Tolkien™ in / Tolkien™ and Academia

David L. Dettman

In a recent article on Tolkien and Beowulf and modern reactions to both, Ruth Morse commented that "it has taken a long time to learn to read (Tolkien)" (Morse, 2004). She is talking about the academic community, and how important the polarization that occurred over Tolkien's popular works was in the culture wars of the late twentieth century. Times have changed significantly in the last two decades – from a point where many disparaged Tolkien's writing and viewed it is escapist, derivative, and having no place in English literature to a wide spread acceptance of his work as a legitimate subject of study.

There has always been a slow trickle of publications discussing Tolkien's works (See the numerous bibliographies listed in West, 2004 for a survey of academic publications on Tolkien). But in the last decade Tolkien's writings have seen a significant increase in academic discussion and publishing. This increase is in part due to the popularity of the films, but also because of the rise of a new generation of academics who grew up reading Tolkien and have ended up in the academic profession because of the inspiration of Tolkien's works. These scholars are much more willing to take Tolkien's works seriously and devote considerable efforts to understanding his fiction in relation to his scholarship and in relation to our reading of and reaction to ***The Lord of the Rings***. This trend has been aided by the great broadening of academic disciplines since the first publication of ***The Lord of the Rings***. English literature no longer focuses only on "serious literature" (whatever that may have meant) but it now encompasses many types of literature, and is much less concerned with evaluating the "quality" of a work,

but more with the uses of, reaction to, and micro-culture of a text.[1] There are also whole new disciplines – such as popular culture (or film studies) that not only see Tolkien as a legitimate topic, but view his writings as part of the core works in the canon they discuss.

The number of recent works on Tolkien in academic publishing is striking. A good half-dozen volumes of collected essays have appeared in the last four years, a new peer-reviewed[2] journal focusing exclusively on Tolkien has been started, and one of the old fan-journals (*Mythlore*) has recently made the jump to peer-reviewed status in a bid to increase the impact of articles it publishes. In addition there has been a sharp increase in the Tolkien-related articles in other journals. Many academics are no longer reluctant to discuss Tolkien. A good example of the new generation of academics willing to acknowledge Tolkien's popular writings as an important influence is Michel Drout, a specialist in Old English at Wheaton College. He tells the story of signing up for his first course in Old English because he recognized some of the terms used by the Rohirrim in the course description (Tolkien, ed. Drout, 2002, p. 3). I was almost a good example of this. I went through my undergraduate degree and an MA in History specializing in Medieval Scandinavian language and literature and English history. Then I got sidetracked due to the personal vicissitudes of employment and life, ending up in geochemistry. But throughout my life I have continued reading academic research in these areas, a lifetime interest nucleated by the love of Tolkien's writings.

But the study of Tolkien's works is not the only academic area that has undergone a huge expansion in publishing. All subjects have seen an increasing number of publications every decade in the post-World War II years, and it is not clear when this escalation will end. Some estimates have described the number of publications in the humanities as doubling every 20 years. Therefore if one is interested in the academic topics that were the focus of Tolkien's professional career (e.g. Germanic Philology), there is a lot more to read than in Tolkien's day. This is both good and bad. There is much more information easily available to the interested reader, who does not have the time, access or language skills to work with the original source materials. The downside of this publication explosion is relatively minor. It makes it harder to

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1. Shippey has a good discussion of the problem of JRRT's works in literary studies during the 1950s to 1980s in the Afterword to J.R.R. Tolkien, Author of the century.
2. Peer-review is a quality-control system where a paper is reviewed by other specialists in a field. It is standard practice in virtually all academic publications. I will use peer-review as a basic criterion for inclusion in this column.

sift through published material for what one is looking for, it has perhaps stifled creativity[3], and it has moved debates in academia from larger issues to minutiae.

Through this column, I will discuss and review recent academic publications in areas that are of interest to readers of Tolkien. Foremost, of course, will be Tolkien's writings as a topic of research and discussion. Secondarily I want to explore current academic work in the areas that Tolkien focused on during his life, medieval northern European history, philology, and folklore. In this case I will review a recent book or a limited group of texts that are accessible to the non-specialist reader who is willing to work a little. Finally there will also be columns that focus on particular academic journals, discussing their scope and recommending a few recent articles of interest.

