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An Unexpected Study:
A response to Ordway's *Tolkien's Modern Reading*

In many ways, Holly Ordway's *Tolkien's Modern Reading* is a surprising book. With such a title, it was sure to garner attention; Tolkien's reading is a perennial interest to his fans and scholars alike. And the book does identify some contemporary authors not previously known to have been read by Tolkien. However, those authors are presented in some unexpected ways. Many readers might have been expecting new discussions of what Middle-earth shares with modernism, but the book demonstrates a disinclination to discuss intertextuality in favour of attempting to identify aspects of Tolkien's character. What many readers likely were not expecting is that the study comes with a polemical style of rhetoric. Even more unexpected is the extended diatribe against Tolkien's first authorised biographer, Humphrey Carpenter, and an exaggerated claim that never before has Tolkien's interest in modern literature been examined. It is a most unusual form of literary study. This article interrogates some of these unexpected qualities.

There is no doubt that Dr. Ordway has done substantial research and legwork; her bibliography is extensive and full (although not everything listed is discussed). She has searched various archives, among them those of the Wade Centre, Marquette University, and the Bodleian library, found unpublished draft material and letters, and traced personal reminiscences from people who knew Tolkien. What is probably the most valuable is her focus on Tolkien's reading of children's literature, for children's literature, like fantasy, had long been dismissed in both scholarly study and public discourse. Most of what she presents is neither new nor unknown, at least among Tolkien scholars and well-read fans; what she accomplishes is to map Tolkien's extensive contemporary reading in one place. This would be helpful if Ordway was an objective or neutral analyst but she has a tendency to make exaggerated claims and to treat weak evidence as definitive.

Ordway is not primarily interested in the intertextual reciprocity of Tolkien's reading and of his writing. In the early chapters about the Victorian and Edwardian authors Tolkien read, Ordway can clearly offer intertextual similarities. She provides an extensive study of similarities between Beatrix Potter's animal stories and Tolkien's hobbits, including names and brass buttons, weskits and handkerchiefs, and this is fascinating; however, she never truly addresses what readers are to make of this. Rather than considering what kind of intertextual relation this is—for instance, imitation or transformation-- she concludes, "The nod to Potter is unmistakable, a sign of Tolkien's deep and abiding admiration for her work" (97). Yet homage is not the only form of textual link even between admired authors and readers are left to wonder just what the relationship between The Shire and Potter's dark and ruthless animal fantasy means, what its significance might be. Later, in chapter 9, Ordway identifies several science fiction authors Tolkien read, and suggests an "influence by opposition" (235). Yet for Olaf Stapleton, David Lindsey, and E.R. Eddison, she can offer only general suppositions, nothing clearly identifying textual or intertextual similarities or specific differences. By the time Ordway reaches truly modern authors in Chapter 10, she has largely given up even on homage; she identifies some of the twentieth century authors Tolkien read (Dylan Thomas, Agatha Christie, Roy Campbell, Osbert Sitwell, Edith Somerville, A Neil Lyons, Stephen Spender, George Stein, Saki) only by listing them. For these writers she does not show they have any influence on the Middle-earth works or Tolkien's creative imagination; she has no textual similarities to show, or even simply

similar events or themes, or how Tolkien transformed these works for his artistic vision. It is just a quick survey. She does examine other writers in more detail, but largely she is interested in showing what Tolkien read but not necessarily how such reading might have influenced him, if at all. It is, of course, her choice to write the book she wants and not the kind of book most common in critical literary studies.

I will begin with this study's first curious aspect, the very unusual entry to her book, the fictional "Prelude". An invented story about the author's childhood is a great rarity in literary studies. Although Carpenter did write an imaginary day in Tolkien's life during the 1930s, written in the present tense, (*Biography* 114), he didn't use dialogue or put any words into Tolkien's mouth. This Prelude is a narrative of a seventeen year old Tolkien remembering an event with his mother on the fifth anniversary of her death, while on his way to Mass. The adolescent stops outside the house where Henry Shorthouse wrote his blockbuster novel *John Inglesant*, as his mother had explained to him, a house very near where Ronald and Hilary lived. For those not aware of Victorian works that have fallen into oblivion, this spiritual romance reflects a philosophical journey of the eponymous character. It is set during the religious disputations of Charles I's reign; those disputations between Catholic and Anglican churches spoke directly to the historical moment of publication (1881), the fervid debate during the heady days of the Oxford, or Tractarian, Movement, which sought to restore to the Anglican church many of the older Catholic rituals. The book's popularity waned as that controversy fell from prominence in England and perhaps as popular penchant for florid prose declined. The Prelude surmises the fictional Tolkien's thoughts about reading, books, his mother, his application to Oxford, although it is not always clear what is authorial comment and what might be taken as young Tolkien's thoughts. The romance with Edith Bratt, started the year before this fictive account is alleged to take place (November 4, 1909), is not mentioned.

