

2014

Contextualizing the Writings of J.R.R. Tolkien on Literary Criticism

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Recommended Citation

Branchaw, Sherrylyn (2014) "Contextualizing the Writings of J.R.R. Tolkien on Literary Criticism," *Journal of Tolkien Research*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 2.

Available at: <http://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol1/iss1/2>

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Introduction

In essays, letters, interviews, and even his fiction, J.R.R. Tolkien is known for having expressed negative opinions about certain kinds of academic study. These included source studies, the reduction of a story into folklore motifs, etymological reconstruction for its own sake, and attempts to reconstruct the world of an ancient storyteller using elements from the story itself. What these studies have in common is the breaking down, or “analysis”, of a story into its elements, and the concomitant removal of those elements from their context. Tolkien advocated a more holistic approach to literature. The story should be taken on its own terms as a work of art, and studied and enjoyed as such. His holistic approach did not prohibit the study of sometimes quite small elements, such as a single word--for Tolkien was first and foremost a philologist--but the themes and words under study were to be studied in context for what they had to contribute to the understanding of the story.

Tolkien made his points quite forcefully. How he did this has been explored in depth by Drout, who has studied the history of the various revisions that Tolkien's most famous essay, “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*”, went through as it was prepared for oral delivery and then publication. Preparing and editing the texts for publication has given Drout the opportunity to see how Tolkien's arguments evolved. In several of his works (2006; 2010; 2011a; 2011b), Drout has shared his insights into the rhetorical devices used by Tolkien, helping us to understand how they came to be so influential. Further insights have been contributed by other scholars, such as Shippey (2007).

The power of Tolkien's arguments won over generations of successors to write the sorts of studies that he believed were most important. The forcefulness with which the arguments were presented had the effect of discouraging later generations from pursuing the sorts of studies that he was perceived to have been opposed to, regardless of whether he was actually opposed to them.

In recent years there has been increasing recognition by scholars that the emphasis placed by Tolkien on certain kinds of studies to the exclusion of others, as well as the emphasis placed by readers on certain arguments made by Tolkien to the exclusion of other, has resulted in a lopsided body of scholarship. There have been calls to remedy this lopsidedness. The present essay seeks to contribute to the remedy rather indirectly, by exploring what Tolkien said and why he said it. After providing a context for understanding his writing, the essay argues that it is possible to read Tolkien's intentions as a call for a restoration of balance to scholarly literature. By making the case for the neglected side so powerfully, he inadvertently contributed to the neglect of the once dominant side. It is important

to recognize the need for a well-rounded body of scholarship, and not to neglect one approach or another to studying literature.

1. What Tolkien Said

The following quotes present a number of the best-known passages written by Tolkien that tend to discourage scholarship of a purely analytic bent. This list is hardly comprehensive, and the interested reader may look to Fisher (2011) for still more exemplars. Quotes in this section and in section 2 are numbered for easy reference and are referred to by number throughout the essay.

Essays

In his two seminal essays “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*” (1936), henceforth *BMC*, and “*On Fairy-stories*” (delivered 1937, published 1947), henceforth *OFS*, Tolkien laid out so extensively and explicitly his thinking on the manner in which literature should be studied that quotes provided here are only representative and not comprehensive. Each essay will be treated in further depth in this paper.

- (1) In Dasent's words I would say: 'We must be satisfied with the soup that is set before us and not desire to see the bones of the ox out of which it is boiled.'...By 'the soup' I mean the story as it is served up by its author or teller, and by 'the bones' its sources or material--even when (by rare luck) these can be with certainty discovered. But I do not, of course, forbid criticism of the soup as soup (1947, 49).
- (2) The analytic study of fairy-stories is as bad a preparation for the enjoying or the writing of them as would be the historical study of the drama of all lands and times for the enjoyment or writing of stage-plays (1947, 72-73).
- (3) Slowly with the rolling years the obvious (so often the last revelation of analytic study) has been discovered: that we have to deal with a poem by an Englishman using afresh ancient and largely traditional material. At last then, after inquiring so long whence this material came, and what its original or aboriginal nature was (questions that cannot ever be decisively answered), we might also now again inquire what the poet did with it (1936, 250).
- (4) Such stories have now a mythical or total (unanalysable) effect, an effect

quite independent of the findings of Comparative Folk-lore, and one which it cannot spoil or explain (1947, 57).

