snippets of Harry's diary mark how Steven is changing, growing wild and unkempt, and becoming skilful with ancient weaponry, as when he comments, 'I find it continually fascinating to think that Steven has become a myth character himself!'³³ By the time Steven reaches the border between the wildwood and Lavondyss he is fully a figure of mythology, draped in Iron Age animal skin clothing, wielding a sword, and having forsaken his old life.

Additionally, the journey towards the heartwood also travels backwards through memory, as Steven and Harry encounter increasingly ancient versions of the shamiga tribe, each a variation on the same experience, the details mildly shifting as each version of the tribe proves a bit more primal. Steven discovers that he is re-enacting the shamiga's myth of the Kinslayer, who chases and perhaps kills the Outsider, his brother Christian.

Tallis's quest is radically different. Because Tallis possesses some influence over the forest, she can pursue just about any course she wishes. Invoking an image from Borges, Ekman differentiates Tallis's pathway from the unicursal labyrinth travelled by Steven, describing it as 'a forest of forking paths'.³⁴ For Ekman, the availability of options, dead ends, and false starts for Tallis corresponds to Umberto Eco's definition of a maze, in contrast to the single

route of a labyrinth.³⁵ Tallis's quest is ultimately for nourishing Ryhope Wood with her creative energies: 'The forest, in its many ways, was sucking out her soul, her spirit. It was sucking out her dreams. It was draining her.'³⁶ Just the same, Tallis does experience growth through acting creatively, or we might say she recreates herself through a dialectic struggle with Ryhope Wood. Holdstock describes *Lavondyss* as 'a story of a girl's search for understanding her place in the world, during which she is transformed.'³⁷ Part of her transformation is maturation, making *Lavondyss* the only conventional coming-of-age story in the series, but also she attains an unprecedented union with the forest, as hinted when a fleck of green is found in her eyes after years of living in the forest.³⁸

The second stage of Tallis's quest comes after her meeting with George Huxley's old research partner, Edward Wynne-Jones, from whom she learns Harry has moved to the centre space, and this inspires Tallis to pursue a course towards *Lavondyss* in the hope of saving her brother. Whereas Steven hears the story of the Outsider and Kinslayer and chooses to take upon himself the tale, Tallis's choice indicates a self-created path, not a pre-planned story.

For both Steven and Tallis, the final step before they leave the wildwoods and approach *Lavondyss* is to cut ties with their companions and take the final steps alone. In both cases that separation happens because the forest subtly draws their companions away to isolate the primary quester; using each quester's agency and personal motives to lead them to follow their own story.

Richard's quest is bewildering because in *The Hollowing* we learn of new complexities within Ryhope Wood. Namely, we discover that the forest is divided into (at least) 'five Ryhope "perimeters," one above the other in a staggered display, connected by thin tubes that curved down between them, some connecting adjacent planes,' meaning that there are multiple levels of Ryhope Wood that overlap each other and are accessible via hollowings.³⁹ Ekman describes this particular spatiotemporal design using Eco's designation of a net, meaning all spatial points connect to one another: 'In the forest in *The Hollowing*, it is implied that every mythotope can be reached from any other mythotope by some route or another. The routes are not necessarily short or obvious, however, and the possibility of losing one's way is ever present.'⁴⁰

The bizarreness of the forest's shape in this novel does make the quest a bit more difficult to track. Whereas Steven worked his way into a story and Tallis created her own path, Richard has no path, just forays through hollowings into the wildwoods from the camp he shares with his fellow explorers. Just as Steven's meeting with the shamiga enables him to restructure his quest around the story of the Outsider and Kinslayer, and Tallis's meeting with Wynne-Jones allows her to crystallise her quest into a story of a young woman rescuing her brother, it is Richard's retreat from and return to Ryhope Wood that constitutes his choice to follow the rescue quest narrative offered by the forest. The brutal battle of wits between Richard and Jason (of Argonaut fame) then signifies Richard coming into his own as a figure of story, playing a role demanded of him by the forest.

Lavondyss – The Heartwood

Each novel ends within the centre space of Ryhope Wood, the realm called *Lavondyss* (an amalgam of Lyonesse, Avalon, and Dyss).⁴¹ This is the place where transformations finalise and each traveller finds some ending to their quest. However, these transformations

are both wondrous and horrifying. Perhaps even more than the wildwoods, Lavondyss is a space composed of story because it is 'the place of ice'⁴² and 'There is old memory in snow.'⁴³ Just as the wildwoods change their shape in order to test, refine, and guide the traveller; 'The protean physical representation of Lavondyss implicates the articulation of desire of those who seek it.'⁴⁴ These desires tend to revolve around some sort of redemption or rejuvenation to supplant the quester's lack. Here those needs and desires can be met, but at great cost.