Several aspects of this unusual narrative stand out. First, the claim that Henry Shorthouse was a one book wonder like Emily Brontë or Anna Sewell. What an odd thing to say, an observation that sounds more like the narrator than like even a well-read teenager. (There are no mentions in the indexes of any of Scull and Hammond's encyclopedic references to either Brontë or Sewell, none, indeed, in Cilli's annotated checklist or in Ordway's index, none either to *Middlemarch*, to which the Prelude's narrator shortly refers in a quotation. But without a known source, how do we know that the adolescent Tolkien understood the allusion about George Eliot's novel? The story seems to imply he does.) Both Brontë and Sewell died shortly after their first novels brought them acclaim as well as notoriety. That term, one hit wonder, is usually, in popular parlance, reserved for rock bands who hit it big with an early top of the charts song, only to languish at the bottom with subsequent songs. That certainly describes Shorthouse, who went on to publish five subsequent novels from 1883 to 1891, novels that went nowhere, much to his frustration and desperate efforts to explain himself. The purpose of this comparison with *Wuthering Heights* and *Black Beauty* is not clear, unless it is Ordway's attempt to try to place Shorthouse's novel on par with these long surviving classics. The second unusual item is a later interior monologue, possibly attributed to the young Tolkien or just the narrator's implication of young Tolkien's thought: "Where were the modern authors who understood the old religion and soul of the country, yet who could also tell an epic tale that gripped the reader and wouldn't let go. MacDonald was too dreamy; Kipling too gung-ho; Conan Doyle too cut and dried. Who among them would ever be able to write a true mythology for England?" (14-15). Now this is curious indeed to attribute to a seventeen-year-old, even a precocious one. First of all, it claims the Victorian fantasist MacDonald as modern; it anticipates Ordway's as yet unexplained and

unproven argument. And that reference to mythology for England might be a bit premature. Tolkien had read *Kalevala* while at King Edward's School but he didn't start writing his *Kullervo* until Oxford days. As Verlyn Flieger has pointed out, the earliest stories of the *Legendarium* developed in "the four years directly following [Tolkien's] own war experience" (*Green Suns*, 24). And as John Garth has stated, "None of the many TCBS letters discussing his work mentions an 'epic' or 'mythology' until 1917" (Garth, 123). [The Tea Club and Barrovian Society was the group Tolkien formed in high school with very dear close friends, who kept in contact through university and war service.] There is an aura of unreliability around this fictional prelude.

The implied homage to Shorthouse in the Prelude, which sounds like something J.S. Ryan wrote in his reminiscences, is rather different from what the older (historical) Tolkien wrote about Shorthouse in his letter to Christopher Bretherton (Letter #257), where Tolkien self-depreciatingly hopes his own fate will not be similar to that of Shorthouse; Tolkien also at that point states he does not know what else Shorthouse might have written, a statement which suggests he was not particularly enamoured of Shorthouse's work, not enough to be aware of any other novels besides *John Inglesant*; Tolkien's reference to Shorthouse is a metaphoric self-reflection, almost a self-projection, rather than a recommendation of the man or the book; the older Tolkien hopes the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* will be sustained and he, writing a letter explaining his work, mockingly hopes he won't spend the rest of his life explaining the book in an attempt to maintain its popularity. Hammond and Scull make a similar observation about an essay on Shorthouse by Morchard Bishop in the Royal Society of Literature's *Essays for Divers Hands* (1958), to which Tolkien refers. Shorthouse, they claim, provided Tolkien a model lesson in spending too much time explaining his book (*Companion, Chronology*, 704). Their interpretation and mine of Shorthouse's lesson for Tolkien are very different from the one Ordway gives, later in her book, where she seems unable to recognise the gentle self-mockery and sees only homage to Shorthouse.

