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Introduction to the Special Issue on "J.R.R. Tolkien and Medieval Poets"

Jane Beal PhD
University of California, Davis, janebeal@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION
to the Special Issue of the *Journal of Tolkien Research*
on “J.R.R. Tolkien and Medieval Poets” in Honor of Richard C. West

by Jane Beal, PhD

“The mind that thought of light, heavy, grey, yellow, still, swift, also conceived of magic that would make heavy things light and be able to fly, turn grey lead into yellow gold, and the still rock into a swift water.” ~ J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-stories”

“Though there is a direct line from medieval alchemy to modern chemistry, there was also a spiritual component. Trying to transmute baser materials (like lead) into nobler ones (like gold) also symbolized ennobling one’s character, one’s soul.”
~ Richard C. West, “Where Fantasy Fits”

I am delighted to share with readers of the *Journal of Tolkien Research* this special issue on “J.R.R. Tolkien and Medieval Poets” in honor of Richard C. West, who was one of the first scholars and archival researchers of Tolkien’s work.¹ The theme was chosen because it interested J.R.R. Tolkien, Richard C. West, and the scholars contributing to this issue. The connection between Tolkien and medieval poets is well worth exploring.

As is well known, J.R.R. Tolkien was a professor at the University of Leeds (1920-1925), and at Pembroke College (1925-1945) and Merton College (1945-1959) of Oxford University. He taught the language and literature of medieval English poets throughout his long career. His editions, translations, and literary scholarship have had a significant, long-lasting impact on medieval literary studies and on the reception of medieval literature in later times. Tolkien’s own imagination was inspired by medieval poetry, and he transformed his medieval linguistic and literary source material in his own original secondary-world of Middle-earth, which he imagined as being set in Arda and its surrounding cosmos. The academic articles included in this special issue explore the connections between some of J.R.R. Tolkien’s best-loved medieval poems and his own creative work.

The contributions to this issue grow out of earlier scholarship by other writers, the foremost of these being Richard C. West himself, and from related investigations of our own. West’s prize-winning essay, “The Interlace Structure of *The Lord of the Rings*,” which received the Mythopoeic Scholarship Award for Inklings Studies in 1976, is a natural source of our inspiration.² This is a model literary study, which examines the use of the medieval literary technique of *entrelacement* used in medieval French tapestry romances and how Tolkien applied it to the structure of his own epic masterpiece.

¹ Janet Brennan Croft, “In Memoriam: Richard C. West.” *Mythlore* 39:2, Art. 23 (April 2021). See <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol39/iss2/23/>. Accessed September 1, 2024.

² Richard C. West, “The Interlace Structure of *The Lord of the Rings*,” in *A Tolkien Compass*, ed. Jared Lobdell (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1975, repr. 2003).

West's book chapters on Turin's *ofermod*, mythological influences in the legend of Beren and Lúthien, and Tolkien's critique of the heroic ethos in *The Children of Hurin* are likewise admirable and inspirational.³ West's wide reading in primary and secondary Tolkien scholarship, of which he had extensive knowledge, is clear in his bibliographies to his studies as well as in his landmark bibliographic book study of Tolkien scholarship.⁴ Like West, other scholars have explored the connection between Tolkien and medieval poets. Some of these influenced West in his work, and all of them influenced the scholars contributing to this special issue.

Naturally Tolkien's major biographers Humphrey Carpenter, John Garth, and Holly Ordway have all indicated significant connections between Tolkien and medieval poetry in their books.⁵ Other book-length studies that specifically explore Tolkien's debts to medieval literature and culture include *Tolkien the Medievalist* (2003) edited by Jane Chance, and co-edited by Chance and Alfred K. Siewers, a related volume, *Tolkien's Modern Middle Ages* (2008). Brian Bates' book, *The Real Middle-Earth: Exploring the Magic and Mystery of the Middle Ages* (2003), and the co-authored volume, *The Keys of Middle-earth: Discovering Medieval Literature through the Fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien* (2005) by Stuart Lee and Elizabeth Solopova, are also rich contributions to scholarship investigating the connections between Tolkien's fantasy work and the work of medieval poets.⁶

John Bowers has published two books exploring Tolkien's scholarly engagement with the fourteenth-century English poet Geoffrey Chaucer, *Tolkien's Lost Chaucer* (2019) and *Tolkien on Chaucer, 1913-1959* (2024), both published by Oxford University Press.⁷ Janet Brennan Croft, Tom Shippey, and Verlyn Flieger have made major contributions through their books as well.⁸ Major reference works

³ For a list of Richard C. West's contributions to Tolkien studies, with full bibliographic information, see the Selected Bibliography at the end of this introduction.

⁴ Richard C. West, *Tolkien Criticism: An Annotated Checklist* (Kent State University Press: 1970; expanded 2nd edn., 1981). In 1976, the first edition of this book won the Mythopoeic Society's award for Inklings Studies Scholarship.

⁵ Humphrey Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography*, Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1977, repr. 1978, 1982; John Garth, *J.R.R. Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003); and Holly Ordway, *Tolkien's Faith: A Spiritual Biography* (Elk Grove, IL: Word on Fire Academic, 2023).

⁶ *Tolkien the Medievalist*, ed. Jane Chance (New York: Routledge, 2003); *Tolkien's Modern Middle Ages*, ed. Jane Chance and Alfred K. Siewers (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Brian Bates, *The Real Middle-Earth: Exploring the Magic and Mystery of the Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), and Stuart Lee and Elizabeth Solopova, *The Keys of Middle-earth: Discovering Medieval Literature through the Fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien* (New York: Palgrave, 2005).

⁷ John Bowers, *Tolkien's Lost Chaucer* (Oxford University Press, 2019) and *Tolkien on Chaucer, 1913-1959* (Oxford University Press, 2024).

⁸ See, for example, Janet Brennan Croft, ed., *War and the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004); Croft, ed., *Tolkien and Shakespeare: Essays on Shared Themes and Language* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2006); Croft and Leslie A. Donovan,

edited by Michael Drout (*The Tolkien Encyclopedia*, 2006) and by Christina Scull and Wayne Hammond (*A J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide*, 2006; 2nd edition 2017) likewise provide a wealth of information about Tolkien's medieval interests.⁹ In addition to these book-length contributions, myriad shorter studies of medieval influences on Tolkien have been published in academic journals, including *Hither Shore*, *Journal of Inklings Studies*, *Mallorn*, *Mythlore*, *Parma Eldalamberon*, *Seven*, *Tolkien Studies*, *Vinyar Tengwar*; and, of course, the *Journal of Tolkien Research*, among others.