Entering Lavondyss means the culmination of the narrative into which the characters have entered. According to Tolkien, the fantasy tale requires a happy ending, the 'eucatastrophe' that manifests as 'the sudden joyous "turn" (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale)'.⁴⁵ However, as Attebery has pointed out, 'Much fantasy does not have what we could call a "happy ending"'. Indeed, the fantasist often seems to start with the idea of such a resolution and then to qualify it, finding every hidden cost in the victory'.⁴⁶ Holdstock's endings certainly question the descriptor 'happy' and are full of costs, but the resolution impresses the reader with some sensation of wholeness. Attebery and C.N. Manlove call this 'wonder'.⁴⁷ Even more usefully, Marek Oziewicz aligns this sensation with Kenneth Burke's and Emmanuel Kant's notions of the sublime, something that triggers "'delightful horror" [...] the aesthetic reaction of the witnessing human subject to an event or idea which is awe inspiring and may often be, unless removed from the observer, positively threatening to life.'⁴⁸ At Lavondyss, stories resolve as transformations at a primal level, not only changing a character's circumstance or perspective, but their very nature as they become fully personages of story.

For Steven, Lavondyss holds the key to setting right the story of his life, namely ending the feud with Christian, restoring the Land to its natural state, and reuniting with Guiwenneth. However, the tale demands that the Kinsman destroys the Outsider and so Steven must involuntarily obey, mourning that 'The legend had resolved in favour of the realm.'⁴⁹ We delight to see a story we recognise as brothers divided by bitter jealousy end according to its formula, and simultaneously we cringe to see story overtake the brothers' agency.

Tallis's time in Lavondyss takes on spiritual dimensions nowhere else attempted in the *Mythago Cycle*. She does not have a rival to battle, and her journey in the wildwoods is a meandering trek through her own choices. Like Lewis Carroll's Alice, Tallis entered a lower world of the mind by chasing the 'white rabbit' in the form of her desire to save both her brother and her mythago lover Scathach, but the tale quickly gives way to her quest for self-knowledge.⁵⁰ Her quest is a baptism by fire (or foliage), shedding the old childlike self and inducting her into the life of the artist by discovering the origins of story and the paradoxical nature of life paired with death. After her resurrection she tells the mythago shaman Tig, 'I feel violated, consumed, yet I feel *loved*. [...] I don't know *what* I feel. All my life I thought that Lavondyss was a vast land, with many aspects. I found it to be a place of murder. A place of guilt. A place of honour. A place of the birth of a belief in the journey of the soul.'⁵¹ Because of her protean powers of imagination, the forest has trained Tallis to become a more powerful and responsible artist so that it might feast on her dreams for some time, all while actualising her own powers and granting her desires to save the men in her life and have a second chance.

Mythago Wood and *Lavondyss* each end with a coda, little visions of stories after stories. Having resolved the Cain and Abel story of Outsider and Kinslayer, Steven moves on to a story of lovers joined forever, since time is suspended in Lavondyss. Tallis also chooses to live out her life in Ryhope Wood, and as an old woman she reverse-ages to reunite with her father

while at the same time her grandson watches her burn upon a funeral pyre. Graham Martin says that these represent a forking of realities within Ryhope Wood.⁵² We might go a step farther and say that Tallis uses her last bits of life and imagination to create a new narrative through which she can reclaim her lost years, leaving behind only the shell of her body.

Unlike Steven and Tallis's journeys into Lavondyss, Richard does not himself transform. Instead he and the research team reach the Green Chapel, which is hinted to be Lavondyss⁵³ where Alex is absorbed by a mythago and, when he re-emerges, his father notes that 'there was something *whole* about the boy, now: trickster and conscience had come back. The two faces of the Green Knight had returned.'⁵⁴ In this novel, transformation less resembles metamorphosis, rather it results from the fusion of separate parts into whole entities. Alex and Richard unite as father and son, dreamer and quester, and we see that Richard's exploits in the forest filled with his son's dreams have helped heal and transform the latter.

Most distinct in *The Hollowing* when compared to the previous novels is the lack of tragedy in the ending. Richard and Alex's reunion does not demand death or any other payment. Having apprehended the knightly myths and revived Alex, they have set the world aright⁵⁵ by restoring the family unit, grafting in Helen as a new wife and mother.

