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Adapting Tolkien (2021), edited by Will Sherwood

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Adapting Tolkien: Proceedings of The Tolkien Society Seminar 2020, edited by Will Sherwood. Edinburgh: Luna Press Publishing, 2021. xii, 149 pp. \$18.99 ISBN 9781913387693 (trade paperback). Also available in ebook format.

Adapting Tolkien: Proceedings of The Tolkien Society Seminar 2020 is the twentieth book in the series published by the Tolkien Society under the auspices of the Peter Roe Memorial Fund. The fund commemorates a talented young member of the Society who tragically died in a traffic accident shortly after joining the Society. As Will Sherwood, Education Secretary for the Society and the editor of the *Adapting Tolkien*, writes, “He was so enthusiastic about having joined the Society that he had written a letter ordering all the available back issues, and was on his way to buy envelopes when he was hit by a speeding lorry outside his home” (iv).

The subject of adapting Tolkien is a timely one, with Amazon’s massively expensive new television show “The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power” set to begin later this year. Reportedly based solely on the limited material about the Second Age contained in *The Lord of the Rings* and its appendices, this show threatens to stretch the bounds of adaptation to new limits. While none of the papers included in the book address the forthcoming show, some of the takeaways from the discussions in this book can provide useful insights for the inevitable debates about the success of that adaptation.

In his Introduction to *Adapting Tolkien*, Sherwood begins by quoting two conflicting statements from Tolkien’s letters regarding his own views about adapting his legendarium, one in which he suggests that the cycles should “leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama” and the other in which he describes *The Lord of the Rings* as being “very unsuitable for dramatic or semi-dramatic representation.” Sherwood observes “These two epigraphs perfectly surmise Tolkien’s conflicted views over the adaptation of his work.” (1; see also *Letters* 145 and 255). Sherwood then goes on to cite the disdain that both Tolkien and his son and literary executor, Christopher Tolkien, had for radio and film adaptations, but notes that Tolkien did encourage other adaptations such as Donald Swann’s *The Road Goes Ever On* and Pauline Baynes illustrations. Nonetheless, Sherwood asserts “Adaptation as a mode is fundamental to the progress of art. Tolkien himself adapted styles, forms, language and tropes in order to create his legendarium” (2). Sherwood adds, “As this seminar proved, adaptation extends far beyond the arts and into our own reality” (3). The seminar, which took place on July 4, 2020, was the first online seminar that the Society conducted, with ten papers presented in a half day. Six of those ten papers are included in this collection, covering a wide range of different topics. They vary just as much in quality as they do in subject matter.

“Adapting Tolkien Beyond Arda, or, How to Navigate the Political Minefield of the International Astronomical Union in Order to Name Features on Titan, Pluto, and Charon After Middle-earth” by Kristine Larsen

From my perspective, the best of the papers is the last one included. Larsen’s writing is professional without being pretentious and reflects a fine-tuned sense of fun. She begins by acknowledging that names were important to Tolkien, pointing out that “Tolkien’s professional interest in names is apparent in a 1932 essay in which he traces the name Nodens (found in inscriptions in Lydney Park) to an ancient king of what is now Ireland and even further back etymologically to its Indo-European roots” (127). She then launches into a fascinating discussion of the politics of the naming of astronomical features and how Tolkienian names have been used in that process, interspersed with the chronicle of Pluto’s demotion from planet to dwarf planet and the controversy that it has caused.

Larsen notes “the official task of designating all features beyond earth falls to the International Astronomical Union (IAU). In spite of the strictly scientific nature of the organization, the process has historically been fraught with politics. It is therefore not a trivial task for scientists to honor the works of Tolkien by adapting names from Middle-earth to features on worlds elsewhere in our solar system. Mythology and philology are frequently involved (something that would have pleased Tolkien)” (128). Bizarrely, “in the case of Tolkien-related names it is apparent how potential problems could arise, given that there are currently only two Tolkien related sources in the gazetteer: Robert Foster’s 1978 *The Complete Guide to Middle-earth* and *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Indeed, there is currently only a single example where the latter is cited as the authoritative source, the naming of a boulder on the minor planet Bennu as Thorondor Saxum: ‘King of the Eagles in the Middle-earth, the fictional setting in fantasy novels by English author J.R.R. Tolkien, the greatest of all eagles, with a wingspan of 55m (approximately as this boulder)’ (IAU, ‘Thorondor Saxum’) (132).