That Ordway is deeply invested in this unusual fiction of an adolescent Tolkien is shown by the unidentified literary allusions in this story, to a very preeminent poet. It is strange that she does not identify the allusions when she makes direct allusions to other authors. To those who know English literature, the title "Prelude" will recall Wordsworth's great poem, *The Prelude or, Growth of a Poet's Mind; An Autobiographical Poem*. When the fictional adolescent recalls his mother's death, he recites the opening to Wordsworth's equally famous poem "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey"; it is this which provides internal dating for the story, the fifth anniversary of her death. Neither allusion suggests a concern with how Tolkien's reading influenced his art. It is equally strange that nothing explains what this Prelude is doing here. Ordway does not provide that until chapter 2 when she says "the reconstruction" is based on some known facts but also on surmises. She practices a similar deferral act when she first explains her chronological use of "modern" in chapter 2; it isn't until much later (chapter 11, 293) that she acknowledges the complex issue of the meanings of 'modern' and its cognates.

These points might be obscure issues to general readers unfamiliar with Tolkien scholarship or with English literature generally, but they strike a curious aspect, a disconnect, to one who is. Reading on, this curious aspect becomes, as Alice would say, curiuser and curiuser.

Chapter 1 sets up Ordway's claims about entrenched notions concerning Tolkien's thought and reading; it is here that the polemic makes its first appearance in how Ordway frames her argument. First is an extensive series of rhetorical questions designed to define the positions she seeks to refute. This is a classic rhetorical ploy of polemics: "Can we really suppose that

Middle-earth was simply a rehash of the Middle Ages?” (18). I doubt Auden in his famous defense of *The Lord of the Rings* meant ‘rehash’. Then she voices the opposition: “After all, wasn’t he an arch-conservative?” (19). Ordway seems to imply that *The Lord of the Rings* could not possibly be as popular as it is if it were only a medieval rehash because who reads medieval literature nowadays? After all, apparently *Beowulf* is not a book one takes to the beach (18). (Her claim seems to overlook the continuing popularity of the Old English poem.; there have been ten movie adaptations, including a Japanese animated fantasy adventure (*Jack and the Witch*), *The 13th Warrior*, and Robert Zemeckis’ adaptation with a very sexy Angelina Jolie as Grendel’s Mother; there have been at least nine translations of *Beowulf* since 1973, hardcover, paperback, mass market paperback, audiobook and Kindle including one by the poet Seamus Heaney (2000) and a much ballyhooed revisionist translation by Maria Dahvana Headley (2020). I can’t vouch if any of these translations were taken to the beach, but translations do seem to come out regularly, and go into multiple editions. And the online Signum University, very popular with fans of Tolkien, is offering a Fall term 2021 course in *Beowulf* in Old English, two sections in fact.) Ordway’s disparaging implication about the popularity of medieval literature is a strawman argument.

And in looking for a source of this strawman characterisation, Ordway targets Carpenter’s *Biography* and then his selection in *Letters*. Yet she is not the first to identify its errors as an early biography and she is certainly wrong to castigate Carpenter for “cornering the market” (25) on biographies; he is not responsible for the dearth of biographies on Tolkien (Consider that C.S. Lewis has been the subject of I think at least 10 biographies so far): that consequence belongs to the Family, which is loathe to provide access to private, personal papers. Early, even authorised, biographies are not particularly known for their accuracy or completeness. Greville MacDonald’s reminiscence of his father George MacDonald is now regarded as highly idealised (McGillis); Greville was a physician. Patrick Brontë asked Elizabeth Gaskell to write a Life for Charlotte Brontë not because she was an historian or biographer but because she was a personal friend of his daughter. Being a novelist led Gaskell to make certain decisions and interpretations that an historian or biographer would not have made, but few people castigate Gaskell personally for claims which notoriously took the Brontë biography down some false avenues; nor is Greville MacDonald personally tarred. Rarely do early biographies get everything right. Nicole duPlessis’s critical analysis of the effects of Carpenter’s biography manages quite successfully to keep the focus on the false avenues inspired by the study, particularly concerning Edith Bratt, without faulting the man’s character. Ordway’s criticisms of the *Letters* also devotes a great deal of time insinuating that Carpenter specifically intended to create a false impression of Tolkien as gruff and curmudgeonly through selective editing and a narrow selection of letters. Her interpretation of Tolkien hardly matches my interpretation of Tolkien from the *Letters*, and many others have previously pointed out that we do indeed need a larger selection as Tolkien was a voluminous letter writer. It isn’t clear why Ordway feels the need to vilify Carpenter personally for his failings; the man, after all, is dead. But nothing demonstrates so clearly that Tolkien studies have developed far beyond this unquestioning reliance on the Carpenter biography which Ordway promotes than the publication this year of a new biography devoted to Tolkien’s wife, *The Gallant Edith Bratt: J.R.R. Tolkien’s Inspiration* by Nancy Bunting and Seamus Hamill-Keays, from Walking Tree Press.