Conclusion

The intricacies of the Mythago Cycle – the play of parallels (some thwarted and others more resonant), the twisting pathways through the surreal landscape, the unnerving mythagos, and the mysteries of Lavondyss – deserve a larger readership and more thorough examination than they have previously enjoyed. The series perplexes the reader with its refusal to give easy answers or the happiest of endings. However, by aligning the various points together we recognise some semblance of a grammar at work within the novels.

Most especially, we see the movement between three spaces, namely: the edgewoods, or outer world; the wildwoods, where the majority of questing happens; and the heartwood Lavondyss, a space made entirely of narrative, where stories intersect and create new life. In the edgewoods the protagonist meets allies and develops some motive to enter Ryhope Wood, while the wildwoods test them. It is during the testing in the wildwood that the characters must make the transition and assume their role in a narrative, something that will drive them to Lavondyss. In Lavondyss they can encounter the story that will make them whole.

The end of a Mythago book means resolving the archetypal story the actors assume, which allows them to awaken to their renewed state. Steven continues to a story of vigil and family happiness (as seen in *Avilion*); Tallis manages to both live and die, perhaps hinting at immortality through ever-diverging stories; and the healed Alex and Richard wait for Helen's return. Although they do not leave Ryhope Wood, those who quest there enter into realms of story, moving from tale to tale.

Although many fantasies co-opt the quest structure and merely resemble 'the market-driven predictable and redundant formula of commodified fantasy',⁵⁶ an author like Robert Holdstock can breathe new life into the model. Old tropes are defamiliarised and repetition provides insight and patterns that become commentaries upon the form. Each quest into Ryhope Wood is as similar-yet-different as any two souls, and rooted in the stories we tell ourselves to make the quest a reflection of the human experience. For Holdstock, our lives are composed of stories, the most enduring of which we call mythology. Just as our

imaginative faculties give birth to myths, our efforts to enact them shape us through a dialectic struggle, one that supersedes any notion of originality. For those who walk the woodways of Ryhope Wood, stories become a source of life, 'the counter-absurdity that finally defeats death'.⁵⁷

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Notes

1. W.A. Senior, 'Quest fantasies', in *The Cambridge Companion of Fantasy Literature*, ed. by Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (New York, NY: Cambridge UP, 2012), 199.
2. Senior, 'Quest fantasies', 190.
3. Weronika Laszkiewicz, 'Into the Wild Woods: On the Significance of Trees and Forests in Fantasy Fiction', *Mythlore* no. 1 (2017), 40.
4. The full title of the second Mythago novel is *Lavondyss: Journey to an Unknown Region* and the physical location is frequently referred to as such; see *Lavondyss* (Orb, 2004), pp. 60, 308, 338, 403; see also *Mythago Wood* (Orb, 2003), 323.
5. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III.i.80.
6. Raymond H. Thompson, 'Interview with Robert Holdstock', Robbins Library Digital Projects, 21 May 1989, <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/text/thompson-interview-robert-holdstock> (accessed 26 October 2018).
7. Robert Holdstock, *The Bone Forest* (London: Grafton, 1992), 9.
8. Senior, 'The Embodiment of Abstraction in Robert Holdstock's Mythago Novels', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 14, no. 2 (2008), 305.
9. Senior, 'Quest fantasies', 199.
10. Senior, 'Quest fantasies', 190.
11. Carroll Brown, 'The Flame in the Heart of the Wood: The Integration of Myth and Science in Robert Holdstock's Mythago Wood', *Extrapolation* (Kent State UP) 34, no. 2 (1993), 161.
12. Senior, 'The Embodiment of Abstraction', 314.
13. Attebery has previously argued that Campbell's monomyth, while influential and at times useful, proves too limiting: 'The problem with Campbell's monomyth as an analytical tool is that it always works because it simplifies every story to the point where nothing but the monomyth is left. It ignores the many mythic stories that do not have questing heroes, and it leaves out the culturally defined values and symbols that make each tradition unique.' Brian Attebery, *Stories About Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth* (New York, NY: Oxford UP), 2014, 108.
14. Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana UP, 1992), 72.
15. Melissa M. Hall 'World Fantasy Award Winner Robert Holdstock Takes on the Greek Gods', SciFi.com. <https://web.archive.org/web/20090117023131/http://www.scifi.com/sfw/issue356/interview.html#thetop> (accessed 26 October 2018).
16. Robert Holdstock, *The Hollowing* (New York, NY: Orb, 2005), 79, original emphasis.
17. Holdstock, *Lavondyss* (New York, NY: Orb, 2004), 244.
18. *Ibid.*, original emphasis.
19. Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 2nd edition, trans. by Laurence Scott (Austin, TX: U of Texas P, 1968), 26.
20. Jeremy Bruner refers to this as 'canonicity and breach'. See Jeremy Bruner, 'The Narrative Construction of Reality', in *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 1 (1991), 11-13.
21. Holdstock, *Mythago Wood* (New York, NY: Orb, 2003), 27, original emphasis.
22. Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2008), 156.
23. Kálmán Matolcsy, 'Masks in the Forest: The Dynamics of Surface and Depth in Robert Holdstock's Mythago Cycle', in *The Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* vol. 17, no. 4 (2007), 359.

