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Laughter in Middle-earth: Humour in and around the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien (2016) edited by Thomas Honegger and Maureen F. Mann

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Laughter in Middle-earth: Humour in and around the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien, edited by Thomas Honegger and Maureen F. Mann. Zurich and Jena: Walking Tree Publishers, 2016. x, 252 pp. \$24.30 (trade paperback) ISBN 9783905703351.

From Tom Shippey's foreword to Tim Kirk's closing cartoon, this is an insightful and entertaining anthology. In addition to the foreword, it comprises nine essays:

- Maureen F. Mann, " 'Certainly not our sense': Tolkien and Nonsense," 9-36;
- Alastair Whyte, "A Fountain of Mirth: Laughter in Arda," 39-57;
- Jennifer Raimundo, "Mirth's Might: The Tenacity of Humour in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien," 61-86;
- Łukasz Neubauer, "Plain Ignorance in the Vulgar Form: Tolkien's Onomastic Humour in *Farmer Giles of Ham*," 89-104;
- Laura Lee Smith, " 'This is of course the way to talk with dragons': Etiquette-Based Humour in *The Hobbit*," 107-132;
- Evelyn Koch, "Parodies of the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien," 135-151;
- Sherrylyn Branchaw, "Strategies of Humour in *The Stupid Ring Parody*," 155-177;
- Davide Martini, "Humour in Art Depicting Middle-earth," 179-209;
- Jared Lobdell, "Humour, Comedy, the Comic, Comicality, Puns, Wordplay, 'Fantastication', and 'English Humour' in and around Tolkien and His Work, and among the Inklings: a Recollection on humour in Tolkien's coterie," 213-242.

In keeping with the theme of the book, there are humorous drawings by Anke Katrin Eissman, Tim Kirk, Jef Murray, Ted Nasmith, Chris Riddell, Graeme Skinner, Ulla Thynell, Kay Woollard, and Patrick Wynne.

Shippey's "Foreword" points deftly to each of the other essays, but does so in the course of drawing conclusions of its own about Tolkien and humor, along with: observations about the laughter of Brynhild over the weeping of Gudrún and that of Ragnar Lodbrog in the snake-pit; a reminiscence of other Old Edwardians laughing at his own breaking a leg in a rugby match; and discussion of the "emotional complexity" of scenes like Sam's homecoming at the end of *The Return of the King* (1) and his conversation about story with Frodo on the Stairs of Cirith Ungol in *The Two Towers* (5).

Mann's essay is a revision of a paper given at the Tolkien Society's Return of the Ring Conference in 2012 and published in the proceedings of that conference, edited by Lynn Forest-Hill (2016). The chapter thoughtfully and illuminatingly applies studies of Nonsense as a genre—particularly Roderick McGillis's entry under that title in *A Companion to Victorian Poetry* (2002), edited by Richard

Cronin, Alison Chapman and Anthony H. Harrison, but also Barthes, Chesterton and Orwell, among others—to several threads in Tolkien’s work, principally language creation, *Farmer Giles of Ham*, *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* and *The Hobbit*. To take one example, she points out that Tolkien’s play with and pleasure in the pure sound of linguistic invention mirrors the role of delight in Nonsense noted in varying ways by McGillis and other critics; on the other hand, unlike McGillis’s Victorians, Tolkien associates nonsense with nursery rhymes and other parts of the “folk tradition” (17), and thus also with the transmission and decay of ancient texts. Other elements of the genre which do find representation in Tolkien’s corpus include parody and ridicule; “delight in things of the body” (19, quoting McGillis 163); interest in names; a dual audience of child and adult; and play with meaning.

Alastair Whyte’s essay argues that the presence of laughter in the legendarium “functions as a signifier of . . . spiritual or moral conflict, the limitations of worldly power and, most importantly, Tolkien’s central theme, the inevitability of change” (40), whether or not the laughing characters are conscious of this significance. In the area of spiritual conflict, beginning with the laughter of Tulkas, good characters laugh openly in defiance of evil, rejecting “universal final defeat” (43, quoting “On Fairy-stories” 153). The laughter of Melkor and other evil characters, on the other hand, connotes dissembling and deception. Under the heading of the limitations of power, Bombadil laughs at the Ring, while Imrahil’s laughter at the idea of attacking the Morannon, though meant “sardonically” (47), indicates something different to the reader. Laughter accompanies momentous change when Bilbo surrenders the Ring and in Gandalf’s demeanor after its destruction, but can also signify false certainty about the future, as with Denethor’s laughing in despair at black sails on the Anduin or the Lord of the Nazgûl’s triumphant laughter in the gate of Minas Tirith. Whyte juxtaposes the latter with Dernhelm’s laughter on confronting Angmar, laughter which “openly exposes the weakness of evil . . . negates its power and . . . obliterates certainty,” combining all three significations.