- (5) It has been said of Beowulf itself that its weakness lies in placing the unimportant things at the centre and the important on the outer edges. That is one of the opinions that I wish specially to consider. I think it profoundly untrue of the poem, but strikingly true of the literature about it. Beowulf has been used as a quarry of fact and fancy far more assiduously than it has been studied as a work of art (1936, 245-246).
- (6) Therein lies the inherent weakness of the analytic (or 'scientific') method: it finds out much about things that occur in stories, but little or nothing about their effect in any given story (1947, 49).

Both essays were composed in the 1930s, and both concern a field--*Beowulfiana* and comparative folklore study respectively--on which much scholarly literature had already been produced. This literature, which Tolkien was familiar with and might have assumed his audience was familiar with, will be explored in greater detail in section 3.

Letters and Interviews

Toward the end of his life, Tolkien's letters show a pronounced negative reaction to the idea of certain kinds (what kinds will be explored later) of criticism of his own work, both in general terms and in response to specific proposals.

In October of 1971, Tolkien quoted Gandalf's words to Saruman in support of his own views on criticism.

- (7) When they have read it, some readers will (I suppose) wish to 'criticise' it, and even to analyze it, and if that is their mentality then they are, of course, at liberty to do these things--so long as they have *first* read it with attention throughout. Not that this attitude has my sympathy: as should be clearly perceived in Vol I. p. 272: Gandalf: 'He that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom' (1981, 414).

In December of 1972, he repeated and expanded on Gandalf's words, in response to a specific request from a reader for help with an academic project concerning Tolkien's works.

- (8) See *Lord of the Rings* Vol. I, p. 272: 'He that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom' (/or she)--Gandalf. I should not feel inclined to help in this destructive process, even if it did not seem to me that this exercise was supposed to be your own private work without assistance...It is also said (I p. 93) 'Do not meddle in the affairs of Wizards, for they are subtle and quick to anger.' I am sorry if this letter sounds grumpy. But I dislike analysis of this kind (1981, 424).

In May of 1972, he wrote,

- (9) I fear you may be right that the search for sources is going to occupy academics for a generation or two. I wish this need not be so. To my mind, it is the particular use in a particular situation of any motive, whether invented, deliberately borrowed, or unconsciously remembered that is the most interesting thing to consider (1981, 418).
- (10) The tendency of the “serious reader [to] take the construction to pieces; find and analyse sources, dissect it into symbols, and debase it into allegory” is “comparable to a man who having eaten anything...uses an emetic and sends the result for chemical analysis” (Castell 1966, 146).

It is worth noting that the three passages date from the last two years of Tolkien's life (he died in September of 1973), and, like the interview of a few years earlier, refer to studies of his own work. They are also, as will be seen, among the most uniformly negative of his quotes on the subject, with no qualifications aside from acknowledging the liberty of readers to do as they pleased. These passages will be interpreted in light of his other writings on the subject later in the essay, when the evidence has been fully presented, but for now, I will draw attention to a few facts: 1) the late date, 2) the correlation of intense emotional reaction both with a discussion of his own works and with a more private medium than an essay for public consumption, and 3) the regrettable fact that we know nothing about the academic work proposed in (8) and so cannot judge its value for ourselves.

Fiction

Not usually cited as part this discourse in the scholarly literature, but made explicit in its application by Tolkien in the two letters cited above, is an exchange between Gandalf and Saruman in LOTR. It is the fallen Saruman who upholds the

merits of refracting white light into its many component colors, and Gandalf the wise who defends a holistic approach.

(11) “White cloth may be dyed. The white page can be overwritten; and the white light can be broken.”

“In which case it is no longer white,” said I. “And he that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom” (1954, 290).

A similar passage in LOTR is applied by Shippey (2006) to what he argues is Tolkien's disapproval of the obsessive reconstruction of etymological roots for its own sake. This time Gandalf speaks of Gollum as “interested in roots and beginnings,” believing that the roots of mountains hold “great secrets which have not been discovered since the beginning.” But, Gandalf tells Frodo, “there was nothing more to find out, nothing worth doing.” (1954, 59-60). While Tolkien never explicitly stated his disapproval of etymological reconstruction for its own sake (even when the reconstruction is valid¹), and attributing this opinion to him is an inference on Shippey's part, the inference is consistent with Tolkien's other expressed opinions and his practice of reconstruction. Tolkien's own engagement with reconstruction was never for its own sake, but was a means to end, where the end was a living monument, whether that was writing poetry in Gothic, creating Gautisk, or shedding light on a text such as *Beowulf*. With even his fictional characters offering insights on academic pursuits, Tolkien's attitude toward analytic studies gives the appearance, at first blush, of being a thorough-going rejection.

