Tolkien™ in / Tolkien™ and Academia

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*I*n October 2004, in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of ***The Fellowship of the Ring***, a conference was held at Marquette University, the location of the biggest collection of Tolkien manuscript material in the U.S.A. Twenty of the talks presented at this meeting have been published in a volume from Marquette University Press, ***The Lord of the Rings 1954-2004: Scholarship in honor of Richard E. Blackwelder.***[1] Dr. Blackwelder, who died in 2001, was a significant contributor to and supporter of the Tolkien Collection in the Marquette University Library. He also wrote numerous articles for ***Beyond Bree*** and produced the valuable ***A Tolkien Thesaurus*** (New York: Garland, 1990).

In many cases the papers in this collection are more casual in style than typical academic articles (such as those in ***Tolkien Studies***, Vol. 1, reviewed last issue), and because of this, the book is a more comfortable read. Reading through these essays reminded me of the discussions I used to participate in at American Tolkien Society or Mythopoeic Society meetings. Different topics, concerns, and many different opinions arose in those meetings, and the participation of people with various backgrounds kept the meetings unpredictable and (mostly) interesting. This volume is like that – significantly broader than your typical academic proceedings volume and based on a wider variety of issues. There is a good deal of high quality

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[1] Edited by Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2006).

discussion of literary facets of Tolkien's writings, of course, but there is an added theme in this book of "how we interact with Tolkien's writings." Maybe this is what makes this book so much fun to read and what reminded me of the old discussion groups, where we argued passionately about *The Lord of the Rings*[2] and worked on developing a personal connection to Middle-earth.

With 20 papers in this fiftieth anniversary celebration volume, I don't have room to discuss each one, so I will look at seven papers that really stood out for me. Most of the rest of the collection is quite good - only three or four of the articles are skippable. The volume is full of well-known names in Tolkien scholarship or in fandom. The authors are Charles B. Elston, Arne Zettersten, Tom Shippey, John Garth, Paul Edmund Thomas, John D. Rateliff, Christina Scull, David Bratman, Marjorie Burns, Jane Chance, Sumner Gary Hunnewell, Michael D.C. Drout, Matthew A. Fisher, Carl F. Hostetter, Mike Foster, Arden R. Smith, Verlyn Flieger, Douglas A. Anderson, Richard C. West, and Wayne G. Hammond.

*T*om Shippey (History in Words: Tolkien's Ruling Passion) gives us an eloquent meditation on dictionaries, word lists, and their importance in Tolkien's life and writing. I enjoy his writing, and this essay is fun to read because it is more discursive and evocative than the usual narrowly defined and methodically argued academic article. He looks at Tolkien's focus on the historical evolution of the Germanic languages and how etymology was one way in which Tolkien thought about literature and history. The essay opens with a simple but striking example of etymology by looking at the word 'fiction' in the major etymological dictionaries of the English Language, the ***Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*** and the ***Oxford English Dictionary*** *(OED)*. Fiction comes from the past participle of the Latin verb *fingere* "to mould or fashion" (*fictum*), which became *fiction* in French and was then borrowed into English. This seems very straightforward, but what is the cognate word in English? Cognate words are ones that developed from a single common ancestor but diverged at some point in the languages' histories. If Latin *fingere* developed along the Romance Language branch of the Indo-European language tree, what was the modern English result of parallel development on the Germanic language side? The rather surprising answer to this is the word "dough," which through the rules for historical sound

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[2] We didn't even have the Silmarillion back then.

changes can be related to Sanskrit *dhigh* "to smear," Latin *fingere,* Greek *thigganein* "to handle," and Old English *digan* "to knead." Tolkien spent a good deal of his life developing word histories like these, rethinking other scholars' etymologies, and examining the mythic and cultural implications of the details of language evolution and borrowing. Imagine for a moment being immersed, like Tolkien, in this language history - the history described above is for only two words, dough and fiction. The simple use of English would conjure vast histories with many intriguing distractions from the task at hand. Perhaps this is one reason why Tolkien worked so slowly on all projects except those involving the production of word lists or dictionaries.