One point that Ordway does not consider is that the focus on Tolkien’s medieval influences was driven by the intense critical attacks on *The Lord of the Rings* for not being like any modernist novel. The most infamous of these attacks is Edmund Wilson’s “Oh Those Awful

Orcs”. If critics at the time of publication were flummoxed to know where the book belonged, and failed to see any value because it wasn’t “modernist” in their eyes, then those who did see value in it turned to highlight the extensive intertextual relationships to medieval literature, which was highly regarded. It didn’t take a biography to inspire them to this avenue of exploration: indeed, it can be said that it was the medievalists who championed Tolkien, not the modernists. And even with their work it took years before Tolkien was really accepted into the canon of literature deserving regard and respect. As Jorge Luis Bueno-Alonso has argued, “Tolkien and his work have finally entered the canon of Anglo-American studies, marked by being admitted into the prestigious Blackwell Companion collection” (77-78) with the publication of Stuart D Lee’s *Tolkien Companion* in 2014.

Chapter 2 presents Ordway’s explanation of her use of ‘modern’, ‘influence’, and her careful delineation of what evidence she accepted for what books Tolkien clearly read. She states she will “attend only to his Middle-earth writings”, that is, the *Legendarium*, but she is tempted at times to go beyond that limit and ultimately she often ignores them by not discussing any evidence in the texts themselves. She also excludes *The Silmarillion* because it was not published in Tolkien’s lifetime and is not part of his fame; this of course is reasonable but it does exclude so much of Tolkien’s writing which was deeply important to him. It would also be especially significant if Ordway could demonstrate evidence of Tolkien’s contemporary reading in *The Silmarillion*. She also includes only books in English, which probably explains why she makes no mention of Elias Lönnrot’s *Kalevala* even though it was available in translations and was so essential to Tolkien’s creative development. A much larger problem is her defense of using “modern”. Any scholar is of course free to provide new definitions and framework for her research, but that new perspective ought to provide meaningful and significant new understandings of the texts in question. This is what Alison Milbank provides in *Dante and the Victorians*, which extends to comparisons to Joyce, Pound, and Eliot and links the two historical moments in uniquely new ways. Had Ordway pointed to John Ruskin’s *Modern Painters*, I might have forgiven her; however, while clearly Ordway compiles many examples of Tolkien’s contemporary reading she does nothing to enlighten our understanding of the Victorian writers who she renames ‘modern’. Her labeling is merely for chronological ease rather than new interpretation.

This smudges a significant difference between the Victorian fantasists she discusses and the modernist writers she discusses. As Stephen Prickett has brilliantly argued in his magisterial *Victorian Fantasy: Imagination and Belief in Nineteenth-Century England*—an academic study which has, phenomenally, gone through three editions since 1979—these writers created their new art form in opposition to the repressive utilitarian and materialist thought of the mid and late Victorian period and in response to the ferment of religious thought at the time. They created art forms that went outside “the classic ideal of nineteenth-century realism . . . of order, coherence, and limitation” (Prickett, 1); they created fairy worlds and invented worlds outside the perceived historical world, as the “underside or obverse of the Victorian imagination” (11). Prickett also identifies their relationship with Tolkien, Lewis, and Charles Williams. To remove MacDonald, Morris and others from their historical moment is to fall prey to the same fault that many early modern critics about fantasy did—they removed “the historical and theological understanding of the nineteenth century” (xviii) from their analysis, as Prickett points out, particularly overlooking religion. In contrast, the modern or modernist writers, in their opposition to their historical moment, went the other way. Instead of rejecting realism outright they explored and experimented with the conventional boundaries of realistic fiction through a variety of aesthetic

means. They created stream of consciousness as a way to represent not character but the discoveries of the new psychoanalytic thought, and, tellingly, they used mythology to explore the profound rupture of their time with traditional culture. (I grant this characterisation is a generalisation—Yeats’ use of mythology is a complicated factor—but it generally pertains.) To be silent about this significant historical difference—either rejecting realism or radically revising it—is to limit what might be gained in looking at Tolkien’s response to these writers of different historical moments. For instance, the invented world and fairy are possibly the most important qualities Tolkien took from MacDonald and Morris, a lesson in world building. Furthermore, Tolkien commemorates mythic realms rather than provide disenchantment, irony, and disillusionment, as the modernists do. Obviously Ordway needs some parameter more delimiting than “post medieval” but straightjacketing everything into a term (that itself has, significantly, various meanings, which she does not address in this chapter) ultimately limits the exploration of what can be gained by considering Tolkien’s relationship with his contemporary literature. Largely Ordway’s use of “modern reading” is simply a cudgel with which to beat Humphrey Carpenter, which she does multiple times, in several chapters. Her later recognition of “modernist” writers, in chapter 11, does little to explicate her use through most of the book.