A topic that might seem to be dry and uninteresting instead is full of understated humor. Discussing the naming of a dark spot on Pluto as “Mordor Macula” Larsen writes, “To say that the name – informal as it was – took off would be an understatement. An Instagram post from the Obama White House the day after the New Horizons flyby celebrated a picture of Charon with the caption ‘One does not simply fly 3 billion miles to take a photo of Mordor, the dark spot on top of Pluto’s moon Charon’. An explanation for the coloration of Charon’s north polar ice cap came a year later, the seasonal migration of methane from Pluto to Charon and resulting interactions with ultraviolet light (Grundy et al., 65). The best appropriation of the explanation is Phil Plait’s SyfyWire article ‘It Turns Out Methane Can Simply Walk Into Mordor’ (137–138).

Larsen’s paper is entertaining, informative, and easy to read. It is a worthy

inclusion, and a fine example of Tolkien scholarship.

“Elvish as She is Filmed: The Adaption of the Elvish Language in Peter Jackson’s *The Lord of the Rings*” by Andrew Higgins

Higgins’s paper is also very good, although Higgins takes a more informal tone than I expected. It seems apparent that this paper was written to be presented at the conference and does not seem to be edited to make it more appropriate for publication in a book. Still, Higgins’s interest in and knowledge of the subject – along with a dry but cutting sense of humor – makes this paper an enjoyable read.

Higgins begins by noting that at a recent 20-year reunion of the cast of the Peter Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings* films, Liv Tyler surprised her cast mates by reciting from memory “the Elvish incantation that temporarily stopped the Black Riders from their pursuit of the One Ring” (43). Of course, this “incantation” is not something that Tolkien ever actually wrote. Higgins goes on to note that the very first words that are heard in *The Fellowship of the Ring* film are in an adapted form of Elvish.” This provides an opening for Higgins “to explore how this version of Elvish was actually constructed and focus in on several examples of diegetic Elvish dialogue to suggest that the inclusion of Elvish in the films creates for those with some awareness or knowledge of Tolkien’s languages a sense of familiarity while for others a sense of strangeness and depth of history in Jackson’s cinematic Faërie” (46).

Before turning to a discussion of this process (and who engaged in it), Higgins references the “seminal paper” by Tolkien scholar and linguist Carl Hostetter, ‘Elvish as She is Spoke,’ the title of which Higgins paraphrases in his own title. Higgins points out that “Hostetter has noted that Tolkien’s overall objective in inventing his languages was not to create a homogenous series of languages that could be used for conversation and dialogue” (47). What Higgins does not mention, however, is the level of scorn that Hostetter directs at the attempts “of actually using Elvish as spoken languages” (Hostetter 240) by using forms of what he refers to as “neo-Elvish”. Indeed, one of the main targets of Hostetter’s ire is David Salo, the linguist hired by Jackson and his team to use Elvish as spoken languages in the cinematic adaptations of Tolkien’s work. Higgins’s borrowing of Hostetter’s title for his own presentation is highly amusing, given that he then goes on to give an interesting and mostly complimentary description of Salo’s work in the films. Higgins concludes “As this paper has shown, while there are certainly questions about this adaptation from the Tolkien linguistic point of view, they are far outweighed by hearing Tolkien’s languages spoken in Jackson’s cinematic world-building and Faërie of Middle-earth and if just one (and I am sure there were more) of the audience members new to Tolkien’s world left the cinema wanting to learn more about Tolkien’s languages, or even language in general, then this work of adaptation was well worth it” (55–56).

“The other illustrated *Silmarillion*: Francis Mosley for the Folio Society” by Marie Bretagnolle and “I Heard the Sword’s Song, and it Sang to Me’: Adapting Tolkien in the World of Heavy Metal” by Brian Egede-Pedersen

There is little that need be said about these papers, as the titles largely speaks for themselves.