Writing about the deep histories of words in the English language was not enough for Tolkien, and throughout his life he worked on inventing his own languages and working out the details of their intertwined etymological histories. These were also woven with the cultures and world of the speakers of the languages of Middle-earth. Just as Tolkien spent a large part of his academic career thinking about specific words and their meanings as they pass through ancient Germanic cultures, he invented rules of linguistic change, language histories, and the cultural background of language interaction in Middle-earth.

Shippey's essay then looks at grammarians and other characters with knowledge of ancient words in Tolkien's writings. This includes the interesting observation that Gollum can be thought of as "a kind of Tolkienian self-image." Like the etymologists, Gollum is from a clan "wise in old lore," he is "interested in roots and beginnings." But, of course, when Gollum burrowed down to the roots of the Misty Mountains, he found no new secrets – "nothing more to find out, nothing worth doing" in Gandalf's description. Shippey points out that Tolkien was aware of the dangers of focusing too much on language roots and that in his writing he maintained a balance between pure language history and the discussion and understanding of ancient literature (of both Medieval England and Middle-earth).

Shippey finishes out his essay by showing both how dictionaries can be used to study Tolkien's writing and how Tolkien used dictionaries. Richard Blackwelder, to whom the conference was dedicated, produced the ***Tolkien Thesaurus***, a concordance to ***The Lord of the Rings***, and Shippey uses this word-list to investigate Tolkien's use of the words "heathen," "wraith" and "goblin." He then looks at Sam's "Ninnyhammers! Noodles!" in the OED, in the ***Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology****,* and using his own etymological observations.

Similarly he discusses *dwimmerlaik* and related words in ***The Lord of the Rings***. The essay concludes with the hope that, although modern academic writing has tried to marginalize philology and has very narrowly defined what is appropriate in the study of literature, many people outside of academics have found the inspiration in Tolkien's writing to continue the study of topics dear to Tolkien's heart.

*I*n amongst quite a few nice literary studies of Tolkien's writing, there are three more that caught my attention. First, John Garth continues his exploration of the impact of World War I on ***The Lord of the Rings*** in "Frodo and the Great War." This essay focuses tightly on Frodo's experiences in ***The Lord of the Rings***, comparing it to other authors' writings on the trench warfare of the First World War. Using literature based on first-hand experience allows Garth to pick up on the inner thoughts and emotions (or lack of feeling) generated by the common experiences of many soldiers along the front. In the descriptions of Frodo's mental state and his interactions with Sam, there are impressive parallels with the reports of WWI veterans. The desperate reliance on camaraderie and moments of minor normalcy, the experience of shell-shock, and the ambiguous end of the war – with the unease about what was really accomplished – are all present in ***The Lord of the Rings***. Even many of the visual images and sounds experienced by soldiers in WWI have a disturbing presence in Middle-earth when they are pointed out to us.

In "Subversive Fantasist: Tolkien on Class Difference," Jane Chance tackles the knotty problem of class in Tolkien's writings. Many readers are distinctly uncomfortable with Sam and Frodo's relationship because of the class difference that is so obviously there. Chance points out the stereotypical portrayal of the classes and class-defining speech in the early chapters of ***The Lord of the Rings***, particularly among the hobbits, and then shows how Tolkien subverts the idea of fixed roles defined by class. In ***The Lord of the Rings***, Tolkien investigates and celebrates the character of the individual and how this can be transformed by inner resolve and strength. Thus Tolkien admits and formalizes class differences in Middle-earth, but individuals can move up (or down) the class scale. Invariably characters do not rise in class status because of class-driven ambition, but rather through inner character. "Attitude toward class status" can therefore become an interesting model by which readers can judge individual characters (in terms of class ambitions) and groups (in terms of how they accept

class mobility) in *The Lord of the Rings*.

The last literary study I want to mention is David Bratman's survey of the corrections (and errors that were never corrected) in *The Lord of the Rings*. In "The Artistry of Omissions and Revisions in *The Lord of the Rings*," Bratman looks at changes in the published text and how Tolkien used the revision process to improve *The Lord of the Rings* and to better integrate it into his legendarium. Many of the changes are minor, but working with these minor edits gives us an interesting view of how Tolkien viewed his writings. Tolkien was reluctant to change text after it had been published and let a number of obvious minor errors stand. In other cases, the changes he felt compelled to undertake show him working carefully with chronology, language history, character, and style when the opportunity for revision arose.