Before proceeding, however, it is necessary to examine exactly what Tolkien meant by “analytic studies.” The term “analysis” can mean many things to many people in relation to literature. In its most watered-down meaning, it can mean any close study of literature, in which case Tolkien's objections become nonsensical. Tolkien, however, was using it in a narrower sense, closer to its etymology: meaning “to break down, dissolve, loosen, or unfasten.” Under the term “analysis”, he included such specific approaches to literature as:

- Source studies of the work.
- Biographical studies of the author.

1 Tolkien's explicit disapproval of bad etymologies, treated by Shippey in another of his essays, is discussed in the following section of the present essay.

- Reconstructing stories that may have existed at an earlier time and been combined to form the main narrative.
- Mining the text for historical data about the time in which it was written.
- Emphasizing the importance of allusions to other stories or events that are mentioned in passing in the text.
- Reducing the story to its component motifs.

Most notably, Tolkien did *not* include philological study, even though a word is a very small part of the text, because the elucidation of a word clarifies the meaning of the text that was intended by the author.

2. What Tolkien Scholars Have Said

These negative opinions are well known among Tolkien scholars. Many studies, including those that do inquire after the sources of Tolkien's ideas, feel compelled to respond to his remarks, whether to join with him in discouraging “pure” source study, to defend the practice, or simply to acknowledge his views. Drout and Wynne (2000), joined by Stevens (2004), second Tolkien's view that knowing what sources an author drew on does not necessarily tell one anything interesting, because what matters is how the author used an old idea in a new way or what effect the idea has in the context of the author's own work.

- (13) All texts must be interpreted. Finding a source merely defers the problem of interpretation; it cannot eliminate it (2000, 107).

Stevens expands on Drout and Wynne's reminder by adding,

- (14) In other words, the more interesting question may be, 'So what?' So what if Tolkien used the Rapunzel story to derive his story of Lúthien escaping from Thingol's tower down a rope made of her hair? What does it tell us about Lúthien? Or, for that matter, what might it tell us about Rapunzel (2004, 121)?

Shank (2013), analyzing “On Fairy-stories”, paraphrases Dasent's ox-and-soup quote (1) thus:

- (15) In these terms, then, we could suggest that while the comparative approach investigates the ingredients, thus leading to some knowledge about how

the soup was formed, it fails utterly in comprehending the smell, taste, and texture of a particular serving or story (149).

Flieger (2003), speaking of the scholars who preceded Tolkien, writes:

- (16) Tolkien faulted all of them and the theories they represented for 'using the stories not as they were meant to be used, but as a quarry from which to dig evidence, or information about matters in which they are interested' (1947, 47). In his view, they were not reading stories at all; they were examining data, a process which to him was a gross misuse of the enchantment, what he called the quality of 'faërie,' that he found in fairy tales (28).

Librán-Moreno (2005, 27), citing quote (9), uses Tolkien's lack of interest in source study to explain the rarity with which he explicitly identified his own sources. She discusses his lack of interest only in the context of the methodology of identifying sources, not in the context of the debate over whether an academic source study should exist in the first place, however valid its findings.

Tolkien and the Study of His Sources (Fisher 2011a), as its title suggests, contains a number of contributions studying Tolkien's sources and responding to his objections. Unsurprisingly, such a work begins with an apology for source study. In the preface, Fisher wonders if Tolkien's wishes should be respected, but then concludes that source studies *do* yield interesting and informative results, and as such, scholars have the right to pursue these investigations.

Shippey (2011), in his introduction to Fisher's volume on source studies, considers the reasons behind Tolkien's objections. He gives three.

One, that Tolkien was offended at the implied insult to his own mental resources. *Hobbits*, he said, came only from his imagination, and the insistent efforts by fans to find their antecedents were fruitless.

Two, that pseudo-etymologies of words such as "Sauron", supposed by certain fans to be derived from the Greek root sauro- 'lizard', brought back bad memories of how linguistics was conducted in the days before the comparative method was developed. As a philologist, Tolkien understood that languages can only be compared systematically, not on the basis of superficial similarities. As a philologist and author, he set out to develop own his languages systematically. Such random associations with irrelevant Greek words were not only unsound, they overlooked the care he had put into creating his languages.

Three, that just as language is more complex and systematic than the "pre-

philological” method (as Shippey calls it) can grasp, so too is literature. Those who have read a little, Shippey says, imagine that everything they have read must be related. Those who, like Tolkien, have read widely, recognize how many themes and similarities crop up accidentally here and there, without there being any necessary connection.