In the limited space remaining I want to look at one of the most important recent developments in Tolkien scholarship. In 2004 West Virginia University Press launched ***Tolkien Studies: An Annual Scholarly Review.*** The journal, which produces one very nice (and moderately expensive) hardcover issue per year, is a project assembled by Douglas Anderson, Michael Drout, and Verlyn Flieger. This journal quickly became one of the primary venues for the publication of Tolkien scholarship, as the only journal singly devoted to his writings. The first three volumes have produced over 750 pages of mostly very exciting scholarship focused on Tolkien. This is an outlet for serious Tolkien research that was sorely needed, and the number and quality of papers shows that there was a pent up demand for this kind of journal. This time around we will look at Volume 1, which contains one Middle English text by Tolkien, seven articles, two bibliographies, and two short notes.

Of great interest to those who read Early English literature is "Sir Orfeo: A Middle English version by J. R. R. Tolkien," edited by Carl F. Hostetter. Although this small pamphlet had no indication of the author, Hostetter makes a convincing case that it is Tolkien's work. The date is a little uncertain, but it seems that sometime in the mid 1940s Tolkien prepared a 20 page pamphlet that presents his preferred version of the text of ***Sir Orfeo***. Only five copies of this pamphlet survive. The text, of course, follows manuscript versions of ***Sir Orfeo*** very

3. I have long wondered if Tolkien's notable ability to change the dominant trends in scholarship would have survived if he lived and worked in recent years. I suspect his spectacular creativity in both academic and popular writing would have been severely constrained if he worked in today's academic environment.

closely, but there are a number of differences between this text and the surviving manuscripts. Tolkien has returned the text to a south-eastern Middle English dialect, removing confusions and emendations introduced as the poem was transmitted through copyists speaking different dialects of Middle English, resulting in a poem that (if Tolkien's view of the history of the poem is accurate) "is closer to what must have been the original form of the poem than any of the three surviving manuscripts." The pamphlet was part of the English Literature course prepared by Tolkien in 1943 and 1944 for cadets in the British Navy. The version presented here is a useful document showing all points where Tolkien's interpretation of the text differs from other standard editions. Tolkien's modern English translation of ***Sir Orfeo*** is based on this text (with a few differences). For those of us not well versed in Middle English, the pairing of this text with Tolkien's translation is an excellent opportunity to try one's hand at reading Middle English poetry.

The excellent lead article is by Tom Shippey, "Light-elves, Dark-elves and Others: Tolkien's Elvish Problem." Although one may not always agree with some of his conclusions, Shippey's articles are always fun to read, very clear and free of jargon. Here he discusses the problem of what elves really are in Germanic mythology, and Tolkien's response to this problem. The true nature of elves is highly ambiguous in both Old English and Old Icelandic writings. In ***Beowulf*** and other Old English texts elves are not favored creatures, but are descended from and associated with evil. However, in the Old English lexicon and in names, there are very positive associations with elves. In Old Icelandic writings, especially Snorri Sturluson's ***Prose Edda***, elves are not described as evil or good. Actually very little is said about what elves are, although Snorri presents a rather elaborate classification of elves, designating Dark Elves, Light Elves, and Black Elves. Shippey discusses Tolkien's attempt to find consistency within the various manuscript traditions. As he often did in his mythic creation of Middle-earth Tolkien developed a much more ancient elvish tradition that would eventually evolve into the various manuscript traditions preserved in Northern Europe.

Almost any reader will find something of interest in this volume, as there is a wide range of topics and approaches. The remaining six articles and two notes discuss Tolkien's prose style, literary influences on his writing, his plans for unfinished works, and the reception his writings have received. Michael D. C. Drout's article, "Tolkien's prose style and its literary and rhetorical effects," is simultaneously concerned with stylistic and thematic parallels be-

tween parts of ***The Return of the King*** and Shakespeare's ***King Lear***, demonstrating Tolkien's sophistication in manipulation of styles, and defending Tolkien's style against the attacks of critics who believe Tolkien's writing is hackneyed and arbitrarily archaic. He examines Tolkien's rhetorical strategies in the confrontation between Eowyn and the Lord of the Nazgûl. Parallels between this passage and ***King Lear*** lead to a discussion of Denethor's madness and how various royal characters respond to despair in the Return of the King. Although Gergely Nagy's paper, "The adapted text: the lost poetry of Beleriand," is sometimes annoyingly difficult to read, it gives us an intriguing discussion of stylistic techniques hinting at verse precursors of prose passages of ***The Silmarillion***. Because Tolkien was familiar with early English prose redactions of older (now lost) poems, he was familiar with the poetic traces (alliteration, parallelism, poetic meter) they leave in prose rewritings of the stories. These poetic traces were embedded in many prose passages in ***The Silmarillion*** and are often marked by sudden changes in prose style.