After briefly describing the history of how the Folio Society turned to Francis Mosley to create an illustrated edition of *The Silmarillion*, Bretagnolle spends the rest of the paper describing Mosley’s style (24–25) and then the illustrations themselves, all of which can be judged by viewing the illustrations themselves. While this is purely a matter of taste, I will not be rushing to replace my new updated edition of *The Silmarillion* illustrated by Ted Naismith.

Egede-Pedersen discusses a different form of adaptation: the use of Tolkien’s words in the lyrics of heavy metal songs, particularly the second album, “Sword’s Song” from 2003, by the band Battlelore. As Egede-Pederson points out, “practically every song is based on something easily recognizable” (63) to a Tolkien aficionado. As someone who has no interest at all in heavy metal music, I found this paper mildly interesting at best. Egede-Pederson notes that when one of the members of Battlelore was asked how he thought Tolkien would have reacted to the music of Battlelore, he replied: “Oh my god! (Laughs) I think he wouldn’t like it” (71–72). I did not come away from reading this paper feeling that I would like it any more than Tolkien would have.

“Is Adapting Tolkien (Mis)Remembering Tolkien?” by Mina D. Lukić

The six papers included in *Adapting Tolkien* total only 139 pages. Lukić’s 52-page paper makes up 37.4% of those pages. I am convinced that hidden within those 52 pages there is a perfectly serviceable discussion of adaptation of Tolkien’s work, with a focus on Peter Jackson’s films, but it gets lost in a sea of irrelevancy.

Lukić begins with a promising discussion focusing on Linda Hutcheon’s book *A Theory of Adaptation*. She cites Hutcheon in noting that “Memory is the source of both fear of adaptations and their appeal” (80). She adds that on the one hand, “an adaptation must stand on its own and tell the story for both knowing and unknowing audiences” but that also “it has a special appeal for knowing audiences, which lies in experiencing the stories they love in a new way, with constant oscillation between an adapted work and its adaptation” (80–81). However, her points soon become buried amongst an avalanche of pages of repetitive, redundant, and irrelevant quotations from random “survey participants” and long and undisciplined ramblings about the nature of adaptations and “Fandom and Memory” that it becomes virtually impossible to focus on the good points that Lukić makes. Had I not been reviewing the book and felt obligated to

read every page I surely would have skipped quickly to the next paper.

“The First Age Materials: Christopher Tolkien’s Greatest Task” by Cami D. Agan

Of all the papers in *Adapting Tolkien* I felt most conflicted about this one. Agan is a respected Tolkien scholar, and her paper addresses a topic very near and dear to my heart. However, while I suspect that many readers will find much to appreciate in Agan’s paper, it failed to meet the expectations that I had for it.

Initially, it appears that the “greatest task” that Agan refers to in her title was Christopher Tolkien’s work in compiling the published version of *The Silmarillion* from multiple disparate sources, in 1977. She opens by citing Jason Fisher’s paper “From Mythopoeia to Mythography: Tolkien, Lonröt, and Jerome” in the book *The Silmarillion Thirty Years On*, where Fisher “points out that Christopher’s task [in publishing *The Silmarillion*] involved “collecting, organizing, collating, editing, and even embellishing his father’s scattered writings” (7; see also Fisher 130–131). However, she fails to mention the most important part of Fisher’s paper, which is that, as Fisher states “Christopher Tolkien’s work on the published *Silmarillion*, like that of the other great mythographers, Jerome and Elias Lönnrot . . . was an attempt to make sense out of his father’s ‘body of more or less connected legend’” (Fisher 113). Moreover, Agan simply ignores all other scholarship regarding the creation of the published *Silmarillion*, including Charles Noad’s important essay in the book *Tolkien’s Legendarium: Essays on The History of Middle-earth*, “On the Construction of ‘The Silmarillion’” and my own book, *Arda Reconstructed: The Creation of the Published Silmarillion*, that discusses the subject at great length.