In recent years, some of the journal article publications have grown from paper presentations given to the members of the Tolkien Society held annually in September at Oxonmoot at various colleges of Oxford University (most recently, St. Anne's College), to the members of Tolkien at Kalamazoo and the *Pearl-Poet* Society at the International Congress on Medieval Studies (ICMS) held annually in May at the University of Western Michigan, and to medievalists generally at the International Medieval Congress (IMC) held annually in July at the University of Leeds. Tolkien scholars are indebted to the efforts of the session organizers, including Will Sherwood, Yvette Kisor, Christopher Vaccaro, Andrew Higgins, and Dimitra Fimi, among others, for their tireless efforts to bring about greater awareness of the "roots and branches" of Tolkien's imagination. Indeed, most of the essays collected in this special issue emerged from these scholarly gatherings.

In May 2022 specifically, the members of the *Pearl-Poet* Society and Tolkien at Kalamazoo sponsored a paper session on "J.R.R. Tolkien and Medieval Poets: A Session in Honor of Richard C. West" at the ICMS at the University of Western Michigan. We chose to honor him for many reasons. Richard C. West was an American librarian at the University of Wisconsin, Madison and a Tolkien scholar whom many of us knew personally and who influenced all of us with his insightful scholarship. Very sadly, he passed away from complications of the coronavirus pandemic and its effects on an underlying condition on November 29, 2020. This was a tremendous loss to our shared community and collective wisdom about J.R.R. Tolkien.

ed., *Perilous and Fair: Women in the Works and Life of J.R.R. Tolkien* (The Mythopoeic Press, 2015). See also Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1978; London: Allen & Unwin, 1982) and *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (London: HarperCollins, 2001). Finally, see Verlyn Flieger, *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1983, rev. 2002), *Question of Time: J.R.R. Tolkien's Road to Faërie* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1997); *Interrupted Music: The Making of Tolkien's Mythology* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2005), and as editor, *Green Suns and Faerie: Essays on J.R.R. Tolkien* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2012) and *There Would Always Be a Fairytale: More Essays on Tolkien* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2017). Flieger also edited some of Tolkien's stories with clear sources of medieval inspiration, including "Smith of Wootton Major" (2005; 2015), co-edited with Douglas A. Anderson, "On Fairy-stories" (2008), *The Story of Kullervo* (in *Tolkien Studies VII*, 2010, and as a published book, 2015) and *The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun* (2016).

⁹ See Michael Drout, ed., *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment* (New York: Routledge, 2006) and Christina Scull and Wayne Hammond, *A J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006; 2nd edition 2017).

Yet West left behind a legacy of inspirational scholarship on the works of J.R.R. Tolkien. So I (Jane Beal, the editor of this special issue) invited ICMS presenters to develop their papers into publishable academic pieces in West's honor. The project was further discussed at the Tolkien sessions held at the IMC at the University of Leeds in July 2022. Thereafter, additional scholars joined the endeavor. It became an adventure of sorts. We journeyed together in the creation of new scholarship on J.R.R. Tolkien, ever keeping Richard C. West in our minds as we progressed, so that although he was gone, he was still our guide, as it were, like the wizard Gandalf.

In 2022-2023, the resulting group of interested Tolkien scholars met three times via Zoom to share the in-progress or completed drafts of our work. We gave and received very helpful verbal and written feedback to one another to aid each of us in our revisionary processes. We considered publishing a volume of collected essays together in printed book form, but in the end, we discussed and agreed to submit to an open-access journal in order to ensure the widest possible availability of our ideas to the greatest number of interested readers. This choice honors West's own preferences as a scholar, librarian, and fantasy literature fan. He strongly supported knowledge of J.R.R. Tolkien being shared as broadly and generously as possible with all curious readers, students, and scholars.

The decision was also made in part because the work of one of our contributors was supported by a grant that articulated a preference for open-access publication of funded research. It was made because another contributor was facing some serious health issues, and I wanted to be sure that all of the contributors would see their work published in a reasonable amount of time, which I knew could certainly happen with the help of the senior editor of this journal, Brad Eden. I now sincerely thank Brad for his interest in the theme of "J.R.R. Tolkien and Medieval Poets," his invitation to the contributors to submit our collective work to the *Journal of Tolkien Research*, and his encouragement to me as the editor of the project, all of which has enabled the creation of this special issue. I also thank all of the external reviewers for the detailed feedback they gave to each of the contributors on our work.

For following our Zoom draft workshop sessions, we the contributors submitted our revised drafts for this special issue of the *Journal of Tolkien Research* for further critique by reviewers in 2023-2024. This next level of feedback initiated another round of revisions, whereby many of the already excellent academic articles were further perfected. It is exciting now in the academic year 2024-2025 to be able to share with the world of readers the results of our studies and our memories of Richard C. West, which I introduce in further detail below.

J.R.R. Tolkien and Medieval Poets

J.R.R. Tolkien had a vast knowledge of medieval poetry that to date has not been completely explored, despite all of the books and shorter studies published on the subject. So this special issue is by no means comprehensive; rather it is highly selective. Nevertheless, it is full of rich insights from a variety of perspectives that will enrich the field of Tolkien studies.

The first two essays by Anna Smol and Christopher Vaccaro respectively explore Tolkien's interest in poems from early medieval literature and culture, namely, the Old English poems "The Battle of Maldon" and *Beowulf*. The second pair of essays by Kristine Larsen and Deidre Dawson consider Tolkien's interest in Arthurian poems from high medieval literature and culture, namely, the *Lais* of Marie de France and Lazamon's *Brut*. The third pair of essays by Michael Elam and Jane Beal examine Tolkien's interest poems from late medieval literature and culture, specifically Dante's *Divine Comedy* and the anonymously authored, Middle English dream vision poem, *Pearl*. It should be noted that Elam's essay also glances back to earlier Old English literature by considering Tolkien's understanding of the *Beowulf*-poet.

The seventh and final essay in this collection by Sara Brown listens for echoes of medieval poetic values in the formation and representation of national identity in the works of J.R.R. Tolkien. To some extent, all these essays deal with the reception of medieval poetry in the literary corpus of J.R.R. Tolkien. The scholarship in these essays is new, generative, and intended to inspire other readers and scholars interested in the intersections of medieval poetry with the creative prose and poetry of J.R.R. Tolkien.

Early Medieval Literature and Culture

In the first essay, Anna Smol (Mount Saint Vincent University) observes that J.R.R. Tolkien's alliterative verse play, "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son," is his critical and creative response to the Old English poem "The Battle of Maldon." Tracing Tolkien's influence on "Maldon" criticism through his "Offermod" essay, which posits a continuum of alliterative poems dealing with the nature of heroism, from *Beowulf* to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Smol's discussion turns to how Tolkien can claim a place in that tradition and how critics have applied his ideas about war and heroism to some of his other works, especially *The Lord of the Rings*. An analysis of the play itself illustrates some of Tolkien's scholarly ideas about alliterative verse and examines allusions to *Beowulf*, "The Battle of Brunanburh," and "The Battle of Maldon," as well as revisions to some Middle English verses attributed to Canute, and a concluding Latin dirge. These allusions to medieval poetry within "The Homecoming" elicit an awareness of times past, present, and future, positioning readers or audiences in multi-level time frames through their experience of poetry.

