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## Critical Insights: The Lord of the Rings (2022), edited by Robert C. Evans

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*Critical Insights: The Lord of the Rings*, edited by Robert C. Evans. Amenia, New York: Salem Press / Grey House Publishing, 2022. xxxvi, 324 pp. \$105.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9781637000717. Also available in ebook format.

*Critical Insights: The Lord of the Rings*, part of the long-running “Critical Insights” series from Salem Press, is a volume edited by Robert C. Evans that explores J.R.R. Tolkien’s life and writing from a seemingly wide variety of approaches, and with special attention to *Lord of the Rings*. With over eighteen articles divided into four sections – and an appendix of resources such as a chronology of Tolkien’s life and works, as well as bibliographies – the very definition of what is meant by this anthology as “critical” is ambiguous. The corpus of contributions is a mixture of, on the one hand, a series of scholarly readings; and, on the other, essays that place the individual authors’ subjectivity at the forefront, some of which risk a general lack of engagement with Tolkien studies, as well as a lack of accuracy in the general knowledge of important elements belonging to Tolkien’s fictional world, from place and language names to plot details. At the same time, there is no strong sense of a particular theme or direction that guides the volume and its contributions, other than a repository of insights – critical or otherwise.

The first section of the *Critical Insights* anthology functions as an introduction to the understanding of Tolkien and his work.<sup>1</sup> Inaugurating the volume is “The Emotions of a Tolkien Reader” by Franco Manni. Although the editor advertises Manni’s contribution as an “international perspective”, thus proving Tolkien’s enduring global popularity, this is not the article’s focus. Instead, Manni elaborates a scale of fifteen factors through which to explain the affective potential of Tolkien’s work. Manni’s personal convictions and his passion for Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* are the essay’s main driving force, rather than a concrete, theoretical methodology that could justify his selection of factors and potential widespread application – of which there is no evidence. Second in this section is a brief account of Tolkien’s life by Evans, which may perhaps prove useful as a summary, but does not offer any new insights on the former’s lifetime or criticism of the existing biographies written on Tolkien.

The second section, “Critical Contexts”, begins with a historical / biographical article by Nancy Bunting entitled “Speak Memory: Some Biographical Sources of *The Lord of the Rings*”. Bunting’s well-written article seeks to draw parallels between *Lord of the Rings* and important elements of Tolkien’s life, especially places. While “Inventing Buckland” is its most persuasive portion, Bunting’s comparison between Eärendel and Brandywine proves rather unconvincing, and a further detailing of Tolkien’s preference for Old English in connection to the geography of both England and Middle-earth is to be desired. Bunting’s contribution is followed by Brandon Schneeberger’s “Teaching Tolkien: An Overview of Approaches”. Rather than suggesting

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<sup>1</sup> The sub-divisions of the main section of “Critical Readings” as detailed in the Introduction are not followed in the volume itself.

original strategies to discussing Tolkien in the classroom, this article is detailed and well-balanced summary of *Approaches to Teaching Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings" and Other Works*, edited by Leslie A. Donovan. But, as a summary, it does not engage in any criticism of the ideas suggested in the *Approaches* volume. Schneeberger's outline may be helpful for those seeking an introduction into teaching methods suggested by outstanding Tolkienists, but one wonders about its affordances, especially considering the reviews already provided by E. L. Risdén<sup>2</sup> and Diana Pavlac Glyer<sup>3</sup> in past years.

Next is "The Departure of Boromir": A Close Reading" by John R. Holmes. Holmes provides a close-reading of a specific moment in the plot of *Lord of the Rings*. The author argues for the need of a stylistic studies of Tolkien's prose and supports his claims by quoting a valid observation made by Michael D. C. Drout, albeit from over twenty years ago. Despite the absence of an in-depth corroboration of this statement, Holmes elaborates a meticulous analysis of this chapter from *The Fellowship of the Ring*. His section "Judas or Peter?" is the most thought-provoking as an interpretation of Boromir's role in and significance to *Lord of the Rings*. Given the painstaking work undertaken by Holmes, I would have wished a further underscoring of how the article's author perceives Tolkien's word-choice as furthering the understanding of this particular event within the narrative.

Closing the "Critical Contexts" selection is "Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* Trilogy and Victor Fleming's *Wizard of Oz*", penned by the anthology's editor, Robert C. Evans. Through a comparative approach, Evans' article discusses Fleming's influence on Jackson's production, as well as the cultural importance and fantasy aspects of both films. The article's best moment is its side-by-side analysis of both films, with "Further Parallels between *The Lord* and *The Wizard*: III" its strongest section. Unfortunately, Evans does not use interviews or statements made by the trilogy's director or production team to explicate potential influences, nor is there a reflection on the contemporary legacy of both Jackson's and Fleming's work. Most troubling is the lack of accuracy when conveying scenes from Tolkien's work and its adaptation – of which, the assertion that Frodo wakes up in the Shire (as opposed to Minas Tirith in Jackson's films and Ithilien in the original) and sailing West "to new places and, presumably, to new adventures" is perhaps the most egregious (64).