Raimundo’s chapter highlights three aspects of mirth in Tolkien’s work: protection, discovery, and victory. The first is exemplified not only by the simple humor of the Shire but also by Bombadil and (in *The Hobbit*, at least) the “warbling” (69) elves of Rivendell. The discovery that comes from mirth is preeminently self-discovery, the ability to laugh at oneself, key in *Farmer Giles*, *Leaf by Niggle* and *Smith of Wootton Major* as well as in the legendarium. Finally, mirth aids in victory in three ways: Tolkien frequently, Raimundo points out, associates laughter with *making a decision* (whether for ill, as with Fëanor laughing at the Kinslaying, or for good, as when his niece refuses the Ring and remains Galadriel); laughter also *strengthens for battle*, with examples ranging from Tulkas to the despairing Éomer; and finally, laughter provides hope and

healing. In a final section, Raimundo notes that none of these things is a virtue inherent in laughter—even Melkor could laugh, she observes: rather, these are the characteristics of laughter which grows out of an innate goodness that knows “Joy beyond the walls of this world” (85, quoting “On Fairy-stories” 175).

Neubauer provides a narrower and more textually-focused argument in his discussion of the humor of names in *Farmer Giles*. There are, he suggests, four overlapping major categories: “pseudo-classical reframing, replication of reality, semantic reversal and false etymology” (92). The title character, Ægidius Ahenobarbus Julius Agricola de Hamo, clearly exemplifies the first of these—but that same string of names also illustrates the second. Ægidius, Latinized from Greek *Aigidios* “bearer of the aegis” is appropriate to his role as defender, and while “Agricola” describes his occupation as a farmer, “Julius Agricola” refers us to the Roman general who shaped the province of Britannia, and “Ahenobarbus” (red-beard) invokes Frederick I Barbarossa—both of these well-matched to Giles’s character as a dynast. His “overanxious” dog, Garm (97; Old Norse *garmr*, “rags, tatters”) illustrates reversal when compared to his namesake, the cerberus of Hel. False etymology shows up in names like “Worminghall,” imagined as “Hall of the Wormings,” deriving from a translation of *Aula Draconis*, rather than from the historically recorded Wermelle, from the proper name **Wyrmas* + *healh*, Wyrma’s Nook. (Neubauer points out that “false etymology” is itself an oxymoron, inasmuch as “etymology” is the study of the “true” meaning of a word, from Gk. *etymos*, “true, real actual.”)

Smith’s chapter is by way of an extended refutation of the claim that *The Hobbit* “is a book about good manners for children” (108, citing David Stevens and Carol Stevens, *J. R. R. Tolkien: The Art of the Myth-Maker* (1993), 65). In fact, the book “primarily subverts ordinary forms of politeness for humorous effect” (108). With apt comparisons to *Through the Looking Glass*, *The Princess and the Goblin*, *Winnie-the-Pooh* and *The Marvellous Land of Snergs*, she demonstrates that “Tolkien’s presentations of etiquette . . . are not simple one-size-fits-all applications of rules of custom and courtesy, but instead, comically and subversively, they show that manners can and do change to fit different circumstances and different purposes” (129). The greatest difference about Tolkien’s picture of etiquette, Smith comments, is his “Realpolitick . . . in Tolkien’s world, as in our own, the powerful have far less need of politeness” (130). I would quibble with one point in the essay. Smith argues that Bilbo, in addressing the dragon as “Lord Smaug,” is reducing him to the younger son of a peer—one might point to Lord David [Cecil] and Lord Peter [Wimsey] as examples of the rule she has in mind. But not *everything* about *The Hobbit* is anachronistic, after all, and medieval usage permitted “lord” in a number of other contexts, even “the lord King” and “the lord Pope”: so I am not entirely persuaded that Bilbo is being quite so elaborately “ironic” (125).