The difficulty is not limited to this failure to attend to the historical moment, because it extends as well to the kind of information Ordway provides about these late Victorian fantasists. While her analysis of MacDonald’s influence on Tolkien is fulsome, she reads MacDonald through the eyes of Tolkien’s rejected preface to the new edition of *The Golden Key*, punningly referring to MacDonald’s “tarnished key”, and calling the verse of the boy Diamond in *At the Back of the North Wind* “doggerel”. She explains MacDonald’s turn to writing for a livelihood as a need for income for a growing family but she omits entirely why MacDonald needed to supplement his income: the elders of his church had severely reduced his salary because they accused him of heresy, fearing he was tainted by the new German theology (Prickett, 11). However, the tenets of his personal faith were to inspire the mysticism in his development of fantasy. There were many avenues to fantasy through faith in addition to the one Ordway examines, Tolkien’s Catholicism; in fact, critics have argued that MacDonald’s fairy tales are best understood “in the context of a Victorian approach to literary fairy tales that combined the supernatural elements associated with traditional fairy tales with either the comedy of social satire or a deep Christian mysticism” (King and Pierce, 357). And while Ordway acknowledges Tolkien’s statement in *Tolkien on Fairy Stories* that “Death is the theme that most inspired George MacDonald” (TOFS, 75), she does not see that both Tolkien and MacDonald treat death not as a problem or a fear to be exorcised (or an opportunity for death bed scenes full of pathos) but as an essential element of life, a part of the journey to what lies beyond, a gateway.

While Ordway calls the children’s literature that young Tolkien read “Victorian” and “post Victorian”, she does not extend that courtesy to the adult fantasists. To call William Morris modern, as she directly does twice in her chapter on him, is to suppress utterly Morris’s profound involvement with Victorian ideas of ideal beauty and divinity, derived from Ruskin, and with which he constructed in his imagination an extensive personal vision of medievalism. This was possible only because of the Victorian rediscovery of medieval literature. Ordway provides an extensive close comparative reading of the two authors that displays the similarities, but she misses the forest for the trees, possibly in her effort to avoid emphasizing medieval sources in Tolkien. Morris’s imaginative vision was medievalistic rather than historically correct, democratic and devoted to fair and honest artisans and craftsmen. He associated his contemporary Victorian culture with everything vulgar and tasteless, tacky and tawdry (Boenig).

There is nothing in the Kelmscott Chaucer, for instance, that resembles the modern art of a Picasso, a Van Gogh, or a Toulouse-Lautrec (or even a Turner). There is nothing in his prose romance *The Wood Beyond the World* that resembles Woolf's *The Waves* or *Orlando*. Morris sought to evoke a longing for the past, rather than to disrupt it and this longing he bequeathed to Tolkien, however much Tolkien may have modified it. (I might also point out that both writers could well have developed this longing from the Anglo Saxon melancholic sense of past glory.) To underplay this aspect of Morris's aesthetic amounts to at best misunderstanding and at worst misrepresentation; after all, in this first great age of the rediscovery of medieval texts, Morris's expertise was exceptional enough that the British Museum would call him to consult about new manuscripts. Ordway also, sadly, has missed a doctoral dissertation by Kelvin Lee Massey (2007) which covers exactly the ground of her chapter on Morris, but also considers "the context of the nineteenth-century revival of interest in the medieval period and in folkloric and mythological narratives" (iv).

Ordway's enthusiasm for modern influence causes her to miss evidence that counteracts or contradicts her claims. She cites Margaret Hiley's structuralist study of mythology in Tolkien and James Joyce in note # 192: "Margaret Hiley observes that Tolkien's mythic structures indicate that his work is 'perhaps closer to modernists such as Eliot, Yeats, and Pound than has hitherto been assumed'" (475). However, this is Hiley's opening statement in her study, "Stolen Language". Hiley includes study of Tolkien's use of Northern myth, "Tolkien, in creating his own mythology, was consciously using ancient material and weaving it into his own ideas" (850). What Hiley writes later after further structuralist analysis is,

The procedure of creating a new whole from fragments is typically modernist—one need only think of the oft-quoted line from *The Waste Land* 'These fragments I have shored against my ruins' (Eliot, *Collected Poems*, 79). Tolkien's use of fragments is, however, markedly different from that of modernists such as Eliot and Pound, in that he always seeks to hide the fragments and incorporate them organically in the newly created whole. Eliot's *Waste Land* and Pound's *Cantos* flaunt their stolen language, whereas Tolkien's is hardly to be detected without the deductive skills of a fellow philologist such as Tom Shippey (851).

