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Tolkien as a Literary Artist (2021) by Thomas Kullmann and Dirk Siepmann

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Tolkien as a Literary Artist: Exploring Rhetoric, Language and Style in “The Lord of the Rings”, by Thomas Kullmann and Dirk Siepmann. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. xiv, 319 pp. \$149.99 (hardcover) ISBN 9783030692988. Also available in ebook format.

This book will ruffle feathers.

In *Tolkien as a Literary Artist*, authors Thomas Kullmann and Dirk Siepmann have applied corpus linguistics (the quantitative and qualitative analysis of word frequency and sequence that large databases of digitized texts have made possible in this century) to the text of *The Lord of the Rings*. Along the way they have also incorporated into their study other, more traditional, methods of literary analysis, though these are always informed by this newly available data.

Some of the results of such deep analysis of Tolkien’s “Rhetoric, Language, and Style,” to echo the subtitle of this book, corroborate judgements of critics over the half-century since the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* (such as the role of the hobbits as mediating focal characters, K& S Chapter 4). Other results tend to refute long-held views (like the prevalence and significance of archaic inversions; see K & S p. 40), and these are the findings likely to make some splash. In between are those findings that will be a matter of indifference to most readers but will prove useful to some future writer on Tolkien who wonders why Aragorn begins a pronouncement about the future with *shall* half again as often as Gandalf does, and seven times as often as Sam or Pippin.

Kullmann and Siepmann’s title is a fair reflection of their approach to studying the language of *The Lord of the Rings*: “Tolkien as a Literary Artist.” By “literary artist” they purport “not to accord any special status to the creator of Middle-earth,” but simply to use the same tools to evaluate Tolkien’s works as might be brought to bear on those of more “canonical” authors such as James Joyce or Virginia Woolf (4). These techniques are primarily Corpus Stylistics on Siepmann’s part, and literary analysis within a framework of “intertextuality” on Kullmann’s. The distinction between the two authors is invited by the careful attribution of each chapter to one or the other (or both), though to be sure there are fruitful mutual influences between the two authors. By measuring Tolkien with the same rod used for academically respectable authors, Siepmann and Kullmann touch on the simmering question of Tolkien’s canonical status in academe—a status which still seems slow in coming. The authors measure the glacial pace of canonical acceptance in the introduction of this book (and in its conclusion) by appeal to standard histories of English-language literature which allocate relatively little space (in some cases none) to Tolkien (1). Avoiding the chimera of “relative literary merit,” virtually all the statements about Tolkien’s style in this book are made

against the baseline of English-language novels of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (a particular area of expertise for Professor Kullmann).

While this analysis allows an easy refutation of critical charges of Tolkien's language as "impoverished" or "simple and lacking in conventional novelistic textures" (5)—a refutation more empirical than hitherto possible—the procedure has the effect of bringing newer and more sophisticated weapons to a battle whose issue has been decided decades ago. Nevertheless, a few litanies of key words illustrating new uses of old roots in Tolkien leads to the bold and possibly startling assertion that Tolkien is "in a much less obvious sense than in the case of James Joyce or Virginia Woolf . . . a linguistic post-modernist" (8).

Even pronouncements like this, presented as challenges to critical consensus, will strike many current Tolkien scholars and fans as old news. Tolkien's debt to 19th- and early-20th-century novels is presented by Kullmann and Siepmann as "often . . . overlooked" (297), an assessment that itself overlooks the past few decades of criticism explicating echoes of modern fiction in Tolkien, culminating in Holly Ordway's *Tolkien's Modern Reading* (2021).

A particular strength of *Tolkien as a Literary Artist* is its catalogues of Tolkien's archaisms of diction and syntax, long stigmatized by detractors as either grating on the modern ear, or channeling the pseudo-medievalism of the nineteenth century. As impressive as these massive marshalling of texts can be, judgments about just what key words *are* supposedly "archaic" are not presented with any regularity. This is particularly surprising, since the database makes possible an objective definition of archaism. We could simply consider an archaism to be an older usage not reflected elsewhere in the corpus, or reflected measurably less frequently. So a purely nominal definition of "archaism" can be posited by appeal to what words are no longer in wide use. But surely this is as useless to criticism as the other extreme, the reader's whim which asserts, "Verily and forsooth, such and such a locution be archaism, because I *say* it be archaism." Unless there is a measure of such usages before the 19th century, how do we know the given usage is archaic? And if, as Siepmann and Kullmann seem to imply, romances by the like of Sir Walter Scott and William Morris are the sources of supposed the elder diction, how do we identify them as archaisms in Scott and Morris?

Illustrations of what I consider the arbitrariness of the "archaic" label abound: I shall (note the archaism of "shall" and "abound") select a few. The differentiation of "glad / gladness" from "happy / happiness," "joyous / joy" across different characters (Aragorn, hobbits, and Gimli respectively; pages 265, 273, 287) is itself quite valuable. Why, though, label *glad* "literary" (265)? Perhaps because of association with the King James "glad tidings? In which case "tidings" is the

archaic element (as Kullmann and Siepmann duly report in contradistinction to “news,” p. 265), not “glad.” Nearing my seventh decade of exposure to colloquial English, I cannot bring myself to consider “glad” a linguistic throwback.