"Critical Readings" is the volume's third and longest section with twelve articles. It begins with another contribution by the volume's editor, entitled "Reading and Understanding Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*: A Survey of Critical Responses". Evans wishes to answer two questions central to Tolkien scholarship – "Why read J. R. R. [sic] Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*? Why read his many other works as well?" (69) – by reviewing and summarizing two compilations of critical essays edited by Rose A. Zimbardo and Neil Isaacs: *Tolkien and the Critics* (1968) and *Understanding The Lord of the Rings: The*

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<sup>2</sup> *Arthuriana*, Vol 26, Number 2, 2016, pp. 139-141.

<sup>3</sup> *Tolkien Studies*, Vol 14, 2017, pp. 201-205.

*Best of Tolkien Criticism* (2004). Whereas the importance of both collections to the history of Tolkien studies is beyond doubt, the meaning and purpose of Evans's survey – despite being detailed and informative – is puzzling for three reasons. First, Evans does not acknowledge the existence of Zimbardo and Isaac's 1981 collected volume, *Tolkien: New Critical Perspectives*, as the 2004 edited collection contains five essays from the 1981 volume. Second, Evans rarely offers a critical perspective on the articles contained in these collections. Third, there are no links between the arguments proposed by these contributions and current scholarship, especially considering that the field has grown quite considerably in the 54 years since the publication of Zimbardo and Isaacs' first edited anthology and the soon-to-be twentieth anniversary of *The Best of Tolkien Criticism*. In a similar vein, Evans authors an overview of Tom Shippey's *Roots and Branches: Selected Papers by Tom Shippey* (2007) in the article "Tom Shippey on *The Lord of the Rings*: The Legacy of a Major Tolkien Scholar". Again, although Evans offers a valuable summary of Shippey's main arguments, the issues highlighted in Evans' previous article appear once more. A critical engagement with Shippey's ideas that takes into consideration the current state of Tolkien scholarship, as fifteen years have passed since the publication of the collection surveyed by Evans is absent, not to mention that Kelley M. Wickham-Crowley had already published a review of *Roots and Branches* in 2008.<sup>4</sup>

The next article from "Critical Readings" is Joyce Ahn's "Critical Responses to Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* Film Trilogy". Ahn's contribution is an overview of Janice M. Bogstad's and Philip E. Kaveny's 2011 edited collection *Picturing Tolkien: Essays on Peter Jackson's The Lord of the Rings Film Trilogy*. Despite Ahn's competent summary of each article, her survey does not address the interconnection between the essays, nor does it discuss the present-day significance of Jackson's adaptations for Tolkien scholarship, especially considering that 2021 marked the 20-year anniversary of the release of *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy. As Anne C. Petty's perceptive review of *Picturing Tolkien* rightly states – and which Ahn does not reference – *Picturing Tolkien* was published from a ten-year perspective of the films' release.<sup>5</sup> Since then another ten years have passed. At the same time, Ahn's survey feels like a missed opportunity to bring into the conversation the renewed discussions surrounding the adaption of Tolkien's literary production sparked by the recent Amazon Prime production *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*, and the author's own criticism of the volume reviewed is missing.

Next is an essay by Courtney Petrucci: "Tolkien as a Craftsman: The Literary Value of *The Lord of the Rings*". Petrucci's premise is the historically tense relationship between Tolkien's literary production, literary studies, and intelligentsia. And yet, given the influential work of scholars like Jane Chance, Verlyn Flieger, and Tom Shippey to address the literary value of Tolkien's texts

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<sup>4</sup> *Tolkien Studies*, Volume 5, 2008, pp. 233-244.

<sup>5</sup> *Tolkien Studies*, Volume 9, 2012, pp. 92-97.

over the past decades, the theoretical underpinnings of Petrucci's study remains unclear. Petrucci reads the first chapter of each volume of *Lord of the Rings* to find the interconnection between the narrative's different plotlines as the backbone of the text's structure. This is indeed an essential characteristic of the novel, termed by an expert like Shippey as *entrelacement*. Nevertheless, Petrucci's exploration of this interconnection seems throughout most of her article unfocused, summarizing the plot rather than analysing Tolkien's storytelling techniques, which she does brilliantly, if very briefly, in her close reading analysis of the multiple verb tenses in "The Departure of Boromir".

Following Petrucci's essay is John R. Holmes' article "'A Dream of Music': The Eärendil Poem in *The Lord of the Rings*". Holmes' contribution is one of the best pieces in *Critical Insights*, for not only does it consist of a superbly constructed analysis of Tolkien's use of poetry and its effects – intra- and extradiegetically – with knowledge of scholarly sources. An element that would perhaps further Holmes' reading is the significance of the chain made by Bilbo's translation of the Eärendil poem and the editor/translation figure that then delivers the poem to the present-day reader. Kris Swank's "Eldest: Tom Bombadil and Fintan mac Bóchra as Memory Keepers" is another scholarly gem within the volume. Superbly written and researched, her analysis covers Tolkien's own impressions of Tom Bombadil, the character's Finnish sources, and new insights in the associating of Bombadil with Irish legend. Further expansion of her ideas, especially those expressed in the section "Other Ancients", is definitely to be encouraged.