Koch's essay surveys generally the field within which Branchaw makes a very specific analysis. Beginning with (and eventually circling back to) a 2016 video of a flyting-like rap battle between Tolkien and George R. R. Martin, Koch considers representative cases of the wide variety of forms of Tolkien parody, from Beard and Kenney's *Bored of the Rings* (1969) down to a number of things produced in the last decade; the intention is not to provide an exhaustive list, and Koch refers the reader not only to Branchaw's chapter but also to David Bratman's article *s.v.* "Parodies" in the Drout *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia* (2007). Broadly speaking, Koch divides parodic strategies between the textual and the social. In the former category belong parodies which play against the plot, e.g. by diminishing Tolkien's evil characters (as when French and Saunders put a Ringwraith on a "tiny pony," 141) or make the quest mundane or absurd (e.g., *Sesame's Street's Lord of the Crumbs*, featuring Cookie Monster), as well as those which play off of Tolkien's invented names (already in 1969 we had Moxie, Pepsi, Arrowroot son of Arrowshirt, and Tim Benzedrine, among others), his moral standards (Koch cites *Lord of the Weed—Sinnlos in Mitteleerde*, a marijuana-fueled redubbing of segments from the Jackson movies, and the slash fan fiction humor of Cassandra Claire's *Very Secret Diaries*), or even just his seriousness—witness Erwin Beekveld, "They're Taking the Hobbits to Isengard," a merely silly loop of (mostly) that single Orlando Bloom line from *The Two Towers* accompanied by an upbeat techo version of Howard Shore's score. Social parodies, on the other hand, play against "the conventions of a genre and the literary style of a text" (145)—one example being the Saunders and French show already cited, another Harry Aspinwall's *Orcs of New York* Facebook page.

Branchaw turns our attention to a self-acknowledgedly obscure topic—an on-line parody of *The Lord of the Rings* which was taken down in 2012 and is now to be found only in copies on the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine (e.g., at <http://web.archive.org/web/20120615232357/http://www.stupidring.com/parody/index.html>). Noting "in *prateritio* mode" (156) the wide variety of comic techniques involved in the 300,000 word parody, she chooses two particular topics: "its structure in relationship to its sources, including Tolkien's writings, the New Line Cinema films, *Lord of the Rings* fan culture, and the parody itself; and the metafictional devices of humour employed in the parody" (157). The parody, organized into six books like the novel and more or less following Tolkien's plot rather than Jackson's, is actually written as screenplay, to that degree resembling the movies. This "schizophrenic indecision" (157) means that the parody includes interactions between "the characters of *The Lord of the Rings*; the film actors; the film crew; fictional narrators; the authors of the web parody; and ad hoc characters" (158). Thus, too, lines labelled, e.g., 'Frodo' are sometimes proper to the hobbit hero, sometimes to Elijah Wood, and sometimes to a character in a web parody—leading to humor based on "category mistakes,"

as when ‘Faramir’ receives news of his brother’s death with the observation that at least he will be able to “make a killing selling Boromir’s merchandise on Ebay” (159). The parody derives humor from the books by, for example, appealing to the reader’s familiarity with (sometimes obscure) parts of the text, for instance by having Legolas Greenleaf object to that reduplicative nomenclature, only to provoke Merry to insist on being “Kalimac Brandagamba,” Sam, “Banazir Galbasi,” and Frodo, “Froda.” The films provide opportunities for jokes precisely by their variations from the novel, as when both Glorfindel and Arwen come to save Frodo, and argue over who should do so. Claire’s film-based *Very Secret Diaries*, mentioned above, provides one of many fannish resources for the parody, while any number of running jokes allow the parody to feed on itself—thus Merry’s canonical purchase of a house for Frodo in Crickhollow gets inflated into a recurring theme of his career as a real estate developer.

Branchaw discusses metafictional devices in the parody under three headings: “strategies,” in which the characters refer to the methods of the parody, for instance by complaining that they’ve lost track of a running joke; “competition,” in which the parody plays with the schizophrenic polyvalence of the characters, as when “the actors/characters threaten to shoot the narrators if they don’t comply with their wishes” (172); and “suspension of disbelief,” in which the authors violate Tolkien’s point, from “On Fairy-stories,” about preserving the reader’s secondary belief in Faërie—for instance by having one character reflect that another is too important to the plot to die, or by reminding the reader that the parody is not finally bound by either the novel or the films, or even by protesting their own parody (as when “the Rohirrim go on strike because their losses in battle have been treated with too much callousness by the film-makers/parody writers” 174, citing *Stupid Ring* III.8). Ultimately, Branchaw concludes, the parody is both “a tribute” to the books and films and “a monument to the creativity and devotion of Tolkien’s fans” (176).