What Hiley sees is not a similarity with the modernists but a difference. Ordway lists Hiley's *The Loss and the Silence: Aspects of Modernism in the Works of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien & Charles Williams* in her bibliography but she never refers to it in the text of her study; Hiley argues that while the Inklings and Modernists were responding to the same historical moment, they did so in opposite ways. Similarly, Ordway lists *Tolkien and Modernism 2* in her bibliography but she never cites Thomas Honegger's study of the mythical method in Tolkien and the modernists, "The Passing of the Elves and the Arrival of Modernity: Tolkien's 'Mythical Method'" from that book. Honegger demonstrates the difference that the modernists like Eliot and Joyce

use the 'mythical method' to express the modern world's disillusionment and rupture with the past. Their references to mythical matter are often allusive, ironic and playful and demonstrate the inadequacy of traditional 'mythic' narratives and high diction to imbue modern life with coherence and meaning. Tolkien, too, employs a 'mythical method' to come to terms with

the challenges of modernity, yet his use of ‘mythical matter’ aims at smoothing the break without glossing over the feeling of loss and sorrow. Tolkien endeavours to come to terms with ‘modernity’ by means of providing the lost context(s) to the fragments of modern existence so that he—and his readers—arrive in modernity not via ironic disenchantment but by commemorating what has been lost (Abstract, 211).

I might also point to Ordway’s discussion of situational similarity between *The Lord of the Rings* and Shorthouse’s *John Inglesant*, where she claims that Tolkien’s use of pity in *The Lord of the Rings* shows “powerful resonances” (284) with Shorthouse’s novel. Yet “resonance” is not a very substantial textual link but quite general and even abstract, lacking explicit evidence, and her argument could surely do with an acknowledgement of the profound history of pity as a theme; Woody Wendling has demonstrated in “The Quest of Pity and Mercy in Middle Earth (sic)” (2006) those biblical and liturgical similarities in Tolkien’s use of pity and mercy while Anna Marie Gazzolo has enumerated the explicit uses of pity by several characters throughout Tolkien in “It Was Pity that Stayed his Hand” (2013, reviewed by John Wm. Houghton in *Tolkien Studies*). Something similar happens when Ordway associates references to the west in Matthew Arnold’s “Tyrsis” with the west in Tolkien’s mythology; Tolkien didn’t have to go to Arnold for important topos of “west”; there is a significant tradition about the west in English literature, perhaps the best-known being John Donne’s “Good Friday 1613. Riding Westward”. I might even point out that Carpenter’s infamous line about Tolkien’s “limited knowledge of modern literature in general” (*Biography*, 69) contextually refers to the headstrong idealistic undergraduate who was not required to read moderns. However, Ordway never refers to Carpenter’s later observations about Tolkien’s knowledge of E.A. Wyke-Smith’s *The Marvellous Land of the Snergs* or Tolkien’s familiarity with Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt* or, more significantly, Carpenter’s statement that “In general he [Tolkien] preferred the lighter contemporary novels” (*Biography*, 163). This is a glaring omission, given that in at least four chapters Ordway reiterates at length how Carpenter claims Tolkien didn’t read modern literature; even if Carpenter repeats that idea, he does not use it exclusively.

In Note #190 Ordway surmises that “If Tolkien read other sections of *Finnegans Wake*, the countless different names given by Joyce to his protagonist Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker (including “Haromphreyld,” “Finn MacCool,” and “Mr Makeall Gone”) might have also stuck in his mind, given the huge variety of names and titles that he gives to, for instance, Gandalf and Aragorn” (475). Yet Ordway does not pause to consider the appropriateness of her comparison. Joyce’s naming of names is bravado, with multiple unrelated suggestiveness and what has been called “foolery” (Cullerton 55). This is unlike Tolkien’s quiet, unassuming seriousness of names. A more likely influence on Tolkien is Lewis Carroll’s Alice books which examine the power of names to represent or mask their bearers and to preserve identity. In *Alice In Wonderland*, Alice is always under threat of losing her name and is called a variety of things; in *Through the Looking Glass* Alice has an extended conversation with the insect Gnat about the role of names and enters a forest of things that have lost their name; she asks Humpty Dumpty, “Must a name

mean something?”. In Carroll’s hands names can have something of a symbolic or magic potency, qualities which are similar to Tolkien’s multiple names; think of Aragorn’s “Estel” as Hope, but never imposture as in Joyce. In fact, in Letter #15 Tolkien claimed that *The Hobbit* is “much closer in every way” to the second Alice book than the first. That strikes me as a far more rewarding influence to pursue than a hypothetical “if” Joyce influence which lacks authoritative direction from Tolkien. *Tolkien’s Modern Reading* is replete with similar examples where Ordway’s enthusiasm jumps at evidence which supports her claim while diminishing or ignoring evidence which does not. To quote from Patrick Fermor, “Advantageous points are coaxed into opulent bloom, awkward ones discreetly pruned into non-being” (*Between the Woods and the Water*, location 1507).