In the second essay, "'And Númenor went down into the Sea': Tolkien, *Beowulf*, and the Masochistic Jouissance of Westernesse," Chris Vaccaro (University of Vermont), observes that in *Tolkien, Enchantment and Loss*, John Rosegrant avers that Tolkien wrote of the downfall and destruction of Númenor in order to release a personal emotional complex. Vaccaro examines in greater detail the emotional power of this story and relates it to the psychological notion of primary masochism (Freud, Deleuze, Bersani) and the pleasures connected to the dissolution of the self. The *Beowulf* poem renders conspicuous the dependency of heroic Anglo-Saxon male subjectivity on experiences of masochistic desire and the

Death Drive, the desire to be unburdened of great expectation and responsibility. The attraction to psychic annihilation is both heroic and Christian.

Vaccaro makes the case that Tolkien's close relationship to the *Beowulf* poem primed the pump of his literary artistry when it came to stories of erotico-spiritual submission such as the Fall of Númenor, allowing for the author and readers alike to experience the erotic thrill of the All-Father's punishments. Indeed, Tolkien himself addresses his reoccurring personal dream in his 1955 letter to W.H. Auden, among others, where he describes the Great Wave and his surrender to it. The event is spiritual and highly emotional.

Vaccaro further observes that the destruction of Númenor is described in *The Lord of the Rings* by Faramir, noting, however, that Tolkien first wrote of it in the "Fall of Númenor" (1936), *The Lost Road* (1937), the "Notion Club Papers" (1945), the "Drowning of Andûnë" (1946), and the "Akallabeth" (1948). Iluvatar himself is brought to wrath, and in his anger, he rends apart the world, condemning the Númenoreans and submerging the land and people under the sea. Of course, the biblical echoes are here to discuss as well: readers think of Noah and the Flood (the post-deluvian world) or perhaps Sodom and Gomorrah. Vaccaro goes on to argue that, as with *Beowulf*, the diegesis around the downfall of Númenor evinces not only a sorrow and a fear of God (*pace* Kierkegaard), but also a trembling and a queer pleasure one could accurately label masochistic.

High Medieval Literature and Culture

In the third essay, "Elwing and the Isle of Seabirds: Tolkien's Towers and the *Lais* of Marie de France," Kristine Larsen (Central Connecticut State University) writes that during the late 1920s-1930s, J.R.R. Tolkien was engaged in writing numerous poetic lays, many of which he never completed. At the same time, he was engaging in a series of revisions of his grand mythology of Middle-earth, the tales which were posthumously published as *The Silmarillion*. As he was working on these various projects simultaneously or serially, it is not a surprise to see repeated themes, motifs, and tropes. Larsen argues that among these are several of the Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) folktale types, especially 432, a version of the *Women Imprisoned in the Tower (Rapunzel)* trope termed *The Bird Lover*. Tolkien can also be seen as drawing upon a work that he references in his own writings (and was known to have owned by 1920), the twelfth-century *lais* of Marie de France. Larsen demonstrates numerous parallels between the *Lai of Yonec* of Marie de France and related tales, and she argues that the tale of Eärendil and Elwing increasingly both drew upon and subverted the ATU 432 trope as Tolkien engaged in revisions in the 1930s.

In the fourth essay, "Tolkien and Lazamon," Deidre Dawson (Michigan State University) argues that the Arthurian poem that had the greatest influence on *The Lord of the Rings* was Lazamon's *Brut*. In a letter to editor Milton Waldman (1951), Tolkien expressed his regret that England lacked a mythology and stories of its own that were "bound up with its tongue and soil," explaining that the Arthurian world was "associated with the soil of Britain but not with English," and

that “its ‘faerie’ is too lavish, and fantastical, incoherent and repetitive.”¹⁰ Perhaps to rectify these deficiencies in the Matter of Britain, Tolkien began writing his own version of the Arthurian legend in Old English alliterative meter, *The Fall of Arthur*, but never completed it.

He did complete *The Lord of the Rings*, however, in which key events of Aragorn’s narrative recall similar episodes in the Arthurian section of *Lazamon’s Brut*. Tolkien, a self-described West-Midlander, was drawn for linguistic reasons to the *Brut*, which was composed in a West-Midland dialect of Middle English laced with deliberate archaisms. Tolkien also used archaistic language in several passages in *The Lord of the Rings*. The *Brut*’s ‘faerie’ is fully integrated into the main narrative, thus meeting Tolkien’s standards for a coherent secondary world. Dawson concludes that both Tolkien and *Lazamon* created mythologies “bound up with the tongue and soil” of Britain, evoking a lost past in which their readers or listeners could become fully immersed.

Late Medieval Literature and Culture

In the fifth essay, “Tolkien’s *Beowulf*-poet and his Dantean Tower,” Michael Elam (Regents University) argues that J.R.R. Tolkien’s tower metaphor in “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*” shows significant affinities with views of the sea presented in Dante’s *Purgatorio*. These affinities combine with relevant similarities between Dante and Tolkien’s view of the *Beowulf*-poet to show an underlying preoccupation Tolkien has about the purgation of source material and the sanctification of authors. Ultimately in Tolkien’s perspective, the *Beowulf*-poet’s view from the top of his tower looks ahead to the hope of eternal life promised to the Christian elect.”

In the sixth essay, “Tolkien’s ‘Beloved’ *Pearl*,” I, Jane Beal (University of La Verne), explore Tolkien’s life-long engagement with the fourteenth-century, Middle English, dream vision poem called *Pearl*. I examine the inspiration that Tolkien took from the poem through reading, reciting, copying, editing, translating, and teaching it to undergraduate students at the University of Leeds and Oxford University. Milestones in Tolkien’s work on *Pearl* include his edition of it, produced with E.V. Gordon and Ida Gordon for Oxford University Press (1953), and a metrical translation of it that he worked on from 1920s onwards, which was published with Allen & Unwin in London and Random House in New York through the efforts of his son and posthumous editor, Christopher Tolkien, in 1975. Tolkien’s interpretations of *Pearl*, which included his view that the poem was an elegy with minor allegories within it, are relevant to medieval scholarship, both then and now, and to Tolkien’s own legendarium. The essay carefully examines Tolkien’s notes on the four editions of the poem that he owned. It concludes that the role and imagery associated with the Pearl Maiden in the poem clearly influenced Tolkien’s own “Pearl Maidens,” Lúthien Tinúviel and Elwing the White, while the central symbol of the poem, the pearl, influenced Tolkien’s representation of the Silmarils.

¹⁰ J.R.R. Tolkien, “Letter 151: To Milton Waldman, 1951,” in *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien, Revised and Expanded Edition*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter with Christopher Tolkien (London: William Morrow, an Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers, 2023), 203.