Next after Swank's essay is "Shelob's Origins in Tolkien's Cats" by Nancy Bunting. Considering Tolkien's well-documented dislike for cats, Bunting's article puts into perspective the relationship between these animals and Tolkien's literary works via his personal experiences, as well as the presence of cat-like elements in his artwork and narratives. Whereas most of the arguments in Bunting's piece stand solidly, their interpretation and their implications for the *Lord of the Rings* could have been taken further, such as the meaning of Shelob thought by Sauron as his cat or Gollum's animality in addition to his potential link to Tevildo.

Three further essays explore religious and spiritual aspects in Tolkien's narrative. Referring to a mainstay of Tolkien studies in view of Tolkien's faith, Franco Manni's "Religion in Tolkien's Works" reads like a very personal rather than scholarly reflection from a Christian standpoint. In fact, Manni's main argument is that the religion of Middle-earth, even if a world-building project with its internal cosmogonic origin and potentially diverging beliefs, "is close and similar to that of the Jews and Christians" (214). Two aspects of Manni's essay stand out: first, the absence of any reference to the long history of writings on religion in Tolkien's literary production, as well as the study of tenets considered central to the text and relevant within a religious framework – despair, duty, free will, grief, and hope. Second, it is striking that Manni labels as "dross" or "contamination" the unique adaptations that the "ethnic-cultural realities" of the Mediterranean and Nordic cultures made of Christianity (214).

Such a statement stands at odds with many of the elements Tolkien admired from texts like *Beowulf*, including the “theory of Northern courage” that can be identified in *Lord of the Rings* – and which Manni mentions, if only in passing.

Following is “Pity, Malice, and Agency in Tolkien’s Subcreation” by Matthew M. DeForrest. Although his study is a Catholic interpretation of Tolkien’s work, DeForrest importantly acknowledges religion-based readings of Tolkien’s work as important and valid, but not definitive. DeForrest intelligently articulates an analysis of the primary text – with a focus on pity, malice, and agency – whilst bringing other authors and literary traditions into the conversation. And yet, it is baffling how DeForrest’s interpretation ignores the wealth of scholarship surrounding these core concepts. DeForrest also contributed the next essay: “The Power That Dare Not Speak Its Name: Tolkien, Magic, and the Occult”. Here DeForrest explores magic as an essential aspect of Tolkien’s fictional world by interpreting its source and, more importantly, the purpose of magic. Nevertheless, despite its interesting interpretative proposals, DeForrest’s study lacks a sturdy methodological framework whilst also ignoring Tolkien’s own reflections on magic in *Lord of the Rings* and Middle-earth as expressed in his 1954 letter to Naomi Mitchinson.

The final essays in this section are dedicated to addressing what the introduction dubs “the controversial matters of race and ethnicity” (xi) via two articles written by Larry Swain: “Mythic People of Fire and Tolkien’s Southern Races in The Lord of the Rings” and “Tolkien’s Alleged Anti-Semitism and the Diaspora”. As a Person of Colour reviewing this volume, I look forward to attempts made to address this underrepresented subject in Tolkien scholarship. And yet, both of Swain’s take on the position of defending Tolkien as a person and author based on the assumption of authorial intent – by, for example, using Tolkien’s letters and interview extracts – and professional background without clearly specifying the origin and history of discussions on race in Tolkien’s literary production nor distinguishing how systemic racism and antisemitism manifests in cultural products such as fantasy works written from a Eurocentric perspective. Whereas Swain’s arguments demonstrate his erudition in Tolkien’s mythological and literary sources, there is little textual analysis of the Dwarves, Easterlings, and Southrons as they are portrayed and perceived within the fictional world created by Tolkien’s texts. Simultaneously, there is practically no solid references to the current conversations surrounding the subject, as well as the valuable work done in this regard by Dimitra Fimi, Helen Young, Robin Anne Reid, and Margaret Sinex. And in Swain’s refutation of antisemitism, he only mentions in passing articles written by Craig Bird, Rebecca Brackmann, and Renée Vink, without synthesising their points and then proceeding to articulate his own.

*Critical Insights* can only be described as an unbalanced volume that should have had a higher degree of editing and accuracy when referring to Tolkien’s literary production and the scholarship surrounding it. The volume’s contributions range from a few outstanding critical readings to a majority of interpretations that may be of use to those beginning their immersion in the

discussions surrounding Tolkien's work. With a few exceptions, for those who seek a more specific, scholarly engagement with the author's texts, the road goes ever on elsewhere.

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