Davide Martini’s copiously illustrated essay is, despite its more general title, predominantly about *Hobbit*-related art. *The Silmarillion*, he points out, offers little opportunity for humorous illustration. He gives a brief overview of *Lord of the Rings* art from Tim Kirk and Frank Frazetta down to Roger Garland and John Howe, but notes again that after, say, the Bombadil chapters (illustrated by the Hildebrandts) there is not very much material in the novel for the comic artist. *The Hobbit*, on the other hand, has attracted all sorts of amusing art, though Tolkien himself disapproved of this, commenting on the work of Virgil Finlay “As long (as seems likely) he will leave humour to the text and pay reasonable attention to what the text says, I expect that I shall be quite happy” (191, quoting Anderson’s *The Annotated Hobbit*, 154). Martini observes that illustrators of *The Hobbit* after Tolkien himself “shift the focus from the text to the graphic representation of the characters and settings” (192). He comments on a number of

depictions of Bilbo, but focuses particularly on images of Gollum, whom Tolkien leaves largely undescribed in the 1937 *Hobbit*, giving rise to “a tradition that takes great liberties with the text when it comes to portraying Gollum” (195). He points to work of (among others) Torbjörn Zetterholm (1947), Richard Horus Engels (1946, 1954), Jan Młodożeniec (1960) and Ferguson Dewar (1964), in all of which Gollum (and, when present, Bilbo) are drawn in a playful “caricature” style (199), though the scenes presented are not themselves funny. After about 1970, Martini comments, *samizdat* publication meant that the U.S.S.R. (and, later, Russia) became a center of *Hobbit* illustration, and he offers another baker’s dozen of “whimsical” illustrations from that milieu. He concludes that “neither the availability of fuller descriptions of the protagonists’ appearance nor the influence of Peter Jackson’s movies has been able to uproot the persistent strain of humorous and often quite idiosyncratic pictures” (208).

Lobdell’s essay closes the collection with work by a senior Tolkien scholar, the Jebel Musa to Shippey’s Gibraltar: and Lobdell’s capacity for recondite allusion (of more or less that sort) makes his chapter somewhat resistant to abstraction (so to speak: he is also fond of wordplay). It appears to me that the editors may have set what was originally the first paragraph of the essay as though it *were* an abstract, and various subheadings throughout the essay are all presented typographically as equal, though the text suggests that some are actually (or at least arguably) subordinate to others.

Lobdell begins by defining “comedy,” “comic,” “comicality,” “English humour” and the “Tolkienian pun”—the last of these being a pun based on philology or the etymological sense of a word, “the exact application of an original exact meaning of a word now often otherwise used” (219). He offers “The Tale of Years” (punning on “tale” = “story” and “tale” = “tally, reckoning”) as one example: though the OED dates the latter, numeric, sense only to 1200, the former, narrative one, to at least 1000, somewhat contrary to Lobdell’s comment that the numeric is “an original meaning” (215). The central section of the essay discusses humor amongst the Inklings, chiefly Lewis, Coghill and Dyson, though with the occasional “detour” (221; in that case into the wit of Williams’s rhyming account of the coming of Palomides from *Taliessin through Logres*). Lobdell glances at clerihevs (and offers several of his own in an appendix), Lewis’s nonsense poem “Awake, My Lute!”, reports of Coghill’s humorous plays and of Dyson’s table-talk, Lord David Cecil’s “English humor” in his biography of Max Beerbohm, satire in John Wain’s poetry, and Lewis’s mockery of *Irene Iddesleigh* before circling back to Tolkien’s *Mr. Bliss*, which has similarities to a boyhood story of St. Philip Neri, himself a “joking saint” (234), and so finally to two observations about *The Lord of the Rings*. The first of these is that the novel has, if not humor, comedy, comicality or the comic—nor “even jokes” (236)—it does have verbal wit, e.g. in Merry’s description of himself as “a small rag-tag

dangling behind” Gandalf (236, citing *Lord of the Rings* 193: the latter page number appears to be a typo), and perhaps even comicality in such things as the fact that “Gollum bites off more than he can chew” (236). The second is the wordplay inherent in the story’s having four endings, presented to us out of sequence: Sam’s homecoming (1031), properly the end of the novel itself; Arwen’s death (1063), the end of the story of Arwen and Aragorn; the final note in the Redbook about Legolas and Gimli (1081), and the entry in the Tale of Years for their departure (1098)—together the end of the story of the Fellowship.

The anthology would have benefited from somewhat tighter editing. Rayner Unwin’s name is spelled “Raynor” on the back cover; bibliographies sometimes list Tolkien by full name and sometimes by initials (and once as ‘John Ronal,’ 104); urls are sometimes set off by < and >, but occasionally the reverse; and there are scattered problems with syntax, tense and punctuation. The volume also follows the convention of spacing between every paragraph, without indentation: a practice which seems to me to create confusion after block quotations, and to make it difficult to tell when authors mean to make something more than a paragraph break, the significance which such extra spacing until recently had.

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