Medieval Inheritance, Modern Identity

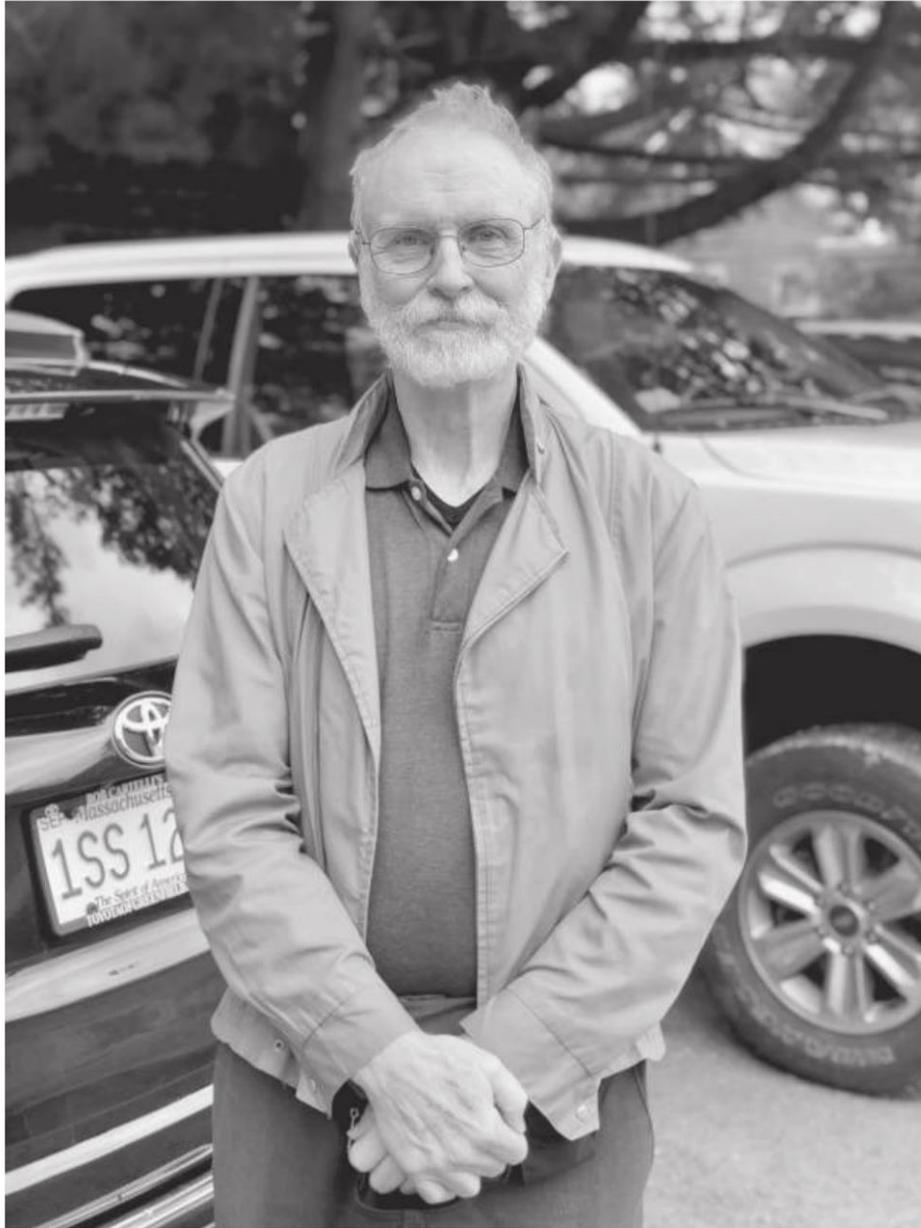
In the seventh and final essay, “Remembering and Forgetting: National Identity Construction in Tolkien’s Middle-earth,” Sara Brown (Signum University) observes that the medieval period in Europe saw the development of a literary movement, grown out of oral tradition, in which epic poems were a means of preserving culture, sharing a moral code, and offering solace in times of hardship. These poems, usually transcribed by monks, had often been passed down through generations and enabled the sharing of memory via storytelling. In many ways, this early literature, rooted as it was in both the religious and the secular aspects of life in this time and which often appropriated classical mythology, was as much a part of the identity of the various European peoples as popular culture is today. The stories and songs of the medieval period may point us towards the beginnings of a sense of ‘nationalism’ and national identity in this time.

Brown further observes that in Tolkien’s Middle-earth, the various peoples, or nations, form and maintain a consciousness of their identity via folktales, songs, archives, and memorials, preserving that identity by constructing shared memory. Concurrently, each nation is being remembered by others, often based on a perception of their morality. Crucially, a nation’s constructed history may omit significant details, typically through a collective act of “forgetting,” to perpetuate a more positive self-image or to enable post-trauma healing.

By investigating the ways in which memory plays a part in how the peoples of Middle-earth see themselves and understand their place in the world, and how this resonates with the ways in which the medieval poets were preserving tradition and culture, Brown explores Tolkien’s fascination with cultural signifiers and recorded histories. She engages with scholars such as Verlyn Flieger, John D. Rateliff, Patrick J. Geary, and Homi Babha, and she examines how national identity is first fashioned, then sustained, through an understanding that the past must be articulated if it is to become memory.

Through these articles, published now in this special issue of *The Journal of Tolkien Research*, we the contributors investigate the connections between J.R.R. Tolkien and medieval poets. In doing so, we also seek to honor the memory of Richard C. West. To this end, it is to a closer recollection of his life and work that this introduction now turns.

*In memoriam Richard C. West*¹¹



Richard West at his last conference, The Tolkien Symposium 2019, Williamstown, Massachusetts. Photo by Carl Hostetter.

¹¹ The information provided in this section about Richard C. West's life was carefully drawn from several published and online sources, which are included in the References (below). Among those who have previously written and published remembrances in West's honor are our colleagues David Bratman, Janet Brennan Croft, Matt Fisher, Verlyn Flieger, Wayne Hammond and Christina Scull, and John D. Rateliff. I am thankful to each of them for their words and memories, which helped me to write about Richard C. West.

Richard Carroll West was born on August 13, 1944 to his parents, Herbert and Marion (Sullivan) West. He was the firstborn son of many children: he grew up with four brothers, Lawrence, Matthew, Thomas, and Joseph, and three sisters, Patricia, Evelyn, and Susan, in a Catholic family. West was raised in Boston, Massachusetts, although his family eventually came to reside in a suburb twenty minutes outside of the city, which was called Milton, where they attended St. Agatha Church. West's father was a World War II Army Air Force Veteran and later an Electrical Salesman for Westinghouse & Standard Electric.¹² His mother was the Librarian for the Town of Milton for twenty-five years.¹³

His parents' early influences on him were spiritually, intellectually, and professionally formative. Like them, West was a devout Catholic in a family that had been Catholic for generations. West could trace his lineage to the family of Archbishop John Carroll, the first bishop to serve in the post-revolutionary United States. As a young man, West was intelligent and curious, graduating second in his class from Cathedral High School in Boston. He subsequently received a BA in English Language and Literature from Boston College. From the University of Wisconsin-Madison, he received an MA in English Language and Literature. Then he undertook doctoral studies, under the mentorship of Eugene Vinaver, an Arthurian scholar, but he stopped at "ABD" (all but dissertation), devoting his time instead to pursuing a career in librarianship. Ultimately, he sought and obtained an MA in Library Science, also from the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Like his mother, West became a librarian. Yet his father's interest in things electrical apparently influenced his area of specialization: West was a technical and engineering librarian at the university level. He held the position of Senior Academic Librarian at the University of Wisconsin, Madison's Wendt Engineering Library, at the time of his retirement. He was awarded Emeritus status in recognition of the excellence of his dedicated service to the university.