These objections, while very true, are incomplete. They do not fully explain why Tolkien would write in such strong language concerning the very existence of source studies. The second and third objection are methodological in nature, and as such they rule out only certain studies, not all, as some of Tolkien's quotes seem to do. As for the first objection, while Tolkien no doubt cannot be blamed for any umbrage he took at the disparagement of his very fertile imagination, it does not eliminate the obvious fact that Tolkien did draw on many sources and admitted to doing so, and therefore does not explain why investigating those sources should not be a legitimate endeavor. The conclusion of many scholars is, obviously, that it is a legitimate endeavor, and the study of sources has carried on without being utterly deterred by such discouraging quotes as (1) - (6). Nevertheless, scholars nowadays are likely to react with a certain defensiveness toward writing analytic studies of the sort Tolkien seemed to disapprove of, and to feel the need to justify writing them, sometimes by pointing out where he contradicted himself. The present study attempts to alleviate the defensiveness, in part by resolving the contradictions wherever possible.

The Relationship of Analytic and Holistic Studies

This section examines the discourse on the subject of analytic studies, and where such discourse positions these studies within the framework of academic scholarship. The negative language on the analytic approach can be divided into two categories: that which discourages the scholar from conducting any analytic study whatsoever; and that which allows it only insofar as it serves holistic needs.

In the former category are phrases such as “left the path of wisdom” (7), “unimportant things” (5), “wish it need not be so” (9), and “which [analysis] cannot spoil or explain” (4). The juxtaposition of “spoil” and “explain” implies that to do the latter is to do the former. Another quote from Tolkien supports the “explain” = “spoil” equation:

- (17) Unless he is careful...he will kill what he is studying by vivisection...For myth is alive at once and in all its parts, and dies before it can be dissected (1936, 257).

Such quotes as (3) and (5), directed toward *Beowulfiana*, had the effect of discouraging historical studies of the period in which *Beowulf* was set or written for a generation or more after Tolkien wrote. As lamented by Shippey and Drout, scholars have taken his words at face value and confined themselves to studies of the poem qua poem. Drout concludes that such an effect is not what Tolkien would have wanted at all, and section 6 of the present paper engages in a close reading of his wording to confirm that belief.

Quotes that allow for the usefulness of analytic studies to holistic studies include such phrases as “merely defers the problem of interpretation” (13), “inherent weakness of the analytic (or 'scientific') method” (6), “So what?” (14), and “fails utterly” (15).

In such a framing, interpretation is placed in a position of primacy, and analytic studies relegated to subsidiary status. Source studies “merely defer” the problem of interpretation, “fail” to be holistic, and have little or no inherent value attributed to them (“So what?”). Loaded language is particularly vibrant in words such as “fail” and “weakness”. “Fail” carries the connotation that analytic studies either tried unsuccessfully, or should have tried to be something they were not. Likewise, limiting “weakness” in such a context to analytic studies implies that holistic studies have no weakness worth commenting on.

Ultimately, such language communicates that source studies have to justify their existence by teaching us something about the interpretation of the text. Interpretation of the text, in this outlook, needs no such justification. It is its own end.

One can wonder, why the emphasis in the discourse on the shortcomings of the analytic approach? In a vacuum, it would make as much sense to talk about how a holistic approach fails to appreciate the potential for intertextuality possible in a body of work as rich as Tolkien's (or Homer's, or Shakespeare's). Neither a purely holistic nor a purely analytic approach can possibly cover everything of interest to say about a work, so why the discouragement toward only one of these approaches? The discourse on the topic as surveyed in this section is clearly not taking place in a vacuum, but in reaction to Tolkien's own thinking on the subject. It makes sense, then, to ask why Tolkien wrote what he did, and my answer to that will be that he in turn did not write in a vacuum, nor did he expect to be read in a vacuum.

The following two sections offer some reasons, not for Tolkien's beliefs--which he himself explained more than adequately!--but for the way he presented them. Section 3 presents Tolkien's opinions in the context of academic scholarship at the time that he wrote, and section 4 uses this context to shed some light on

why he thought it important to emphasize holistic studies to the extent of downplaying the importance of even such analysis as he saw value in. Sections 5 and 6 will show that it was not only what Tolkien said but how he said it that led to the regrettable state of affairs summarized by Shippey (2010) in the title of his essay: "Tolkien's Two Views of *Beowulf*: One Hailed, One Ignored. But Did We Get This Right?" It is for this reason that it is so important first to explore what he actually said that led to misinterpretation and why he said it that way.

3. Tolkien's Intellectual Context

While the analytic approach to literature such as the Homeric poems goes back to antiquity, most notably to the Alexandrians, the modern school of thought to which Tolkien was reacting has its immediate origins in the eighteenth century. This survey accordingly begins there.

