Twenty-first Century Receptions of Tolkien (2022), edited by Will Sherwood

Kristine Larsen
Central Connecticut State University, larsen@ccsu.edu

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Many of the volumes in the Tolkien Society's Peter Roe Series (of which this is number 21) are slender in bulk but hefty in thoughtfulness. This particular edition continues in that tradition. As described in the introduction by editor Will Sherwood (Education Officer of the Tolkien Society), this work contains four essays based on presentations delivered at the Tolkien Society 2021 Winter Online Seminar (February 13, 2021). In some ways it is disappointing that a higher percentage of the twelve presentations were not included in this volume (presumably based on the presenters' wishes); however, the four very different explorations we have here succeed in giving the reader both a taste of the transmedia world that Middle-earth has become in the Twenty-first Century and the importance of new theoretical frameworks, including fandom studies. Henry Jenkins defines a "transmedia story" as one for which each "new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution" to the collective universe (95) – the term "text" used broadly to include film, games, literature, and more. Some fans choose to limit their engagement with Middle-earth solely to written works penned by J.R.R. Tolkien (which places *The Silmarillion* as published in an interesting gray area); others enjoy immersing themselves in works that take Tolkien's vision as their starting point, the creations of "other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama," including game designers, artists, musicians, fanfic writers, and, of course, film director Peter Jackson (*Letters*, Letter 131, 145). In the Twenty-first Century Middle-earth has increasingly become what Marsha Kinder describes as a "supersystem of entertainment, one marked by transmedia intertextuality" (1). It is therefore quite fitting that the four essays collected in this volume reflect an international authorship, the use of varied theoretical lenses, and diverse topics of focus.

Jelena Filipovic (Heinrich-Heine-University, Germany) kicks off the book with an exploration of the open world, third-person perspective video game *Middle-earth: Shadow of War* (2017). As Filipovic explains, the game (a sequel to *Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor* [2014]) "takes place in an alternate storyworld that depicts events preceding *LotR*" (5). The player interacts with this vision of Middle-earth through the original character Talion, a Ranger who is "brought back from the dead by the wraith of Celebrimbor" (6). At this point, only two paragraphs into the essay, some readers (especially those like myself not usually interested in gaming and/or analysis of original characters) might be tempted to skip the remainder of the essay. But as I quickly discovered, such a narrow-minded path can only be followed at the risk of missing a valuable opportunity to

engage more deeply with a more "canonical" (albeit incomplete) work of Tolkien's, "The New Shadow" (*Peoples*, 409-21). Indeed, this essay posits that a scholarly examination of *Middle-earth: Shadow of War* provides additional understanding as to why Tolkien abandoned his sequel to *The Lord of the Rings*.

Filipovic begins with an overview of the game's plot (including numerous spoilers) as seen through René Girard's theoretical lens of memetic rivalry. Specifically, she analyses how in the game universe Celebrimbor and Sauron tread a very thin line between "peace and dominion" because of their memetic rivalry (resulting from "imitation of a model who becomes a rival, or, vice versa, of a rival who becomes a model" [7]). While canon purists might turn up their nose at this version of Celebrimbor, as part of her analysis of the game universe, Filipovic makes cogent insights concerning the Celebrimbor of Tolkien's written works (especially *The Silmarillion*). She also draws connections between the plot of "The New Shadow" (and interestingly, another abandoned story, "The Lost Road") and the alternative universe of *Middle-earth: Shadow of War*. The essay does bog down a bit in the middle, in a detailed analysis of the original character Talion as a victim/scapegoat, which is more plot summary for the game than effective original analysis. The impatient reader can easily skip over these three pages without losing the overall theoretical thread of the piece. Likewise, the final section, which deals with Orcs and political theory, does not flow as naturally as the first two, leading to a slight flattening of the ending. Indeed, the author teases the reader with the startling comment that in the game "major antagonists, such as Shelob are portrayed as good," a statement that deserves more unpacking than it is afforded here. Despite these rough spots, reading this essay will afford even the most militant never-gamer valuable insights into important themes in Middle-earth.

