2017

Tolkien in the New Century: Essays in Honor of Tom Shippey (2014), edited by John Wm. Houghton, Janet Brennan Croft, Nancy Martsch, John D. Rateliff, and Robin Anne Reid

Gergely Nagy
Independent Scholar, bwglamorak@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch

Part of the Modern Literature Commons

Tolkien in the New Century. Essays in Honour of Tom Shippey, edited by John Wm. Houghton, Janet Brennan Croft, Nancy Martsch, John D. Rateliff and Robin Anne Reid. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2014. viii, 260 pp. $29.95 (trade paperback). ISBN 9780786474387. [Also available in kindle e-book format.]

It is perhaps not the function of a *festschrift* to deal in big conclusions and supply solutions, but to present little ones, maybe with suggestions of something larger. Connecting to the interests and fields of the *laudant*, such volumes need to show them what their work made possible. Tom Shippey has been (and still is) an enabler for all of us in Tolkien Studies: author of the seminal *The Road to Middle-earth* (first published in 1983) and countless insightful articles, he is the veritable pope of the field. The many editors of *Tolkien in the New Century* doubtless set out to produce a volume of this kind to honour Shippey's work. The result, however, is a somewhat mixed collection, ranging from the somewhat perplexing to the pleasantly stimulating.

The editors of the volume grouped the papers in five big parts. The first of these, "Memoirs," contains not essays proper but fond memories of how the contributors first met Shippey and/or his work. The first of these, John R. Holmes's "Counseling the *Scippigræd*: How T.A. Shippey Taught Us to Read," sets the tone for the whole part: playful as ever, Holmes coins the term "*Scippigræd*" on the model of Alfred (Ælf-ræd) for all of us who are "advised by Shippey." This nice philological joke turns into Holmes's own advice about how to become like Shippey—demonstrating that it is indeed practically impossible today. The rest of the section, including contributions by David Bratman, Todd Jensen, Jessica Yates and John W. Houghton, presents more personal memories about Shippey's role in the writer's careers, in Tolkien fandom, or of a particularly memorable talk. The only other author who veers slightly away from the personal note is E.L. Risden, whose "Tom Shippey and a Few New Leaves on Some Old Roots and Branches" goes on to talk about the volume collecting Shippey's shorter papers, *Roots and Branches* (2007). And that also sets the tone: here too we'll have the roots and branches growing out of what Tom Shippey did for us.

The second section, "Answering Questions," connects to concerns in Tolkien's work that have occupied Shippey too, and contain two of the best papers of the collection. Robert T. Tally, Jr.'s "Places Where the Stars Are Strange: Fantasy and Utopia in Tolkien's Middle-earth" uses the genre of utopia to revisit the theoretical argument about why fantasy is inferior to science fiction, purporting to show how the theoretical bias that privileges science fiction can very easily be disrupted. This is a very welcome argument, or would be, if it went beyond the usual critical commonplaces and topics (machine vs. magic, good-and-evil), and if others, particularly Shippey himself, had not made essentially the same argument before. Even allowing for Shippey's own avoidance of explicitly theoretical arguments and

terminology, and Tally's bringing in Frederic Jameson alongside Darko Suvin, I think we should take the next step: engage properly with the ideology of realism, lurking behind all the critical scruples with fantasy. There is no "fantastic" in the 20th-century sense without reference to realism, and the critical disdain against "magic," "metaphysics," or "the past" in general are all reactions to the fantastic's refusal to meet those artistic, critical and philosophical standards. Tolkien's work is in fact ideal for deconstructing the ideologically determined buzzwords by showing how all of these *and the stories and texts they are represented in* are historically embedded, culturally dependent constructs, and what Tolkien is about is exactly how stories and text build up the contexts that then privilege certain concepts and not others. Similarly, instead of just saying that "Tolkien's writings include very little actual magic" (47), we should finally admit there is *no magic at all* in Tolkien (not in the cultural historical sense anyway; this anticipates another essay in the volume, by Kristine Larsen); instead of merely saying "The real value of utopia lies . . . in the ways that it enables us to imagine radical alternatives to the present society" (53), we need to point out how non-realistic fiction (which would include both fantasy and science fiction) simply emphasises the departure from realism, and looks to the past (fantasy) or the future (science fiction), but remain fictions about stories and their uses. This essay is a perfect starting point for all this.