Further: mere infrequency is not enough to brand a word: this study marks *unscathed* as similarly “literary,” though I’ll wager it will pass unnoticed among most 21st century general readers. Recent lexicographers seem to agree: I could not find a current dictionary that lists “scathe” as archaic.

While the introduction to this book seems to take a proper delight in twitting Tolkien fans and critics who “seem to know Tolkien by heart, but have read little else,” and “explain Tolkien by reference to Tolkien”—these are the ruffled feathers referred to earlier, and perhaps you’ll say they need ruffling, and perhaps I’ll agree—nevertheless, Siepmann and Kullmann are sometimes guilty of the opposite extreme of ignoring obvious contexts in Tolkien’s major texts outside of *The Lord of the Rings*. Granted, the stated purpose of *Tolkien as a Literary Artist* is objective study of that one text. But something as simple as placing “orcs” in the same category with “hobbits” as words “invented by Tolkien” (without any detectable play with the etymology of Latin *inventio* as “discovery”) is the sort of claim one would expect of that hypothetical reader who knows Tolkien by heart, but little else. Otherwise the very sources that Tolkien mined for the word *orc* would be obvious, as would its connection with the modern metathesized and vocalized form *ogre* (noted by the OED). When the tenth-century glossator(s) of MS Cotton Cleopatra A.iii listed equivalents for Latin *orcus*, the first choice was simply “orc.” (Then *byrs*, then *hel-deofol*.)

A bit more nuanced is this book’s unfortunate designation of such phenomena as the sentient willow in “The Old Forest” chapter (Book I, Chapter 6), Treebeard, and Elves as “supernatural” (pages 133, 149, 240) without at least acknowledging Tolkien’s twitting of the OED for the unsuitability of the word in regard to *fairy*. In the same way, the conscious nuance of “magic” in the text of *The Lord of the Rings* itself is ignored by Kullmann and Siepmann, to the point of calling plants that have healing properties “magic” (132) when their effect could as easily be considered pharmacological, even within the context of the fantasy novel; and Saruman’s hypnotic control over people is termed “magic” (145) when similar auto-suggestion can be instanced in the primary world, even if it be merely a trick of the mind.

Prof. Kullmann’s expertise in the 19th and 20th century British novel is invaluable in detecting echoes (or in Julia Kristeva’s terms “pre-texts”) of Tolkien’s contemporaries in *The Lord of the Rings*. Such echoes, where demonstrable, are welcome as a healthy antidote to the too-frequent assumption in Tolkien criticism

that the salient pre-text must always be medieval. Yet *Tolkien as a Literary Artist* perhaps sounds the other extreme by excluding pre-modern corpora of English writing—corpora that undeniably informed Tolkien’s diction. The loss of that pre-modern context is not limited to the words in *The Lord of the Rings* that are no longer found in English, such as *mathom* or *marish* or *eored*, but is felt in words that are still with us, like *tale*, *sheen*, or the verb form of *shape*, which simultaneously bear quite different modern (“story,” “reflected light,” “to give form”) and Anglo-Saxon (“counting,” “beauty,” “to create”) meanings.

Consequently, Kullmann and Siepmann’s discussions of the supposed disposition of *reek* (49), the supposed cliché status of *bitter end* (59), or the preference of *doom* for “judgment” (179) all miss the diachronic nuances of those three items. In the case of *reek*, the primary meaning when Tolkien wrote was “smell,” but many of the iterations in *The Lord of the Rings* more closely fit the earlier sense of “vaporish wafting.” Of the twenty-four iterations of *reek/reeks/reeking*, in *The Lord of the Rings*, Siepmann and Kullmann’s assertion that the word is “associated with the foul odours of Mordor” (49), do not differentiate the two layers of meaning. Admittedly, some of Tolkien’s uses of the word, such as “a reek arose of torches,” or “reeking marshes,” might merge both senses. But locutions like “a smoldering reek” and “a reek lay on the land” tend more toward the sight of the rising cloud than to the smell.

The case of *bitter end* is stickier. In the discourse of the 19th and 20th century novels that form the baseline for the study of Tolkien’s words for Kullmann and Siepmann, authors consciously avoid any collocations of words other writers have used before them, anathematizing such combinations with the stamp of “cliché,” originally French printers’ jargon for the pre-arranged block of type or image (also called a “stereotype”). But before moveable type such re-use of others’ words was not stigmatized. It was even cultivated. And in any case, collocations happen despite our diligence, or else the concept of “pre-text” used in this study would be impossible. Simply remember that Tolkien was trained as a language historian and the significance of word patterns change. A cliché becomes a fossil of various semantic associations, pointing to earlier forms. More often than not, a cliché in *The Lord of the Rings* presents Tolkien with an opportunity to suggest earlier states of the words. *Bitter* originally suggested a physical image, meaning “sharp” (related to *bite*), subsequently applied metaphorically to taste. But that semantic change is a red herring in the combination “bitter end,” because it does not derive, as commonly assumed, from the bitter dregs after the sweet stuff is gone, but from the “bit” end of a rope.