French doctoral student Marie Bretagnolle also contributed an art-related essay to the previous proceedings in this series, for the 2020 Tolkien Society Seminar on Adapting Tolkien. Her essay in this volume is described as inspired in part on an interview with artist Tómas Hijo for the Tolkien Collector's Guide website. Here Hijo explains that his artistic intention is to illustrate as if he was a being living in Middle-earth, looking from the inside-out rather than the inside-in. Bretagnolle includes Hijo as one of four Twenty-first Century artists she argues embraces this style of "art as coming 'from' Middle-earth" (26). Her analysis begins, not unexpectedly, with two of the most famous illustrators associated with Tolkien's works, Alan Lee and John Howe, whom she describes as depicting Middle-earth through the eye of a traveler within the world. In particular, she argues that both artists' Middle-earth-related sketchbooks (which she compares to a "touristic guide" [27]) reflect the feeling of artists who had literally "travelled across Middle-earth and sketched as mush as they could to show the marvels they have encountered on their way" resulting in a "visual testimony" of Tolkien's

Secondary World (27). Her characterization of these two pillars in the transmedia world of Middle-earth is interesting, but it is not explored in sufficient depth to provide a significant original analysis of their work. The vast majority of the Tolkien fandom is – or should be – familiar with the work of Lee and Howe; therefore the lack of illustrations to accompany this essay is not a significant drawback in the case of her analysis of these particular artists, although the inclusion of a few URLs to illustrations that she feels particularly align with her argument would have been appreciated.

The next artist, Spaniard Tómas Hijo, is not widely known in the fandom; Bretagnolle does a valiant job of describing Hijo's images, and does include a URL where one of the several pieces she references can be viewed. The analysis of this section is far more detailed and nuanced than was seen in the first. As previously noted, Hijo is presented as an artist who composes his art through the lens of a resident of Middle-earth. Bretagnolle explores related aspects of the artist's technique, composition, and the full effect for several *Lord of the Rings*-based pieces in a manner that is useful for those of us who are not art experts.

The final artist, Jay Johnstone, is situated as a translator of Middle-earth. Certainly less familiar than Lee or Howe but still known to a significant portion of Tolkien fandom, Johnstone's easily recognizable style lends itself to a close reading. However, Bretagnolle's descriptions of his methodology is not as clear as it needs to be for a broad audience (like the intended readership of this volume), although the inclusion of URLs leading to various pieces of artwork are greatly appreciated. In short, Johnstone's images are stylistically compared to medieval manuscripts and royal portraits, an analysis that seems rushed. Connections to Pauline Baynes's well-known illustrations for *Farmer Giles of Ham* deserve a more deliberate contemplation than is presented here. Bretagnolle concludes by stating that all four of these artists "emphasize the impression of historical depth already provided by the legendarium" (36); while this may be true, she only provides a truly convincing case for the work of Johnstone in this essay.

The third offering in this book takes the rather traditional form of a scholarly close reading and analysis of a written text, in this case early scenes in *The Fellowship of the Ring* (largely involving the Nazgûl) and representations of darkness. Nick Groom (University of Macau, China), perhaps best known for his work on the Gothic, brings a heavy Twenty-first Century theoretical lens to bear on these vignettes. His ambitious stated goals for this essay are to introduce Speculative Realism to the reader, argue that such modern approaches can "provide startling new readings of Tolkien," demonstrate how Tolkien himself influenced these approaches, and "explain how Tolkien's writing might provide a perspective on the bigger conceptual and environmental concerns of the Anthropocene today" (38) – all in a 21-page essay. As one might expect, even a scholar of such reputation as Groom might be hard pressed to deliver on all these

promises with consistent success. The result is an analysis that becomes less clear and perhaps less successful as it goes along.

Groom begins with a historical review of changing depictions and interpretations of darkness, beginning with Pseudo-Dionysius and moving forward in time using works Tolkien was known to have owned, ranging from *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and on to John Milton and Edmund Burke, before drawing connections to philosophical works of the 21st century. The analysis then shifts to a detailed explanation of Speculative Realism (Object-Oriented Ontology), which Groom himself calls a "rather ambitious" goal for an essay of this length (41). As one would expect, this theoretical discussion is particularly dense, but the author tries his best to invoke interesting examples to illustrate the theoretical framework, although I must admit to having to read this section multiple times to gain what I hope is the intended meaning. A discussion of the difference between "weird" and "eerie" (not unexpectedly invoking Lovecraft, but in addition ghost story author M.R. James) naturally brings to mind the Barrow-Downs, which, unfortunately, Groom admits is "beyond the scope of this paper" (45). What is deemed within the scope is an argument that Tolkien is actually an "unlikely forbear of Speculative Realism" (45) due to his ability to "normalize the non-anthropocentric (human-centred) narrative" (46).