A very enjoyable and unusual part of this book are the three or four essays that are concerned with how we interact with Tolkien today. These are not essays one finds in the usual academic journals. "Elvish as She is Spoke" by Carl Hostetter is very well done and an important set of observations on attempts to learn and use Tolkien's Elvish languages (he calls this Neo-Elvish). He first looks at what the Elvish languages are in Tolkien's writings. They are a set of historically related languages for which the intertwined history has been worked out, and *examples* of the languages' histories are documented. Hostetter points out the unpleasant truth that one cannot learn Quenya or Sindarin from the material left by Tolkien; his work does not include a grammar and phrasebook. There are different schools of Neo-Elvish language teaching, and their approaches to the construction of spoken Quenya or spoken Sindarin are often incompatible. The languages are often over-regularized, skipping over the strong nouns or verbs that are so interesting to a language-historian like Tolkien. Various solutions to the problem of expanding the limited vocabulary present for these languages are discussed. (How do you say "car" or "television" or "e-mail" in Quenya?) But the most important point made by this article is that the attempts to use Tolkien's languages are based on the translation of English into Neo-Elvish. The problem with this is that non-English languages use different patterns of thought and different cultural assumptions to produce the same bit of language. To give an example from Japanese (the language on which I am currently working), I wouldn't say "pass the salt, please" in Japanese, but would use "can you please take the salt?" I suppose the rest of the sentence is just assumed ("and give it to

me"), but it is never said out loud. And there are many phrases that are required in Japanese, but that have no equivalent in English - if one goes to visit a friend, one says "I'm going to be a bother to you" when entering his/her house. We have to assume that the Elvish languages had very different ways of thinking and different cultural assumptions than that of American English in the late Twentieth Century. It may be fun to dabble in Neo-Elvish, but we have to admit that we are getting it wrong. I don't think that Tolkien would approve.

Mike Foster teaches a course in Tolkien at Illinois Central College, and in his essay, "Teaching Tolkien" he shares his approach to Tolkien in the classroom. It is interesting to see how one teacher approaches this body of work and the variety of exercises he gives to his classes. He is clearly a better teacher than I would be, allowing a wider range of approaches and appreciations of Tolkien's work that I would give credit for. (I am probably too narrowly focused on history and folklore.) It is also interesting to hear his criticisms of some classes at other institutions that have tried, with varying success, to respond to the recently revived interest in Tolkien's works.

Finally, Douglas A. Anderson looks at "The Mainstreaming of Fantasy and the Legacy of *The Lord of the Rings*." This essay rambles a little, but it contains a number of fascinating side-stories about Tolkien and early science fiction fandom. He gives us multiple versions of the story of Tolkien's acceptance of the International Fantasy Award at a luncheon after the 1957 Worldcon. Anderson looks at how *The Lord of the Rings* was initially received in the science fiction community and he challenges the common view that it was a poor seller until the paperback dispute in the U.S.A. Anderson argues that the modern legacy of *The Lord of the Rings* is multifaceted, and not all good. One particularly problematic facet is the development of "genre fantasy" which has become a huge source of income for publishers and has led to the recent wave of large amounts of unimaginative and derivative fantasy. While Tolkien cannot be blamed for this development, it can be traced directly to his financial success. A couple of Anderson's asides really caught my attention: he describes Vernor Vinge's 1967 short story, "The Accomplice," set in the 1990s, which "is about the surreptitious making of a film of *The Lord of the Rings*, using advanced computer animation, that wins for the filmmakers an Oscar." Also, in one of the footnotes, he muses on the importance of Midwestern America in Tolkien fandom, where there was a surprising amount of very early activity in both academia and fandom. This passage takes note of the early appearance of the *Minas Tirith Evening Star* as

we near our fortieth year of publication.

   The Lord of the Rings 1954-2004: Scholarship in Honor of Richard E. Blackwelder, edited by W. G. Hammond and C. Scull is available from Marquette University Press for $32 plus $3.50 for shipping. See www.marquette.edu/library/information/news/2006/ jrrt_proceedings for ordering information.

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