In the eighteenth century, the venerable tradition of textual criticism was beginning to lead to new discoveries in the related disciplines of language and literature. It had long been observed that when one studied multiple manuscripts of, say, Chaucer, these manuscripts would exhibit conflicting readings here and there. A methodology was developed for determining the oldest reading², or the one least likely to have been introduced by a scribe. In the process, scholars realized the importance of reconstructing the relationships between any two manuscripts. For instance, if two manuscripts with the same reading are determined to have been copied from the same exemplar, they do not provide independent evidence for that reading.

This comparative method found fertile new ground in 1786, when Sir William Jones, now credited with sparking off the field of Indo-European comparative linguistics, gave an address to the Asiatic Society. In the address, he suggested that Sanskrit, Persian, Latin, Greek, Germanic, and Celtic languages might all go back to a common ancestral language. The techniques used in textual criticism to reconstruct an ancient reading were applied to reconstruct this common ancestor language. We now call that reconstructed language Proto-Indo-European. Linguistic application spurred the development of many innovations and improvements to the comparative historical method and encouraged its use in still other fields.

At this point in history it becomes difficult to talk about any literary, textual, or linguistic theory in isolation. Each informed the others. It was common for the same scholars to work in more than one of these fields, or for the same

2 Not necessarily the one found in the oldest manuscript.

theory, developed by one scholar with one field in mind, to be applied by later scholars to other fields. The same Jakob Grimm, for instance, who described a pattern of sound changes in Germanic that came to be known as Grimm's Law, is one of the Brothers Grimm famous for their collection of folktales.

During the nineteenth century, the drive for “national mythologies” resulted in the collection of oral stories such as *Grimm's Fairy Tales* and the *Kalevala*. Once these collections were available on the printed page, scholars started to recognize motifs that cropped up again and again in very disparate traditions. Scholars speculated that just as many languages in which these tales were told had proved related, so might their oral tradition of myth. They began breaking down stories into motifs, the same way they had broken down languages into sounds, and set out to reconstruct the origin of these traditions.

Meanwhile, the scholars of textual criticism were naturally applying themselves to the study of great works of literature such as the Bible and Homer. What they concluded was surprising to many: that there was not a single Ur-text to be reconstructed, as though one author had sat down and composed a single body of work, and divergences entered in only during the copying of the manuscript tradition. Works previously attributed to a single author were found to have such contradictions and differences in style that many scholars came to subscribe to a theory of multiple authorship. They were opposed by others who continued to believe in a single author, and a host of theories sprang up, each trying to account for the features of the text in question.

Having summarized the general trends of the period, I now proceed to illustrate some of the outcomes of the analytic approach at its most extreme.

The Pentateuch, or first five books of the Old Testament, were long believed to have been written by one man, traditionally given the name of Moses. This theory of single authorship, which is still thriving today, began to compete with the so-called documentary hypothesis. The documentary hypothesis, also called the Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis after two of its early proponents, argues that four separate authors can be detected, as well as a redactor who united the different threads into a single text.

The contributions of each hypothesized author are not discrete chunks of text, but are largely interwoven throughout the text, especially in the first four books. Even a single verse might be analyzed into two parts and attributed to two distinct authors. For instance, the verses of Gen. 22:1-19 are attributed to the author commonly abbreviated E according to the documentary hypothesis, 22:20-24 to the J author, and 23 to the P author (Carpenter & Harford-Battersby 1900, 273). Working in this way, scholars try to reconstruct distinct texts that can

sometimes stand alone and tell a coherent story (such as the flood) in two or three different ways, and on other occasions we find only enough text from one author to supplement a story being told by another author.

The Homeric Question, by which is meant the study of the origins of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and their composition and authorship, abounds with a larger number of competing theories. Nevertheless, some of these nineteenth century theories, can be seen as forming counterparts to the Biblical debate over the Documentary Hypothesis versus the Mosaic authorship hypothesis.

Wolf, one of the eighteenth century textual critics, sparked off this Unitarian vs. Analyst debate in 1795 by arguing that the poems of Homer were not originally committed to writing, but composed and transmitted orally (Wolf 1795). Many rhapsodes, as he reconstructed the state of things, sang about many threads of the Trojan War, and only in the time of Peisistratus were they consolidated into the two complete poems as we know them.

This argument gave the Analysts the chance to try to reconstruct the component stories, and identify different authors. Wilamowitz (1884), much like Wellhausen, to whom he dedicated his investigation into the Homeric question, argued that the *Odyssey* was composed from three separate poems, brought together by a redactor. Those component poems he sought to break down into still earlier components and find still earlier redactors for them. Lachmann (1837) had taken a similar approach but arrived at different conclusions: he believed the *Iliad* was the result of eighteen different lays, comparable to the lays that Lönnrot had compiled and worked into the *Kalevala*.