It is after all this that Groom finally turns to analyzing darkness in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, using the theoretical framework(s) previously laid out. This is not an intellectual exercise for the meek (or tired), as it takes some concerted effort to keep up with juxtaposition of theory and practice. The Lovecraftian and Jamesian connections are perhaps the most interesting, and certainly make the effort required worthwhile. An abridged version of this essay, keenly focused on just these aspects, would have been quite interesting; the reader who finds themselves wandering and becoming lost in the earlier theoretical overview is urged to take the time to read this section, as it provides some highly interesting and original views of these familiar scenes in Middle-earth. The conclusion of the essay – where Groom finally gets to the Anthropocene – is disappointingly terse and could have been unpacked further, although in hindsight it would have been better for him to have just stuck to his first three goals and foregone this last brief insight for another work.

Mina Lukić (University of Priština, Kosovo) and Dejan Vukelić (Mathematical Institute, Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts) close out the volume with a study about Tolkien's grave as a site of memory for fans from across the world. While graves in Middle-earth have occasionally been the subject of scholarship (e.g., Sabo 2007), a scholarly investigation of Tolkien's shared grave with Edith as a monument, and fans' reactions to that monument, is long overdue. While reading through their theoretical background I could easily see how Tolkien's grave fit as an example, even before the authors began to present

the results of their online survey on fan reactions to visiting the gravesite. The authors properly situate Tolkien's grave as a memorial in terms of its Beren/Lúthien epitaph, both generically and in relation to the deeper meaning of these characters in his literary and personal life. The biographical and literary overviews strike the proper balance of length and depth, as one cannot assume that all readers of this volume will have sufficient familiarity with either.

The bulk of the essay is based on a January 2021 online survey targeting individuals who visited Tolkien-related sites in the UK. While a list of the other commonly visited sites is not included in the essay (a frustrating oversight), it is not surprising that the grave was the most widely visited location (appearing in 63% of the 500 responses). Tolkien's resting place is certainly one of my top three personal pilgrimage sites in Oxford, the other two being Addison's Walk and the Eagle and Child; as a result, I found myself having a very personal response to this essay, repeatedly agreeing with the excerpts from fan responses to the survey as to how they were viscerally affected by their time at the grave.

It is not clear how familiar the authors of this essay are with questionnaire-based research, although there are a few aspects of the reporting of the results that caused me some pause. First, it was not explained how the survey was advertised and whether the survey had been cleared by a Human Subjects Review Panel (or similar oversight structure). Second, the quotations from the surveys are not described using consistent demographics – a standardized listing such as "initials, age, gender, country" would have been preferred. In addition, some of the comments are accompanied with complete names as well as other demographic data (such as age and country) that allows for the unambiguous identification of the respondents (in the case of well-known fans). It is assumed that as part of the survey respondents were required to actively give informed consent for their comments to be published with their identifying information attached.

Having explained those concerns, I now remove my researcher hat and eagerly don my fandom cap, as I urge all readers to likewise do when pouring through the reproduced survey responses. If you are like me, you will find your own experiences in Wolvercote – and other Tolkien-related sites – echoed in the words of these fellow fans. While there is perhaps little that is truly surprising in the survey results, it is still a highly valuable body of data concerning fan responses to Tolkien the man and his characters (as the survey questions specifically refer to the epitaph). The main question I was left with after reading this essay was what happens to all of the fan-donated items that are periodically removed from the grave; an inventory of such artifacts (including excerpts from letters and other writings left there) would be a fascinating fandom study, the problem being how one might conduct this research ethically.

Taken as a whole, these four essays begin to demonstrate the breadth of topics related to Twenty-first Century receptions of Tolkien that are ripe for exploration,

as well as a taste of myriad flavors of analysis that can be brought to bear. It is hoped that this work will spark additional scholarship, both by the authors in the collection and among its readership.

Kristine Larsen
Central Connecticut State University

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