Tolkien reverts to the earlier visual meaning of “bitter” twice in the “Shelob’s Lair” chapter (Book IV, Chapter 9), avoiding reference to the “bitter end” of Frodo’s sword Sting by speaking of its “bitter edge”—a double pun, since “edge” was an Old English word for “sword” (related to the modern meaning by synecdoche). A few pages later Sam’s blade meets Shelob when the giant spider “thrust herself on a bitter spike.” Tolkien only uses the combination “bitter end” nine times in the half-million words of the novel, modifying it four times with “the,” three times with “a,” once with “its” and once with no direct modifier (“to find bitter end”). These variations force the reader, I think, to consider the constituent words of the collocation separately.

The “layered” semantics of English words is yet another argument for extending the corpora in any future studies of Tolkien’s style. The continuity of English style and syntax, a pet notion of Tolkien’s, is obscured when the context of earlier forms is ignored. Something as simple as the gendered pronouns for sun and moon in Middle-earth, for example, is misconstrued when Kullmann presents them as following “Germanic conventions . . . rather than the English poetic convention of referring to the sun as ‘he’, as in Latin.” The significance of the feminine sun is not that it is a Germanic rather than a Latinate feature, but that it is later rather than earlier. English did not *change* its grammatical gender: it *lost* it as an inflection. Old English grammatical gender not a matter of pronouns only. And while it is true that one can find a masculine *sunna* in Old English (in Ælfric, for example), by far the norm is feminine *sunne*. Alfred the Great’s educational reform normalized the West Saxon feminine form, and the instruction in Old English that Tolkien received in the first decades of the 20th century followed such West Germanic normalization—much to the irritation of young John Ronald, who remained Mercian at heart.

Another mechanism by which the words of older writers merge with ours is in song, and the prevalence of song and verse in *The Lord of the Rings* calls for a procedural exclusion in the word-crunching involved in this study. The book does in fact give special attention to the lyrical side of *The Lord of the Rings*, and Kullmann’s chapter on “Songs and Poems” (Chapter 8) is one of the best features of this volume. But the tendency of diction in poetry to skew older than diction in the novel will consequently taint the results of any word search intended to scout “archaism” or “literary” word use—unless song is separated out in the sample.

If all these quibbles over detail (and some over design) obscure the attractiveness and (what is even rarer) the usefulness of *Tolkien as a Literary Artist*, then shame on the reviewer. Even readers who quarrel with some of its conclusions

will, I believe, find the beginnings of several critical conversations on Tolkien's stylistics in this book.

The introduction (Chapter 1) is virtually an executive summary of the whole book, including paraphrases and direct repetitions from the later chapters.

Chapter 2 ("Tolkien as a Stylist," Siepmann) presents the key-word analysis as a function of the same key-words in 19th and 20th century fiction, with a bonus in 2.3.3 of "Key Words Shared with Tolkien's Translation of *Beowulf*."

Chapter 3 ("Narrative Syntax," Siepmann) gets deep into the weeds of grammatical construction in Tolkien's style on word, phrase, and clause levels, ending with analysis of two sample paragraphs.

Chapter 4 ("Points of View," Kullmann) confirms and deepens the stylistic observations of Tom Shippey (not cited in the chapter bibliography), Jared Lobdell, Brian Rosebury, and Steve Walker, measuring the dominance of the hobbit point of view in the novel by making them the internal storytellers (85% of all "non-direct" speech, according to Kullmann, represents hobbits), and the foci of "psychonarration (p. 105).

Chapter 5 ("Landscape Descriptions," Kullmann), identifies three functions of landscape in *The Lord of the Rings*: to glorify the English countryside, to mirror the state of a character's mind, and to "add magic."

Chapter 6 ("Speeches and Declarations," Kullmann) allows for more formal and ritual uses of speech, and acknowledges the extent to which syntax and style observations of previous chapters become more complex when speech acts become more formal.

Chapter 7 ("Storytelling," Kullmann) identifies three categories of the 45 to 50 "intercalated" stories told by twenty-three characters in the novel: simultaneous events, exposition, and "mythological" past.

Chapter 8 ("Poems and Songs," Kullmann) includes a well-crafted argument that in following the histories of these traditional songs "readers become philologists."

Chapter 9 ("Language and Character," both authors) is an expansion of suggestions in earlier chapters of the ways in which idiolect aids characterization in *The Lord of the Rings*. The individual observations on characters' speech is of tremendous value to readers and critics interested in character study in Tolkien.

The conclusion (Chapter 10, "Tolkien's Position in Literary History," both authors) is modest, tentative, and brief, though it does not shirk from stylistic comparison with the canonical giants Shakespeare and Joyce.

I have called *Tolkien as a Literary Artist* a useful book, and that may be an understatement. Its word lists and stylistic observations will form the basis of

articles and studies for years to come. One of my first evaluative questions of any work on Tolkien is always, “will this add to our understanding and appreciation of Tolkien’s work?” For this work, the answer is, “oh, yes, immensely—both in itself, and in its potential to generate valuable criticism.”

In spite of the feathers.

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