The task of analyzing folklore is made even easier than analyzing the Homeric poems by the fact that folklore already exists in discrete stories in large numbers. Many scholars find it natural to group together stories from different traditions as having the same themes; but to achieve this purpose, it is necessary to break down the stories into motifs.

For an illustration of the results of such analysis, I have chosen Propp. His famous *Morphology of the Folktale* was written in Russia in 1928, though its first translation into English came only in 1958. He would thus not have directly influenced either of Tolkien's essays from the 1930s, but I include him because he was writing as part of the same tradition that Tolkien was reacting against, and his work provides such a striking example of extreme analysis.

Propp assigned a symbol to each motif, and thus, after reducing a story to its components, he was able to summarize it in a shorthand notation. This shorthand notation he used for the comparison of tales. In an appendix titled "Further Techniques of Analyses", he provides examples. First he writes the motif

in a few words, such as “Quest of three heroes,” and gives its symbol, e.g. C↑. Then he strings the symbols together into a formula that looks more mathematical than literary. The final result of the first example (128) is this:

$$\beta^1\delta^1A^1B^1C^1H^1-I^1K^4\downarrow w^\circ$$

Having arrived at a set of symbols in this manner, Propp is able to follow with an appendix consisting of a matrix of tales and symbols. This matrix allows easy examination of the overlap of motifs of any two folktales. Though, as noted, the 1958 English translation of Propp postdated Tolkien's 1930s essays, it predated the 1966 interview in which Tolkien decries the dissection of a story into symbols. Whether this particular work by Propp had come to Tolkien's attention at this time or not, and whether or not Tolkien was aware of the use of algebraic symbols, his objection was to the idea that an element in a work can be abstracted from its context, because it is not a part of a holistic story. His rejection of dissection into symbols applies equally to the approach that would understand the resurrected Gandalf as Christ (for example) and to the approach that would understand Aragorn as a particular type of hero in folklore, interchangeable with any other character who could be represented by a Greek letter in Propp's schema.

Study of Germanic works of literature took place in the same intellectual environment, often by the same scholars. Lachmann, for instance, applied the techniques he used on Homer to the *Nibelungenlied*. Tolkien noted that once the students of Wolf, the *Liedertheorists*, got their hands on *Beowulf*, it stood no chance of being evaluated as anything but a collection of separate oral lays (2011, 81).

Wellhausen and others had approached the Old Testament from the angle of history, as well as textual criticism. Since much of the Old Testament was written explicitly as a historical document, this approach made sense. Homer was poetry, not history, but was nevertheless used as a source of information about history. In the eighteenth century, Classical scholars had learned to ask what a historical period could tell them about an author, and conversely, what an author's work could tell them about the historical period. Treating Homer as a member of a distinct society from Callimachus was one important thrust of Wolf's work. The converse, of course, resulted in quarrying Homer for evidence of what either his own time was like, or what memory he retained of what the age of his heroes was like. Most famously, Homer was used by Schliemann as a source to determine the

location of ancient Troy, a city long dismissed as purely the stuff of legend³.

In such a climate, *Beowulf* would inevitably be quarried for earlier stories, such as that of Ingeld. Details of feuds between Germanic peoples would be assiduously hunted down.

But *Beowulf* was at yet another disadvantage. Homer and the Bible, underpinnings of Western civilization, suffered no lack of defenders on the grounds of aesthetic unity, nor of those who believed in the value of reading and enjoying them as works in themselves, whatever the history of their composition. They were treated as quarries, but they were in no danger of losing all literary appreciation in favor of being treated as quarries.

Beowulf, in contrast, did not enjoy a long and well-entrenched history as a work of high prestige. It was only in the later eighteenth century that scholars became able to read it at all. Only able to skim the beginning and end of the poem, some earlier scholars believed it was a history of the wars of the Swedes and Danes (Tolkien 2011, 78). They were disappointed when they found it was a poem with monsters, and they criticized the quality of the poetry. Homer was subject to the same criticisms--Lachmann and Wilamowitz believed any poetry they considered inferior was a later interpolation, not part of their beloved Ur-texts--but with more defenders than the hapless *Beowulf*. Study of *Beowulf* as a literary object languished...until Tolkien came along.

4. Tolkien's Influence

Tolkien was not the first to read and study *Beowulf* as a poem, but he was the most influential. In 1936, Tolkien delivered "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" in a lecture to the British Academy, and it was published as an essay shortly thereafter. In it, he responded to critics of *Beowulf*. He argued that *Beowulf* should be studied as a poem in its own right, not only as source material for various Germanic peoples, and that it was in fact a poem with a great deal of literary value to recommend it.