Verlyn Flieger's "The Jewels, the Stone, the Ring, and the Making of Meaning" is another excellent starting point for going further. With her usual eloquence and a detailed background in the creative history, Flieger traces how the Silmarils, the Arkenstone and the Ring work in Tolkien's writings as metaphors of light and meaning. However, I cannot help but find the pervasive reference to Tolkien's "intention" and "meaning" somewhat outdated. "The Silmarils are not a perfect representation of what I believe Tolkien was trying to accomplish" (76) is a conclusion that sums up this attitude. "If the light of the Silmarils is so holy, why do they have such a negative impact?" (67), asks Flieger; but isn't this like asking how God can allow evil if He's so good, or if the Flame Imperishable is so good, how come Melkor's desire for it brings about so much evil? It should be no surprise that the clearest light (meaning) leads to desire of appropriation (the darkest stage of interpretation?); this is not incongruent at all, it is just contrary to a strictly "religious" interpretation where all that is expected (and imagined) in the face of the holy is adoration. Even in "Ainulindalë," this is explicitly not the case, because the Valar are expected to "show forth [their] powers in adorning [Ilúvatar's] theme, *each with his own thoughts and devices, if he will*" (*The Silmarillion* 15, emphasis mine). I see no incongruence in Tolkien's varied and shaded, yet insistent depiction of how this "totality of meaning" can be desired and appropriated, and *that* leads to evil. Flieger's argument is, as usual with her, rich in suggestions: one can argue with it, develop it, and this is exactly how new steps are taken in interpretation. Nevertheless, I would warn against an overly heavy emphasis on Tolkien's "message"—because I think if we insist on

expecting a clear-cut and moralising/didactic message, we are in fact doing a disservice to Tolkien.

The three remaining papers in this section deal with various interesting Tolkien connections from the influence of 19th-century illustration to the Old English appositive style. In between we have E. L. Risden's "Middle-earth and the Waste Land: Greenwood, Apocalypse, and Post-War Resolution," which turns to a parallel with the great modernist canon Shippey also suggested: T. S. Eliot and the "mythical method" employed in "The Waste Land." The conclusion that "both writers foreground the private and public creation of language and landscape to address post-war issues of loss, responsibility, and power" (58), again, seems to me a very good starting point to going further and examining the "mythic mode" of modernist expression as opposed to the "mythopoesis" seen in Tolkien's (and other fantasists') work. Cultural history is also invoked in Nancy Martsch's "The 'Lady with the Simple Gown and White Arms' *or* Possible Influences of 19th and Early 20th Century Book Illustrations on Tolkien's Work," where parallels are drawn between the illustrative work of Lancelot Speed (*Red Fairy Book*) and some of Tolkien's important female characters, Goldberry, Arwen, Galadriel and Éowyn. But the conclusion that "when pressed to describe his beautiful ladies, [Tolkien] fell back on—not the medieval dress of his professional study, nor the styles contemporary with the writing of *The Lord of the Rings*—but the 'lady with the simple gown and white arms' from the book illustrations of his childhood" (37) is admittedly somewhat thin and not clearly provable. Even if it was, though—what do we gain if we proved that some of Tolkien's important female characters, frequently accused of being sketchy and stereotypical, are based (visually) on an equally sketchy and stereotypical depiction from the 19th century? Yet again, a starting point is offered here for a much wider research in art history and its cultural historical context, since these "stereotypical" representations are themselves culturally and historically embedded: and examining that could very well provide interesting results. In a sense, Leslie Stratyner's "Tolkien and Apposition" goes further and examines how the Old English appositive style informs Tolkien's writing. Apart from stylistic elements, Stratyner also discusses Gollum as apposition, being the "shadow side" of both Bilbo and Frodo, anticipating the other article in the collection that deals with Gollum, also from the Old English point of view: Yvette Kisor's " 'Poor Sméagol.'"

The book's third part, "Philological Inquiries," brings up questions of language and related concepts that can strongly be tied to the type of innovative philological interpretation of Tolkien that Shippey pioneered. Here John R. Holmes's "Keeping Counsel: Advice in Tolkien's Fiction" expands Gildor's advice from *The Lord of the Rings* (and Frodo's proverbial reaction to it, "go not to the Elves for advice") in characteristically Holmes-ian syntactic and etymological ways as part of a larger examination of advice in Tolkien. The essay is shot through with the same witty and loving jokes and asides that coined the term "*Scippigræd*" in the "Memoirs" section; the conclusion that