Instead, Agan pivots to a different subject altogether, maintaining that “Perhaps no other testament to Christopher’s achievement is greater than the fact that, despite his father’s death, the disorganization of his unpublished materials, and the task of connecting them (or not) to the published Third Age works, he was able to succeed in giving us multiple portals into these ‘legends’ in his father’s stead” (8). She adds:

Indeed, as Christopher explains, the First Age materials as we now have them function on at least two levels: “in the history of Middle-earth the development was seldom by outright rejection – far more often it was by subtle transformation in stages, so that the growth of the legends . . . can seem like the growth of legends among people, the product of many minds and generations” (*Lost Tales I*, 8). Despite the challenge of making sense of his father’s remaining manuscripts on the First Age, Christopher has managed consistently to provide us with a sense these two levels: the itinerary of his father’s writing (and rewriting) process in the primary

world, as well the sense of an ancient tradition for the inhabitants of the secondary world, Arda, of tales, histories, and other ancient texts saved from the wreck of Beleriand (10).

This is a valid and important point to make, but Agan takes it in a direction that I found distracted from the main point she was making. She states, “To go further and provide a helpful way to consider these two resonances for the tales of the Elder Days, the notions of diegetic and non-diegetic serve to highlight the primary and secondary world divide” (11). Some may indeed find that to be a helpful way to consider these two resonances for the tales of the Elder Days; I did not. “Diegetic” is primarily a cinematic term that seemed out of place to me in this discussion. As Agan acknowledges, “In film, “diegesis” or the diegetic refers to any element within the world of the film” (*Ibid*). As mentioned earlier, Higgins gives an appropriate example of this when he notes that “repurposing a body of disconnected and unfinished language invention to create diegetic dialogue that would suggest the ‘sound and feel’ of Tolkien’s Elvish and the noble race who spoke it” (46). However, imposing this cinematic term onto the question how Christopher’s presentation of the First Age materials functions both as a history of the evolution of the stories themselves as Tolkien created them over the course of almost six decades, and as the history of the ancient times that they purport to cover imposes an unnecessary complication. Agan uses the terms “diegetic,” diegetically” or “diegesis” more than 40 times, few of which add significantly to the core point that she is making.

As an example, she writes, “the fascinating thing about what Christopher Tolkien has given us is that the First Age materials function continually on both levels, diegetic and non-diegetic. They resonate both as records of Tolkien’s sub-creation made and re-made throughout the twentieth century, and as a cache of ancient tales of the Elder Days that preserve and hallow the Great Tales of ‘the drowned lands’ (*CoH*, 8) of Beleriand” (17). If the phrase “diegetic and non-diegetic” is removed this statement loses nothing and the point becomes clearer. The imposition of the cinematic term only serves as a distraction.

Still, Agan makes some very helpful and cogent observations about Christopher’s work presenting his father’s legendarium. Before diverting into her discussion of “diegetic” versus “non-diegetic” Agan notes “While there is substantial editorial commentary as to date of composition-revision, the condition of manuscripts, changes in narrative, etc., the controlling sentiment of cohesion or unity that so formed the published *Silmarillion* does not organize the *History of Middle-earth* texts. As a result, while these texts may ask more of readers, they provide a clearer sense of the way J.R.R. Tolkien worked through what Christopher calls “the vision of his vision” of the Elder Days (*Lost Tales I*, 7). Through these post-*Silmarillion* volumes, Christopher has revealed the “massive

and continuous history” of the First Age and has consciously avoided attempts to reconcile competing strands of narrative (*Peoples*, ix)” (8–9). In my opinion, she would have been better served to continue to focus on discussing how Christopher successfully presented that vision of his father’s vision without bothering with the extra device of using the cinematic concepts to illustrate her point.

Conclusion

Overall, *Adapting Tolkien* is a mix of different ideas about the ways in which Tolkien’s work has been adapted, and varies widely in quality. Nonetheless, the papers included provide some valuable insights into some of the different ways that Tolkien’s work has influenced diverse aspects of our culture, even though I found some aspects of some of the papers problematic.

Perhaps the most consistent takeaway is that the success of an adaptation – or a scholarly paper about the adaptation – is often in the eyes of the beholder. That will inevitably prove true about Amazon’s *The Rings of Power* television series as well.

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