In the year 1938 he wrote and delivered as a lecture another essay, "On Fairy-stories". He similarly proclaimed the literary value of the genre of fairy stories, and the importance of reading, enjoying, and commenting on the literary value of individual stories. The main thrust of scholarship had been comparative and anthropological in focus. Adult readers looking for stories to enjoy and

3 Though there were archaeologists who were already digging at Hisarlik when he arrived, it was Schliemann and his work with Homer that brought the enterprise to the attention of a wider public audience.

serious academics tended to turn up their noses at fairy stories, as childish, escapist, or otherwise unworthy of being taken seriously.

Tolkien was aided by a shift in the intellectual climate away from the dissectionists of the nineteenth century, such that the view that epic was necessarily composed of older folk lays, akin to what Wilamowitz and Lachmann posited for Homer's poems, was no longer widely subscribed to (Chambers 1921, 112-20). Nevertheless, *Beowulf* was still frequently ignored as poetry, and when considered, compared unfavorably to the poem as the critic would have liked to have had it. Tolkien's goal was to earn it a place among works of literature to be studied primarily as such, and to challenge the view that it was of poor quality.

I submit that in some respects, Tolkien was successful beyond his wildest dreams, and arguably beyond his intentions as well. In *Beowulf* studies, he succeeded in changing the opinion of the quality of the poem as well as changing the nature of studies concerning it. In studies of his own work, where his influence has been more mixed, there exists more of a balance, but it is possible and probable that good studies have not seen the light thanks to the vigor with which he expressed his opinions.

Of the two essays, *BMC* and *OFS*, *BMC* was by far the more influential. So influential was it, in fact, that it has been proposed as “the single most influential essay in the history of literary studies in the twentieth century” (Drout 2010), and similarly as “the most often-cited scholarly paper in the humanities of all time” (Shippey 2010) with the result that *Beowulf* scholars feel the need to point out that *Beowulf* studies did not, in fact, begin with this essay (see Drout 2011a) for examples).

The positive result of *BMC* was the overcoming of the stigma against the monsters in *Beowulf*, and the encouragement a body of study of the poem that treats it as a self-contained object of art. Tolkien's goals in that respect were met.

The negative result of *BMC* has been that, in part thanks to Tolkien's discouragement--or perceived discouragement--of “quarrying”, non-literary studies of *Beowulf* have lagged in favor of purely literary studies. Shippey (2010, 2014) and Drout (2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2014) have written several essays lamenting the ahistorical approach to *Beowulf* that predominated after Tolkien's essay. Though it would be infeasible to quantify this trend by documenting all scholarship on *Beowulf* since 1936, Shippey (2014, 75) cites prominent illustrations of the ahistorical approach, including the introduction to *Klaeber's Beowulf*. In his contribution to the same volume (2014, 159-60), Drout argued that detaching the poem from history was not Tolkien's intention, but that it was welcomed by scholars because an ahistorical poem gives greater scope for

varying literary interpretations than a poem bound by chronological considerations. In their writings, Drout and Shippey call for a more balanced approach. They argue that Tolkien did not intend *Beowulf's* historical context to be abandoned, and they argue that Tolkien's caution about the historical accuracy of *Beowulf* can and should be challenged by evidence. Drout (2014, 175) notes that works that have deviated from the post-Tolkien trend and applied the findings of history and archaeology to *Beowulf* have often yielded enlightening results that should be pursued further.

The recent publication of Tolkien's commentary on *Beowulf*⁴ (2014) illustrates Tolkien's commitment to a balanced approach to the poem: neither ignoring its historical context nor treating it as though its sole value were the extent to which it serves as a historical document enlightening us about the past. Throughout, he follows the two threads of history and fairy-story elements in the poem, showing how they diverge and how they intertwine. For one example, see his commentary on lines 290-305 (pages 204-220), in which he uses the poem as evidence for a claim about the historical wars between the Danes and Swedes, but at the same time carefully highlights the presence of legendary characters and argues that the fairy-tale aspect means that there can be no one-to-one mapping between the poem and the historical situation. This commentary, then, is Tolkien embodying his own principles of literary criticism. Unfortunately, because it was only published in 2014, compared to the 1936 emergence of his more polemical and one-sided essay, his balanced commentary has not yet been influential in the way his essay has.

OFS was less influential. One area in which Tolkien most notably failed to obtain his desire was with regard to fairy tales. Though a variety of approaches to the scholarly studies study of folklore prevail, he would still be saddened by the continued association of fairy tales with children and by the stigma that attaches to adults reading "escapist" literature, including his own work.