There is another issue with these introductory chapters on methodology (and which pertains throughout the study) and that is Ordway’s use of the authorial “we”. Usually, when used appropriately, such use implies a shared identity or agreement between author and reader. In fact, the rhetorical style works only when there is agreement between the two, that is, when the evidence is thoroughly convincing and conclusive. Yet Ordway often uses “we” coercively as a way to provide polemic authority for her argument; and, strangely, she confusingly uses it to satirise her opposition as well as to imply shared identity. A few examples will provide the context. When she describes what she claims is the traditional view that Tolkien was well-read only in medieval literature, she resorts to “Yet here we find something puzzling”, as if readers share her idea that no book set in a medieval timeframe could be so universally popular (18). This shortly becomes, as I have earlier pointed out, “Can we really suppose that Middle-earth is a rehash of the Middle Ages? How many people read Mallory these days? Who has heard of Ariosto? Do people take Beowulf to the beach?” (18-19). Ordway then concludes this section by sarcastically imitating the voice of her allegedly short-sighted opponent: “We need not bother, therefore, to consider his modern reading; it must have been minimal, something he dismissed as worthless, just as he rejected anything that smacked of the modern day” (19), an act which completely undercuts any shared identity between writer and reader.

More examples. “Tolkien knew modern literature, and was oriented toward the modern world, to a greater degree than we have hitherto realized” (22). This is not a conclusion to her book but an opening statement. Unfortunately, a good many scholars and critics have pointed out and discussed Tolkien’s familiarity with the modern world and those of us who know their work have long understood this. In 1987 Christina Scull published a comparison of *The Hobbit* “Considered in Relation to Children’s Literature: Contemporary with Its Writing and Publication” (not cited by Ordway). A significant recent example of scholarly recognition of Tolkien’s involvement with “the cultural and intellectual milieu of the early 20th century” is Dimitra Fimi’s article on Tolkien’s knowledge of “radical linguistic experimentation” and the work of Sapir, Jespersen, James Joyce, and Gertrude Stein, “Language as communication vs Language as Art” (2018), also not cited. And then there is the groundbreaking study of new interpretive frameworks for studying Tolkien’s modernity, *Tolkien and Alterity* (2017) (not cited). Tolkien’s involvement with his contemporary milieu is not a new discovery and Ordway’s ‘we’ does not speak for everyone in the Tolkien community nor for all readers of her book. Yet she uses this coercive ‘we’ multiple times: “We must, then, give up the assumption that Tolkien was utterly backward-looking and therefore uninterested in and uninfluenced by the contemporary world” (33). Again, Ordway does not prove that many current readers of Tolkien have that assumption that he was “backward” looking. And one final example: “If we assume

that literary invention is mechanistic and that tracing sources is like solving a math problem, then looking at Tolkien's sources will only disappoint us and leave us nonplussed But literary criticism does not have to work this way, if we always recall the goal we have in view: that we are trying to understand a mind, not strip-search a text, let alone a particular term within a text" (57-58). I think she more properly means "her goal". Characterizing textual relationships as "strip-searching" is particularly egregious, given the pervasive and extensive thought about "intertextuality" that dominates literary study these days, a perspective extending far beyond the postmodern theorists like Julia Kristeva who first put forth the theory and which has demonstrated intertextual relationships far more complex and multivarious than the traditional "influence" was capable of identifying. Intertextuality has in fact addressed the very point that Tolkien said sources ought to lead to: "the particular uses in a particular situation of any motive, whether invented, deliberately borrowed, or unconsciously remembered" (*Letters*, # 337). It is polemical to characterise those who wish to study a writer's art and aesthetics as strip searching; it is as well a presumptuous assumption that the final goal of literary study is biographical knowledge of the author, although that appears to be what Ordway wants; but it isn't really a good cop/bad cop scenario. It also ignores Tolkien's own contention that an excessive interest in the psychology of the author curtails interest in the art (*Letters*, #213). Ordway assumes that her argument is ironclad and that she can disparage the opposition yet often her evidence is quite arguable and not fully convincing, so her use of the authorial "we" becomes problematic. It detracts from her appeals to logic and ethos. Leigh Fermor might have been describing just this use: "'Let us assume' turns in a few pages into 'We may assume', which, in a few more, is 'As we have shown'; and after a few more pages yet, the shy initial hypothesis has hardened into a brazen established landmark, all the time with not an atom of new evidence being adduced" (*Between the Woods and the Water*, 94).