24. Ibid.
25. Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1976), 99.
26. Holdstock, *Lavondyss*, 174.
27. Holdstock, interviewed by Robert Lightbody, 'Interview with Robert Holdstock', *Mythago Wood: The Official Robert Holdstock Website*, 20 May 2006, <http://robertholdstock.com/intervw2.html>. Emphasis added by me.
Note: interview is no longer available online, and so is quoted from Kálmán Matolcsy's 'Masks in the Forest', 352.
28. Stefan Ekman, *Here Be Dragons: Exploring Fantasy Maps and Settings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2013), 109.
29. Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 102.
30. Ekman, *Here Be Dragons*, 113.
31. Ibid.
32. Holdstock, *Mythago Wood*, 217.
33. Holdstock, *Mythago Wood*, 296.
34. Ekman, *Here Be Dragons*, 113.
35. Ekman, *Here Be Dragons*, 114.
36. Holdstock, *Lavondyss*, 268.
37. Holdstock, 'Mythago Wood and Avilion', *Mythago Wood: The Official Robert Holdstock Website* (2009), <http://robertholdstock.com/articles/avilion-and-mythago-wood/> (accessed 26 October 2018).
38. Holdstock, *Lavondyss*, 271.
39. Holdstock, *The Hollowing*, 120.
40. Ekman, *Here Be Dragons*, 114.
41. Graham Dunstan Martin, *An Inquiry into the Purposes of Speculative Fiction – Fantasy and Truth* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), 168.
42. Holdstock, *Lavondyss*, 398.
43. Holdstock, *Lavondyss*, 14. See also pp. 70 and pp. 212-13.
44. Senior, 'The Embodiment of Abstraction', 310.
45. J.R.R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories' (Oxford, UK: Oxford UP, 1947), 22.
46. Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy*, 15.
47. Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy*, 16.
48. Marek Oziewicz, 'Profusion Sublime and Fantastic: Robert Holdstock's Mythago Wood', *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* vol. 19, no. 1 (2008), 100.
49. Holdstock, *Mythago Wood*, 324.
50. See Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 124 for his comments on *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.
51. Holdstock, *Lavondyss*, 398.
52. Martin, *An Inquiry*, 168-9.
53. Ekman argues that 'Eco also claims that "the abstract model of a net has neither a center nor an outside," and whereas Ryhope Wood does have an outside, it is an outside that is impossibly small compared to the inner vastness. Furthermore, unlike the other three books, *The Hollowing* contains no quest for a Lavondyss at the center of the wood. The heart of the wood and the goal for the quest in this novel is Alex's hiding-place, located somewhere in the forest net, and any one of several routes leads there.' (Ekman, *Here Be Dragons*, 114.) However, Richard observes the remains of an expressly female daurog burst open (*The Hollowing*: 307), much like the shell Tallis is reborn from after her time in the first forest. I believe that the Green Chapel where Alex is held actually is Lavondyss, though perhaps on a different dimensional plane than where Tallis was transformed. So while Ekman is correct that there is no overt quest for Lavondyss, it still is the final location of *The Hollowing* and the space where the desired individual (i.e. Alex) is found.
54. Holdstock, *The Hollowing*, 322.
55. Ildikó Limpár, "'A Heap of Broken Images'" – The Mythological Wasteland of the Mind: *The Hollowing* and *Ancient Echoes*," in *The Mythic Fantasy of Robert Holdstock: Critical Essays on the Fiction*, eds Donald E. Morse, Kálmán Matolcsy (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2011), 141-55, 153.
56. Senior, 'Quest fantasies', 199.
57. Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 125.