Although many critics discount the value of the treasure-hunt that is literary source tracing in Tolkien's works, this kind of research is an awful lot of fun (I have done quite a bit myself) and we need a venue to publish the results. Fortunately ***Tolkien Studies*** cooperates with this need and publishes this type of work. Tolkien's reading was, of course, very wide-ranging and his use of the most obvious sources has been thoroughly discussed, so papers of this sort are difficult to present in an interesting way. The papers here are variable in success. Particularly notable is Mark T. Hooker's "Frodo's batman" which uses a few short stories inspired by English writers' World War I experiences to describe the position of an officer's batman. The pairing of a lower-class enlisted man as the personal attendant (i.e. servant) of an officer is a phenomenon of which the modern American has no experience and does not easily understand. However, this was one of the many aspects of the WWI experience that remained with Tolkien during the writing of ***The Lord of the Rings***, and it is important for the understanding of the master/servant upper class/working class relationship between Sam and Frodo during the long journey.

Ann Petty surveys the strong influence that the ***Kalevala*** had on Tolkien in the creation of the myth and legends of Middle-earth in "Identifying England's Lönnrot." She looks at Elias Lönnrot, the editor and compiler of the ***Kalevala***, as a model to emulate in Tolkien's collation and arranging of the material of the **Silmarillion**, at both writers' linguistic innovation, and

catalogues many parallels between plot features of the ***Kalevala*** and the ***Silmarillion***. She concludes with a discussion of how Tolkien's work tries to enter into the spirit of Nationalistic Folklore, the (sometimes) politically powerful nineteenth century idea that a people's character is derived from their myths, and a group with a legendary history should be an independent political entity. Although Tolkien's desire to "create a myth for England" has been described many times, I have always been uneasy with this idea as a true motivation for Tolkien. He was only too aware of the profound losses of pre-Christian myth and legend in northern Europe and his creation always seemed too personal and too full of philological in-jokes to fit this description. I won't deny that Tolkien's letters sometimes refer to this motivation, but I think Tolkien would have been profoundly uncomfortable with Petty's article which elevates Tolkien to an equivalent status with Elias Lönnrot.

Two short notes also propose possible sources for some of Tolkien's writing. Dale J. Nelson writes about Algernon Blackwood's short story "The Wendigo" as a possible source of some characteristics of the Nazgûl and their winged steeds. He also comments on a probable connection between the writing of Lord Dunsany and the poem "The Mewlips." Thomas Honegger also adds "A note on Beren and Lúthien's disguise as werewolf and vampire-bat," suggesting a source in the fourteenth century Middle English romance ***William of Palerne***.

Verlyn Flieger writes about what might have been if Tolkien had the time and inclination to finish his time-travel project which has seen very fragmentary publication as ***The Notion Club Papers*** in volume 9 of the ***History of Middle-earth***, **Sauron Defeated**. In her essay she describes the approach Tolkien developed to tie his ancient legends to the literature and history of ancient Britain and how these legends were to be preserved through racial memory and lineal bloodlines into the present. She succeeds in bringing together a number of relatively cryptic notes in the manuscript collection published by Christopher Tolkien and gives us a pretty good picture of where Tolkien wanted to take these stories.

Finally there is a fascinating article by Olga Markova, "When philology becomes ideology: The Russian perspective of J. R. R. Tolkien," on the development of Tolkien studies and fandom in the former Soviet Union. This short article describes the early translations and adaptations of ***The Lord of the Rings*** and the Soviet State's response to a growing Tolkien fan activity. She describes the tendency of translators in the 1990s to emphasize the power politics and use of brute force in the conflicts of ***The Lord of the Rings***. Although she cannot describe it

in detail, this article shows the power and importance of the translator in the reworking of Tolkien's world to into the issues and culture important to modern Russian readers.

Two Bibliographies finish out the volume. Douglas A. Anderson has compiled a listing of Tom Shippey's writings on Tolkien. And there is a bibliography of Tolkien criticism published in 2001 and 2002. This cumulative bibliography will become a regular feature in future issues of the journal.

This is a very auspicious beginning. The two issues of ***Tolkien Studies*** that have appeared since 2004 show that this new venue will continue to produce many interesting observations and ideas in the area of Tolkien studies.

Information on purchasing Tolkien Studies can be found on the West Virginia University Press web site: http://www.wvupress.com/journals/ . An individual subscription is $60 per single-issue volume, and $150 for three years. You may be able to request single articles through your local library's interlibrary loan. Electronic copies of the articles are available to some libraries through Project Muse.

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