"in the characters who offer advice [in *The Lord of the Rings*], Tolkien builds an inverse relationship between real authority and willingness to dispense counsel" (94) again contains one of Tolkien's most central concepts, *authority* (with a twist, we could add *authorship*) as focus for further inquiries. More philological than Holmes's, however, is Jason Fisher's paper, "Tolkien's Wraiths, Rings and Dragons: An Exercise in Literary Linguistics." Fisher follows in the footsteps of Peter Gilliver and his co-authors in *The Ring of Words*, and gathers together another ring of words which show how Tolkien's words and word choices might bring into play a lot of uncertain etymological connections that are still very meaningful (but less "demonstrable" than most of what Shippey worked with). This very well-documented paper (I wonder why Gilliver et al.'s work is not referenced more, especially since they have a separate section about "Withywindle" too: *Ring of Words* 218-19) revisits some of Shippey's own work on "wraith" and "wríðan," "Smaug," "Sméagol" and "sméogan," but adds and digresses freely, not quite coalescing into Shippey's rigorous philological-interpretive reasonings, but nevertheless illustrating a closely-knit *relatedness* in the words discussed.

Words feature in another sense in B.S.W. Barootes's " 'He Chanted a Song of Wizardry': Words with Power in Middle-earth," which is an interesting analysis of songs and powerful words in Tolkien with the help of Northrop Frye's great structuralist typologies, specifically Giambattista Vico's model of the historical phases of human language as used by Frye in *The Great Code*. The terms **"**hieroglyphic," "hieratic," "descriptive" (also "metaphoric," "metonymic," "demotic") (117) remind one of Owen Barfield's theories of language and the use Verlyn Flieger made of them in *Splintered Light*: they are interesting items of cultural history, finds in the archaeology of linguistic inquiry, of ways of trying to make sense of language and its change. One all the more expects to see the next step: "metaphoric" and "metonymic" are also important and meaningful concepts among the psychoanalytically charged theoretical terms of Jacques Lacan and especially Julia Kristeva. I think Tolkien studies have much to gain from looking at language as represented in Tolkien not only in historical, cultural historical and philological, but also in theoretical terms.

Few things show this better than Yvette Kisor's essay " 'Poor Sméagol': Gollum as Exile in *The Lord of the Rings*," in the fourth section of the volume (entitled "The True Tradition"). Here Kisor looks at how the Anglo-Saxon concept of "exile" (prominent in Old English poetry, especially the elegies, but also to be found in *Beowulf*) can be used to describe Gollum. "Exile is fundamental to Tolkien's concept of both Elves and Men," writes Kisor, and goes on to say that "for Gollum his Ring, his Precious, takes the place of king or homeland in the *comitatus* relationship" (154)—an especially interesting remark since Sauron's giving of rings as an act of ensnaring and deception ironizes exactly this Anglo-Saxon relation that the act of ring-giving usually represents. Tolkien's use of "wretch(ed)" for Gollum reflecting Old English *wrecca* is a telling point (156), although I think Gollum's speech "as a kind of

analogue to poetic formulae" (154) is somewhat farfetched (would it be possible to look at Gollum's speech as Shippey looked at Bombadil's—examining its metrics and formulaics?). The essay, however, falls into two distinct parts as Kisor starts examining this speech, including a very good survey of critical opinions about it: Gollum's use of pronouns "separates him from the rest of the world," goes the conclusion, and "his unusual use of referential language suggests a state of mind perhaps [more associated with] the modernist notion of alienation" (163). This last point (as Kisor admits) is less about Old English exile than (again) the cultural historical context of Tolkien's concepts and images, and could easily serve as a point of departure towards examining his relation to modernism's governing concepts (as with Risden's paper).

In the same section, John D. Rateliff's "Inside Literature: Tolkien's Explorations of Medieval Genres" offers a parallel argument to C. S. Lewis's observation that Tolkien "had been inside language": Rateliff argues on the basis of how Tolkien's shorter and non-Middle-earth poems relate to medieval forms and poems that he had been inside literature too. This extremely well-documented (31 longish notes), very compact paper is one of the longest in the collection, but is nevertheless a very pleasant read. So is Marjorie Burns's "Night-wolves, Half-trolls and the Dead Who Won't Stay Down," originally a keynote address to the Vermont Tolkien conference, in which she leads the reader through some of Tolkien's lesser-commented Scandinavian motifs like the *varg*s (incidentally, Old Norse *vargr* is roughly synonymous with Old English *wrecca* in meaning "outlaw," demonstrating the thematic connections that draw Tolkien's work together), trolls and skin-changers as well as the "afterwalkers" (definitely not invented by G.R.R. Martin). John B. Marino's paper, "The Presence of the Past in *The Lord of the Rings*" is, however, one where one does not see either a new point or a suggested point of departure. "The past had had a mystique for quite some time" (169), goes its somewhat banal opening sentence; and the paper itself delivers a not very deep enumeration of things, places, people, and objects that "invoke" the past in *The Lord of the Rings*. All of these, *and* the suggested continuity, *and* the attached nostalgia has been dealt with by other scholars (among them, Shippey) long ago and in more detail.