West met his wife of over forty years, Harriet Perri Corrick-West (m. 1977), in Madison, Wisconsin. She received her MS in Chemistry in 1970 from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where West also attended graduate school. She became a specialist in the School of Pharmacy at the Veterans' Administration Hospital in Madison. The two shared interests in science fiction and fantasy. Corrick-West published the apazine *Theriaca* for Dapa-Em and the fanzine *Corr*. To her, West dedicated his award-winning 1976 book, *Tolkien Criticism: An Annotated Checklist*, writing: "For Perri, my wife, who advised against waiting until this was perfect before publishing it." Together, West and Corrick-West were the co-founders of Madison's annual feminist science fiction convention.

In retirement, West continued to serve his community as a Eucharistic Minister as well as an usher at Good Shepherd Catholic Parish in Madison, Wisconsin.

¹² Boston Globe (Boston, MA) Obituary of Herbert N. West, *Boston Globe* (Boston, MA), August 15-16, 2001.

¹³ Boston Globe (Boston, MA) Obituary of Marion West, *Boston Globe* (Boston, MA), January 1-3, 2013.

Throughout his life, West was also an active scholar who was deeply curious and interested in many literary subjects. He was already an avid reader and a fan of graphic novels (a.k.a., comic books) in high school. He discovered J.R.R. Tolkien as an undergraduate, when he first noticed in C.S. Lewis' remarks in his preface to *That Hideous Strength* references to "Numinor and the True West" and Lewis' friend "Professor J.R.R. Tolkien." Thereafter, West found and read *The Lord of the Rings*.

While a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, West was one of the co-founders of the University of Wisconsin Tolkien Society, attending the first meeting in 1966. He was also a writer and editor of *Orcrist*, the society's main publication, from 1966 to 1977. He edited or co-edited eight issues (some in collaboration with *The Tolkien Journal*).¹⁴ *Orcrist* was an early Tolkien fanzine that included scholarly work.¹⁵

The ambitions of the University of Wisconsin Tolkien Society included a *Lord of the Rings* variorum edition, which both Ivor Rogers and West were interested in helping to create. Although the variorum edition did not ultimately come to fruition, nevertheless, as a result of his interest in the project, West first visited in July 1968 the archives at the Raynor Memorial Libraries of Marquette University in Wisconsin to study the manuscripts of Tolkien's major works, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, which are preserved there. He visited regularly for the rest of his life – over the course of more than fifty years – and his last visit was in September 2019. (He had planned another for March 2020, but this was cancelled due to the pandemic.) In addition to his archival work, West attended many academic conferences, where he shared generously from his knowledge and encouraged other scholars.

West researched, wrote, and frequently presented on J.R.R. Tolkien at various conferences, including the First Conference on Middle Earth (Urbana, 1969) and the Second Conference (Cleveland, 1971). At Urbana, West presented on "The Interlace Structure of *The Lord of the Rings*," which later became his best-known, award-winning essay of the same name. He assisted editor Jared Lobdell in collecting essays from this conference for publication in *A Tolkien Compass* (1975).

Beginning in graduate school, West faithfully attended the International Congress on Medieval Studies (ICMS) at the University of Western Michigan for many years. He also took part in Tolkien conferences in Marquette (1983) and Wheaton (1985, 1998) as well as the Milwaukee Mythcons (1987, 1999) and the Norton, Massachusetts Mythcon (2014), where he was the invited Scholar Guest of Honor. His contributions to these conferences were substantial and involved significant responsibilities. For example, he chaired the Mythcon 30 / Bree Moot 4 in 1999, which had the theme of "Beyond Bree: Exploring the Fantasy Worlds of J.R.R. Tolkien and his Fellow Travelers," and he gave a plenary speech at Mythcon

¹⁴ Specifically, *Tolkien Journal* 11/ *Orcrist* 3, *Tolkien Journal* 13 / *Orcrist* 4, *Tolkien Journal* 14 / *Orcrist* 5. The *Tolkien Journal* eventually merged with *Mythlore*.

¹⁵ A forty-year hiatus intervened between *Orcrist* 8 and 9; the ninth volume was issued in 2017.

45, which was later published in *Mythlore* 125. West was a board member of *Mythlore* from 1999, when it was brought back to print as peer-reviewed scholarly journal, until his death in 2020. West attended every annual meeting of the Tolkien workshop from 1989 to 2019: twenty years. He did not limit himself to Tolkien and Mythcon conferences, but also attended The Cloak and Clue Society meetings. For West was also a fan of mystery novels and detective fiction, such as those written by Dorothy Sayers.

As John D. Rateliff pointedly noted in his published remembrances of West: “Richard’s publications greatly increased as he neared retirement.”¹⁶ Indeed, West contributed to several books on Tolkien that were published in fairly rapid succession: 1) *Tolkien’s Legendarium* (2000), 2) *Tolkien the Medievalist* (2003), 3) *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth* (2004), 4) *The Lord of the Rings, 1954-2004: Scholarship in Honor of Richard E. Blackwelder* (2006), 5) *Picturing Tolkien* (2011), 6) *Tolkien in the New Century* (2014), and 7) *A Wilderness of Dragons* (2018). He contributed the lead article in the second volume of *Tolkien Studies* (2005), and, as already noted above, the Guest of Honor speech at the 2014 Mythcon, later published in *Mythlore*. Rateliff adds that West:

... continued his researches at Marquette, typically once or twice a year, taking the morning bus over from Madison, working till the Archives closed for the day, and taking the early evening bus back to Madison. His ongoing work at Marquette most recently bore fruit in a publication, “A Letter from Father Murray” in *Tolkien Studies* 16 (2019): a valuable corrective to the context of one of Tolkien’s most quoted letters.¹⁷

Of all his work, West’s early short study remains of perennial interest, “The Interlace Structure of *The Lord of the Rings*” (1975), which was published in *A Tolkien Compass*, edited by Jared Lobdell, and awarded the Mythopoeic Scholarship Award for Inklings Studies. Yet, my favorite essay by West is the one on Beren and Lúthien because of how it evinces West’s deep understanding of the interconnections between Tolkien’s nearly-biographical legend and its many medieval (and earlier and later) literary sources of inspiration. West was consistently insightful about Tolkien’s work, and not only in its written forms, but also in performance. This fact prompts me to share a personal remembrance of Richard from a shared experience of a performance of Tolkien’s translation of *Beowulf* at the International Congress on Medieval Studies.