This rhetoric and method work like an unexpected speed wobble or shimmy on a bicycle.; it rattles evidence out of place and risks throwing the reader over the handlebars. Yet Dr. Ordway is an accomplished, adept academic. What is she doing here? An answer perhaps lies in the possibility that Ordway is not following mainstream style of literary criticism; she is using a far more persuasive approach: she is, in fact, applying not the rhetoric of the literary critic but that of the apologist, for she is trained in both apologetics and literature. She is the author of *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination: An Integrated Approach to Defending the Faith*. Her contribution to that developing field, her integrated approach, promotes a rhetoric that recognises an appeal not only to logic and rational argument but also to metaphor and imagination as well as to the close recognition of what words mean. She argues for forms of rhetoric that appeal to intuition and not logic alone, particularly the use of poetry and narrative and imagery. She claims it is important to identify the best way to appeal to an audience's understanding, either rationally or imaginatively. Emotions and imagination must complement the intellectual or propositional mode and, ultimately, her apologetics has "a defensive, corrective aspect" (location 1012). It is useful to consider several of the comments she makes in this study.

A significant part of the apologist's work involves discerning what preconceptions, difficulties, and context the audience is likely to have, so as to write or speak in such a way as to increase the likelihood that the ideas are understood as intended. What grasp does my audience have of the ideas I am presenting? Is my task at this moment to clarify the rational meaning of the ideas, in the sense of propositions and definitions, so

as to remove obstacles of basic interpretation? Or is my task to bring the ideas to life, to help people imaginatively grasp them and appreciate their significance? (location 562)

The beauty of figurative language, used well, is that it can communicate truth both directly and intuitively, by its fittingness of image and meaning, even if the reader doesn't consciously understand it. (location 822)

Literature offers a mode of apologetics in which we can guide the natural human emotional response toward its right end, by presenting truth in such a way that we are moved on the level of our emotions as well as convinced on the level of our intellect.... Narrative provides another incarnational mode of apologetics. While there are non-narrative forms of literature, there is often a hint of implicit story even in a primarily lyric poem or in a predominantly character-focused drama. (location 1616)

I apologise for the extensive quoting of passages from Ordway's study, but the purpose is to show her own words, about a form of persuasion that is her particular bailiwick. Ordway has taken this form of polemical argument and applied it to a literary study, an examination of Tolkien, or, as she probably conceives of it, a defense of Tolkien. It appears that she has secularised her method of apologetics. Not everything identified in this article is necessarily attributable to her apologetics, but many things can be. This explains why, for instance, she has taken her audience not as experienced readers of Tolkien studies but as general, uncritical readers for whom she can define and ridicule a supposed opposition. It might explain why she sees the need for a "corrective" about Humphrey Carpenter's character as well as for his biography. It explains why she might have taken for evidence research that is less tested but more conducive to her particular point of view, more emotionally or intuitively satisfying. It explains why she might regard "modern" as another example of distorted language, such as that she considers with the contemporary secular use of 'sin,' 'lie,' and 'marriage', which require correction in a particular direction. And, finally, it explains why she begins *Tolkien's Modern Reading* with a fictive account of an adolescent Tolkien. She concludes each chapter in her Apologetics book with a poem which she uses imaginatively to express the ideas of each chapter. (They work there.) Tolkien, on the other hand, is awarded a tenuous fiction as a sort of imaginative persuasion of who she thinks Tolkien was.

This brings me back to the allusion to Wordsworth in that initial fiction, the Prelude. There in the nutshell of an allusive allusion lies a metaphor for why Ordway shies away from comprehensive intertextual analysis and so often repeats phrases about Tolkien's creative imagination; it is the key to understanding what she is trying to do. Her purpose after all is not so much an examination of "Tolkien's modern reading" per se or its influence on his creative writing; that is a means to an end and not an end in itself. Her ambition is larger or greater than that. She has set her sights on establishing a new narrative about Tolkien the man, the growth of the writer's mind. That is no insignificant aim but her polemical method tarnishes her work and it raises important questions about the role of apologetics and the difference between literary criticism and apologetics, a boundary she crosses.

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