The last section of the collection introduces "Perspectives from Outside the Cycle." Here Kristine Larsen's paper, " 'Alone between the Dark and Light': 'The Lay of Autrou and Itroun' and Lessons from the Later Legendarium' returns to the question of magic in Tolkien's works, producing (based on Tolkien's remarks in his letters) a neat little typology of Art vs. Domination, Effect vs. Enchantment (230). The consistent claim that the evil instances (what Tolkien terms *goetia* as opposed to the artful *magia*) are connected to the idea of knowledge (225) and power (226) are especially useful as points of departure. "Magic" in Tolkien (as I indicated above) is a question that should have its definitive treatment—not only from a critical-theoretical point of view, and neither from Tolkien's own religious

understanding, but synthesizing conceptions of magic from cultural and religious history with critical theory. As Arthur C. Clarke observed, "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic" anyway: these are aspects of representing exactly power, knowledge, the relations to them and their effects in the fictional worlds. Power and knowledge (Michel Foucault's work is crying out to be applied here) are therefore concepts that could be used in interrogating how the "metaphysical hierarchy" of Middle-earth works, and how Tolkien's representation of it creates the effect of "magic" as part of his larger theme of producing a complex representation of culture and cultural history.

Richard C. West's " 'Lack of Counsel Not of Courage': J.R.R. Tolkien's Critique of the Heroic Ethos in *The Children of Húrin*" is, sadly, little more than a postscript to his own "Túrin's *Ofermod*" (in *Tolkien's Legendarium*), continuing its argument, and in some sense connecting to Stratyner's on the appositive style: West suggests that the minor characters and their stories can be seen as the "digressions in the *Children of Húrin*" (as the famous digressions in *Beowulf*) to comment on the main character's virtues and flaws (which sometimes happen to be, tragically, the same thing). David L. Dettman's piece, "Väinämöinen in Middle-earth: the Pervasive Presence of the *Kalevala* in the Bombadil Chapters of *The Lord of the Rings*" is somewhat more problematic. Dettman goes to great length (literally) with a lot of paraphrase, unnecessary quotation and the reiteration of all *Kalevala*-related biographical details, to claim that the early influence of the *Kalevala* was "inherited by *The Lord of the Rings*" (199). But the evidence presented is not very strong: for instance, that both Tom Bombadil and Väinämöinen are said to be "old" (202) and "singers" (207), or the supposed verbal parallels (208), or that Bombadil's "little realm" echoes the *Kalevala*'s "small-scale, forested environment . . . ahistorical and . . . removed from both modern and nineteenth-century Finnish culture" (212), going as far as suggesting that Rivendell, Fangorn, and Lórien are also *Kalevala*-reprises. While Lönnrot and his work certainly influenced Tolkien (a point that Shippey himself also made long ago), I find the "parallels" here very unconvincing on the whole.

The book, as can be seen, offers various themes and views, from well-known to less-known scholars, from larger conceptions to more minute details, and a lot of interesting points of departure that show how Shippey's work or his concerns and interests are productive in the second (and third, and fourth) generation of Tolkien scholars after him. The easy reading of the volume, however, is made infinitely more difficult by its placing the endnotes to each chapter to the most annoying place possible, directly after the chapter. Each set of notes is followed by the paper's "Works Cited," but these are not collected at the end into a "master-works-cited" list for the whole volume. Laudatory volumes are very rarely major academic publications; they have a different function, and that function is fulfilled by *Tolkien in the New Century*. Don't seek the field-changing papers here: if you have time, some essays in this collection are a nice and stimulating read and might suggest new

directions for philological-minded but nevertheless progressive Tolkien scholars. And for that, we again have Tom Shippey (and the editors and authors of this volume) to thank.

Gergely Nagy
Budapest, Hungary

Works Cited

Gilliver, Peter et al. *The Ring of Words. Tolkien and the Oxford English Dictionary.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Silmarillion.* Ed. by Christopher Tolkien. 2nd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001.

[*Book Review Editor's Note*: Because this volume's editorial system of subheadings was lost in the formatting of the index, Janet Brennan Croft has made available at academia.edu a corrected version. Also, Douglas A. Anderson's "Tom Shippey on J.R.R. Tolkien: A Checklist through mid-2014," originally compiled for this volume but excluded, is similarly available as a pdf at academia.edu.]