¹⁶ See John D. Rateliff, “Richard C. West, 1944-2020,” *Tolkien Studies* XVIII (5 October 2021): 7. <https://tolkienists.org/tolkien-studies/18/04/>. Last accessed September 18, 2024.

¹⁷ See again Rateliff, “Richard C. West, 1944-2020,” *Tolkien Studies* XVIII (5 October 2021): 7. On a personal note, I can share that when I was visiting the Archives at Marquette University in 2022, I read the letter from Father Murray, and I thought that it should be published in full. Shortly thereafter, I discovered that it was! As I continued reading everything I could in the Archives during that visit, I found and read for the first time Richard C. West’s edition of the letter in *Tolkien Studies*. It was a meaningful moment.

A Personal Remembrance

My clearest memory of Richard is from a decade ago. In 2015, he and Brad Eden organized a Readers' Theater Performance of Tolkien's *Beowulf*, a prose translation which was first published just the year before along with Tolkien's story, "Sellic Spell." As Richard mentioned in an email to a group of us (dated March 7, 2015), he was inspired by performances of *Beowulf* in Old English and in modern English translation at the Mythopoeic Society in August 2014 and the Tolkien and Fantasy Society at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in December 2014.¹⁸

Thom Foy prepared a dramatic script excerpted from Tolkien's newly published book, focused on four key sequences of events from the poem: "The Coming of Grendel," "Victory and Celebration," "Grendel's Mother and Beowulf's Departure," and "Old Age, the Dragon, and Death." At the suggestion of Jewell Morrow, we all prepared for the reading by meeting online and practicing our lines aloud. (This was years before the social effects of the coronavirus pandemic made such online meetings a common practice.) I remember that Richard took a leading role in organizing our online practice sessions. There were three narrators: Jewell Morrow, Mark Lachniet, and me, Jane Beal. Andrew Higgins was our hero, Beowulf. Brad Eden was Wiglaf, the loyal thane. My dear friend and colleague, Dr. Deidre Dawson, Professor Emerita of Michigan State University, played the noble part of Wealtheow, Queen of the Danes. Richard C. West was our king: he memorably voiced the part of wise King Hrothgar himself, leader of the Spear-Danes. Richard was seventy years old at the time.

In May 2015, the seven of us read the revised script aloud in a "Tolkien Unbound" session of the 50th International Congress on Medieval Studies.

<p>Tolkien's <i>Beowulf</i> (A Readers' Theater Performance) and Maidens of Middle-earth V, "Turin's Women"</p> <p>Organizer: Brad Eden, Valparaiso Univ. President: Thom Foy, Univ. of Michigan-Dearborn</p> <p>Tolkien's <i>Beowulf</i> Thom Foy; Andrew Higgins, Cardiff Metropolitan Univ.; Jewell Morrow, Independent Scholar; Deidre Dawson, Independent Scholar; Mark Lachniet, Independent Scholar; Richard West, Independent Scholar; Jane Beal, SanctuaryPoet.net; Brad Eden</p> <p>Maidens of Middle-earth V: "Turin's Women" Eileen Marie Moore, Cleveland State Univ.</p>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;"> Session 155 Fetzer 1045 </div>
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It was a completely enjoyable event. In the course of it, Richard read this wise speech of King Hrothgar to Beowulf:

'Lo! this may he say who furthereth truth and justice among men,
 that this good knight was born to mastery. Thy glory is uplifted to
 pass down the distant ways, Beowulf my friend, thy glory over every
 folk (ll. 1424-28) ... Now for a little while thy valour is in flower;

¹⁸ Richard C. West, Personal Communication via Email Message (March 7, 2015).

but soon shall it be that sickness or the sword rob thee of thy might, or fire's embrace, or water's wave, or bite of blade, or flight of spear, or dreadful age; or the flashing of thine eyes shall fail and fade; very soon 'twill come that thee, proud knight, shall death lay low (ll. 1475-80) ... Go now to thy seat, use the gladness of the feast, war's honour with thee! Between us shall many a host of treasures pass when morn shall come.' (ll. 1490-95)¹⁹

During the performance, when Richard was reading, Kris Swank took a candid snapshot of all seven of us.



Pictured (from left to right): Jane Beal, Mark Lachniet, Brad Eden, Andrew Higgins, Deirde Dawson, Richard C. West, and Jewell Morrow
(Photo credit: Kris Swank)

After the performance, Richard sent out a thoughtful email on May 21st to everyone in our performance group. I include his message here in full so that anyone reading this introduction who knew Richard can hear Richard's voice again and see how smart, humble, humorous, kind, and encouraging he was, then and always:

Well, I checked with Tom Shippey as to the pronunciation of "sellic" and he says, "it is, definitely, selliCH: as in pitch, ditch, and indeed lych, all spelt in A-S pic, dic, lic."

¹⁹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary together with Sellic Spell*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2014), p.64.

I think also of the very common “ic” (ich, meaning I), so I should have realized. I take comfort that everyone else I heard at the Congress also pronounced it “sellICK.” But I shall correct my pronunciation henceforward.

Something was also nagging at me about “Hrothgar,” and I found a note I had made of Tolkien’s gloss of “hroth” in his Commentary (p. 238) that “The basic sense was one of ‘sound’: ‘exultation, (shouting) in triumph. The noun could form the first part of personal names ...’ Hence “Hrothgar” would mean something like “spear (gar) of triumph or exultation” while “Hrothulf” would apply this to a wolf. But we were pronouncing the names correctly.

One young lady spotted me at one of the C. S. Lewis sessions on Saturday and asked me if I had played Hrothgar. I admitted I had, and she told me she and a friend of hers had been talking about how much they enjoyed our performance. So maybe we have some groupies. :)

I think we did well.

Best wishes,

Richard

With the memory of this kindly *viaticum* in mind, I now turn from the life, scholarship, and inspiration of Richard C. West to a special invitation to our readers.

Invitation to Our Readers

Although the collection of essays in this special issue of the *Journal of Tolkien Research* on “J.R.R. Tolkien and Medieval Poets” is dedicated to honoring the memory of Richard C. West, it is written and published for you, our readers. West cared about readers, whether they were students or scholars or fans, and he wanted people to enjoy the rich imaginative works of J.R.R. Tolkien throughout their lives as he did. As the editor of this special issue, I hope you will enjoy Tolkien’s works even more in years to come, in part because of the perspectives that can be gained in reading the essays we are sharing with you now.

Jane Beal, PhD
University of La Verne

Selected Bibliography of Publications by Richard C. West about J.R.R. Tolkien

Note: 1) I am indebted to Douglas A. Anderson, “Richard C. West: A Checklist,” *Tolkien Studies* 2 (2005): 11-14 for references to West’s publications on Tolkien up to 2004 as well as key notes on the publications, reproduced below. Selected updates are available in *Beyond Bree* (2021). 2) Publications are listed in order by date, earliest to latest, under each sub-header of this selected bibliography.

Books

Tolkien Criticism: An Annotated Checklist. Kent State University Press: 1970; expanded 2nd edn., 1981.

[Based on earlier work published as “An Annotated Bibliography of Tolkien Criticism” in *Orcrist*, no. 1 (1966-67): 52-91; Supplement One in *Orcrist*, no. 2 (1967-68): 40-54; Supplement Two in *Orcrist*, no. 3 (co-published as *Tolkien Journal*, 4 no. 1; whole no. 11; 1969): 22-23; Supplement Three in *Orcrist*, no. 5 (co-published as *Tolkien Journal*, 4 no. 3; whole no. 14; 1970-71): 14-31. Material from the first two issues of *Orcrist* was revised and published as “An Annotated Bibliography of Tolkien Criticism,” *Extrapolation* 10 no. 1 (December 1968): 17-45. A highly selective supplement is “A Tolkien Checklist: Selected Criticism 1981-2004.”]

Edited Journal

Orcrist, the journal of the Tolkien Society at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (founded 1966). Nos. 1 (1966-67) and 2 (1967-68) co-edited by Richard C. West and James B. Robinson; nos. 3 (1969-70) through 8 (1977) edited by Richard C. West. A ninth issue, also edited by West, was published in 2017.

Book Chapters and Articles

“The Interlace and Professor Tolkien: Medieval Narrative Technique in *The Lord of the Rings*,” *Orcrist* 1 (1966-67): 26-49.

“Tolkien in the Letters of C.S. Lewis,” *Orcrist* 1 (1966-67): 2-16.

“Contemporary Medieval Authors,” *Orcrist* 3 (co-published as *Tolkien Journal* 4:1, whole no. 11 (1969): 9-10, 15. [On T.H. White, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien]

“Progress Report on the Variorum Tolkien,” *Orcrist* 4 (co-published as *Tolkien Journal* 4:3, whole no. 13; 1969-70): 6-7.

“The Status of Tolkien Scholarship,” *Tolkien Journal* 15 (Summer 1972): 21.

“The Interlace of *The Lord of the Rings*” in *A Tolkien Compass*. Ed. Jared Lobdell. LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1975. 77-94. New York: Ballantine, 1980: 82-102. Chicago and LaSalle: Open Court: 2002: 75-91.

“Túrin's *Ofermod*: An Old English Theme in the Development of the Story of Túrin,” in *Tolkien's Legendarium: Essays on The History of Middle-earth*. Ed. Verlyn Flieger and Carl F. Hostetter. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000.

“Real-World Myth in a Secondary World: Mythological Aspects in the Story of Beren and Lúthien,” in *Tolkien the Medievalist*. Ed. Jane Chance. New York, NY: Routledge, 2003.

“Setting the Rocket Off in Story: The *Kalevala* as the Germ of Tolkien's Legendarium” in *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth: A Reader*. Ed. Jane Chance. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2004.

“A Tolkien Checklist: Selected Criticism 1981-2004,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 40:4 (2004).

“‘And She Named Her Own Name’: Being True To One's Word in Tolkien's Middle-earth,” *Tolkien Studies* 2 (2005).

“Her Choice Was Made and Her Doom Appointed,” in *The Lord of the Rings, 1954-2004: Scholarship in Honor of Richard E. Blackwelder*. Ed. Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull. Marquette, WI: Marquette University Press, 2006.

“Neither the Shadow nor the Twilight”: The Love Story of Aragorn and Arwen in Literature and Film,” in *Picturing Tolkien: Essays on Peter Jackson's The Lord of the Rings Film Trilogy*. Ed. Janice Bogstad and Philip E. Kaveny. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2011.

“A Letter from Father Murray,” *Tolkien Studies* 16:1 (2019): 133-39.

“Where Fantasy Fits: The Importance of Being Tolkien,” *Mythlore* Vol. 33, Iss. 1, Art. 2 (2014).

“‘Lack of Counsel, Not of Courage’: J.R.R. Tolkien's Critique of the Heroic Ethos in *The Children of Húrin*” in *Tolkien in the New Century: Essays in Honor of Tom Shippey*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2014.

“Canute and Beorhtnoth,” in *A Wilderness of Dragons: Essays in Honor of Verlyn Flieger*. Ed. John D. Rateliff. Wayzata, MN: The Gabbro Head Press, 2018.

Reviews

“The Critics, and Tolkien, and C.S. Lewis,” *Orcrist* 5 (co-published as *Tolkien Journal* 4:3, whole no. 14 (1970-71): 4-9.

[Reviews of *The Tolkien Relation* (1968) by William Ready; *Tolkien: A Look Behind the Lord of the Rings* (1969) by Lin Carter; *Good News from Tolkien's Middle-Earth* (1970) by Gracia Fay Ellwood; *Tolkien and the Critics* (1968) ed. Neil D. Isaacs and Rose A. Zimbardo; *Shadows of Imagination* (1969) ed. Mark R. Hillegas; *J.R.R. Tolkien* (1969) by Catherine R. Stimpson; and several studies of C.S. Lewis]

Review of *Tolkien and The Silmarillion* (1976) by Clyde S. Kilby, *Christian Scholar's Review* 6 (1977): 352-53.

Review of *A Question of Time* (1997) by Verlyn Flieger, *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 9:3 (1998): 247-50.

Review of *The Annotated Hobbit: Revised and Expanded Edition* (2002), ed. Douglas A. Anderson, *Seven: An Anglo-American Literary Review* 21 (2004): 114-16.

Review of *The Power of Tolkien's Prose: Middle-Earth's Magical Style* by Steve Walker, *Tolkien Studies* 8 (2011): 130-36.

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“The Tolkienians: Some Introductory Reflections on Alan Garner, Carol Kendall, and Lloyd Alexander,” *Orcrist* 2 (1967-68): 4-15.

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“Malory and T. H. White,” *Orcrist* 7 (1973): 13-15.

“Medieval Borrowings in the Fiction of Poul Anderson,” *Unicorn* 2:5 (1973): 16-19.

“The Sign of the Unicorn: The Unicorn Motif in Selected Works of Modern Fantasy.” In *Selected Proceedings of the 1978 SFRA National Conference*, ed. T. J. Remington. Cedar Falls, Iowa: University of Northern Iowa, 1979: 45-54.

“Humankind and Reality: Illusion and Self-Deception in Peter S. Beagle's Fiction,” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 1:3 (1988): 47-54.

[Reprinted, under the original title, "Humankind Cannot Bear Very Much Reality," see below.]

"Mervyn Peake's Shorter Fiction," *Peake Studies* 1:3 (Winter 1989): 25-31.

"Humankind Cannot Bear Very Much Reality: Illusion and Self-Deception in Peter S. Beagle's Fiction," in *The Dark Fantastic: Selected Essays from the Ninth International Conference on the Fantastic and the Arts*. Ed. C. W. Sullivan III. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997: 59-64.

[A reprint, under the original title, of "Humankind and Reality," see above.]

"Warren Lewis: Historian of the Inklings and of Seventeenth-Century France," *Seven: An Anglo-American Literary Review*, 14 (1997): 75-86

"Author Studies," Chapter 8 in *Fantasy Literature: A Reader's Guide*, ed. Neil Barron. New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1990: 389-406. Revised version, combined with entries by other critics, as Chapter 10 in *Fantasy and Horror: A Critical and Historical Guide to Literature, Illustration, Film, TV, Radio, and the Internet*, ed. Neil Barron. Lanham, Maryland, and London: Scarecrow Press, 1999: 471-527.

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Illustration Credits

Photo of Richard C. West at the Tolkien Symposium in Williamstown, Massachusetts, 2019 by Carl Hostetter. Originally printed in *Tolkien Studies XVIII* (2021) to accompany the memorial remembrance of John D. Rateliff.

Photo of Tolkien at Kalamazoo Reader's Theatre performance, May 14, 2015 © 2015 by Kris Swank is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

About the Contributors

Dr. Jane Beal (PhD, University of California, Davis) is Professor of English Literature at the University of La Verne in southern California. She received her BA, MA, and PhD in English, with specializations in medieval and early modern literature, and an MFA in Creative Writing. She is the author or editor of eight academic books and over forty peer-reviewed articles and chapters, primarily on the *Pearl*-poet, the *Polychronicon*, and the mythology of J.R.R. Tolkien. Her scholarly articles on Tolkien appear in *Arthuriana*, *Mallorn*, *The Once and Future Classroom*, *This Rough Magic*, and the *Journal of Tolkien Research*. She has also edited a special issue of the latter journal on the theme of “J.R.R. Tolkien and Medieval Poets” in honor of Richard C. West. She regularly publishes poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. Her poetry collections include *Sanctuary*, *Rising*, and *Song of the Selkie*, eight haiku micro-chaps, and three audio recording projects combining poetry and music, “Songs from the Secret Life,” “Love Song,” and co-created with her brother, the saxophonist and composer Andrew Beal, “The Jazz Bird.” She loves to share the joy of learning with her students, helping them to grow holistically and fulfill their dreams for their lives.

Dr. Sara Brown (PhD, Salford University) is Chair of the Language and Literature Faculty at Signum University, USA, where she has taught on courses with Corey Olsen, Verlyn Flieger, Dimitra Fimi, Robin Reid, Doug Anderson, Amy Sturgis, and John Garth. Sara currently serves on the editorial board of *Mallorn*, the academic journal of the Tolkien Society, and is co-presenter on podcasts such as *The Tolkien Experience*, *The Rings of Power Wrap-Up*, and *The Prancing Pony*. Her essay on an alchemical reading of the Ring of Power won the Tolkien Society Award for best article in 2023, and her essay on the doomed marriage of Aldarion and Erendis won the Tolkien Society Award in 2024.

Dr. Deidre Dawson (PhD, Yale University) is Professor Emerita of Michigan State University, where she designed and taught courses on J.R.R. Tolkien in the Residential College in the Arts and Humanities and the Department of Romance and Classical Languages. Her publications on Tolkien include “English, Welsh and Elvish: Language, Loss and Cultural Recovery in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*” in *Tolkien’s Modern Middle Ages* (Jane Chance and Alfred Siewers, eds., PalgraveMacmillan, 2005), “Linguistic, Cultural and Biodiversity in Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*,” in *Approaches to Teaching Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings and Other Works* (Leslie A Donovan, ed., New York: Modern Language Society, 2015) and “Language and Alterity in Tolkien and Lévinas,” in *Tolkien and Alterity* (Christopher Vaccaro and Yvette Kisor, eds., PalgraveMacmillan, 2017). Deidre has also contributed essays and book reviews to *Tolkien Studies* and the *Journal of Tolkien Research* and has presented papers on Tolkien at the Leeds International Medieval Congress and the International Congress on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University. Deidre holds degrees in French from the Université Paul Valéry Montpellier III and Yale University, where she studied both medieval French language and literature and literature of the Eighteenth Century.

Dr. Michael David Elam (PhD, St. Louis University) is an Associate Professor of English in the Humanities Department at Regent University. His primary area of research is Middle English literature broadly, and more specifically, the poems of the *Pearl*-manuscript. He is also interested in the literary texts of ancient Greece and Rome as well as the distinction between intention and meaning in poetry. His articles appear in the *American Benedictine Review*, *American Notes and Queries*, *Integrité*, and the *South Atlantic Review* as well as the *Journal of Tolkien Research*. He regularly teaches works of the classical and medieval eras—both literary and philosophical—and occasionally he offers special topics courses on the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, with an emphasis on Tolkien’s non-Middle-Earth writings, both fictional and academic. His scholarly interest in Tolkien focuses on both Tolkien’s disappointment as an impetus to writing and also the non-Germanic literary influence on his work.

Dr. Kristine Larsen (PhD, University of Connecticut) is distinguished Connecticut State University Professor of Earth and Space Sciences at Central Connecticut State University, where she has taught since 1989. Her teaching and research focus on the intersections between science and society, including sexism and science; science and popular culture (especially science in the works of J.R.R. Tolkien); and the history of science. She is the author of the books *Stephen Hawking: A Biography*, *Cosmology 101*, *The Women Who Popularized Geology in the 19th Century*, *Particle Panic!*, and *Science, Technology and Magic in The Witcher: A Medievalist Spin on Modern Monsters* (McFarland & Company), and the forthcoming *The Sun We Share: Our Star in Popular Media and Science* (McFarland & Company).

Dr. Anna Smol (PhD, Queen’s University) is Professor Emerita in the Department of English at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. Her research interests include Tolkien, Old English and medievalism, children’s literature, and higher education pedagogy. Her publications on Tolkien can be found in *Tolkien Studies*, *Journal of Tolkien Research*, *Mythlore*, and in various essay collections. She is currently a member of the editorial board of *Mallorn*, the peer-reviewed journal of the Tolkien Society. Drawing on research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Dr. Smol and her assistants are compiling a “Tolkien and Alliterative Verse” website <<https://tolkienalliterative.ca>> that includes a bibliography, blog, and information pages. Her recent and forthcoming publications deal with Tolkien’s “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth,” with the myth of Eärendil, and with Tolkien’s visualization in world-building.

Dr. Chris Vaccaro (PhD, City University of New York) is Senior Lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Vermont. He teaches a variety of courses, including “British Literature Survey,” “Introduction to Old English,” “Beowulf,” “Tolkien’s Middle-earth,” “Tolkien’s The Hobbit,” “History of the English Language,” and “Tolkien and Film.” He is also the editor of two essay

collections on J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Body in Tolkien's Legendarium* (McFarland Press, 2013) and *Tolkien and Alterity* (Palgrave, 2017). He has published book chapters and articles on Tolkien as well. He organizes the annual conference on J.R.R. Tolkien at the University of Vermont and, together with Yvette Kisor, annual sessions on Tolkien at the International Medieval Studies Congress at Kalamazoo (ICMS). He is a published poet, currently working on a new collection of ekphrastic poetry and a monograph on *Beowulf*.