In the field of studies of his own work, which I will call *Tolkieniana* by analogy with *Beowulfiana*, Tolkien's opinions have also obviously had an influence. It is impossible to say what scholarly works have *not* been written or published because of his discouraging opinions, but even if no other evidence existed, the apologies for source study by Fisher and Shippey that open the recent volume of source studies of Tolkien's work (Fisher 2011a) show the self-consciousness that has been engendered by his discouragement. With that said,

4 I owe the reviewers at *The Journal of Tolkien Research* thanks for bringing this volume to my attention.

the existence of the volume shows that his discouragement has not sufficed to suppress all such study. There has been less of an imbalance in *Tolkieniana* than in *Beowulfiana*. Why Tolkien scholars should have been more persistent than *Beowulf* scholars in the face of discouragement is hard to say, but it may be in part because of the number of readers who are familiar with his fiction but less so, or not at all, with his nonfiction and with the opinions he expressed therein. There demonstrably exists an audience for studies, both popular and scholarly, of the ox bones or at least the ingredients of the soup. Many students come to medieval and/or Anglo-Saxon studies through Tolkien's fiction (Drout 2011a, 2-3; Lee & Sopolova 2006). For them, recognizing the sources of Tolkien's work does not lessen but increases their appreciation of his work, while whetting their appetite for more. Therefore, there has been a tension between on the one hand, either persuasion by Tolkien's arguments, or at least a desire to respect his wishes regarding his own work even when not persuaded, and on the other hand, the desire to know more on all matters, including sources.

Regarding *Beowulf* studies, Shippey and Drout have observed that Tolkien's arguments pulled the pendulum hard to one side, in hopes of restoring a balance, but with the effect of creating an imbalance in the other direction. Shippey writes, "He pitched his argument as strong as ever he could. But did he really mean it? All of it? Or did people only hear the bit of what he said that they wanted to hear? Whatever the explanation, the effect of what Tolkien wrote has been to terminate interest in *Beowulf* as a guide to history" (2010). While an absolute term such as "terminate" may be overstating the matter, the status of Tolkien's essay in the discipline of *Beowulfiana* is certainly powerful enough to have had a regrettably discouraging effect on later scholars who might otherwise have pursued an interest in non-literary studies of *Beowulf*. The present essay argues that Tolkien meant what he said, in *BMC* and elsewhere, but said only what he felt needed to be said, because he was seeing himself in the context of an intellectual environment where the other case was already being made strongly.

Followers of Tolkien have read him out of context--hence the need for reminders that there is work that predated Tolkien--and have done exactly what would be expected if one handed a student a copy of *BMC* in a vacuum. Tolkien's brief concessions to the validity of the analytic side, in both *BMC* and *OFS*, are easily overlooked in the rhetorical strength of his arguments for his own side. Therefore he is often seen as presenting a one-sided view himself. Now, why the intellectual trend tended toward reading Tolkien in isolation as a manual for how

to approach *Beowulf* studies⁵, is beyond the scope of this paper. Drout (2014) presents his own views on the subject. The purpose of this paper is to show that it is possible to understand both why Tolkien wrote as he did, given his context, and why, out of context, readers would naturally understand only part of what Tolkien meant.

5. What Tolkien Meant

Given the summary of Tolkien's intellectual context provided above, it should be clear that Tolkien was himself in a defensive position. That he was reacting to his historical context has been called attention to by Drout (2011a, 20) and Clark (1990), and is the main thrust of the present essay. Drout, having closely studied the rhetorical devices by Tolkien in his essay, emphasizes the effort that Tolkien was making to refute previous scholars, and he regrets the fact that Tolkien's strong language is what has guided later scholars more than the balanced context of Tolkien's writing (2011b).

It's no accident that Tolkien's two major essays on literary criticism defend *Beowulf* and fairy stories. Homer and the Old Testament were in no need of defense: the Bible has never lacked for passionate devotees, and the Homeric Analysts were countered all along by a thriving school of Unitarians. Nor was Homer, no matter the school of thought, ever dismissed by the academic community as being of poor quality. Quite the opposite! The belief that the definition of a good poem was a "poem more like Homer" was partly responsible for wishing *Beowulf* were different (Drout 2011b, 14), and so strong was the belief that the Homeric poems were good that it shaped beliefs about how they must have been composed. (Drout 2011b, 12). Tolkien said casually that he first discovered the sensation of literary pleasure in Homer. Notably, he said this without defensiveness, and no one challenged him on it. When he wrote about the literary value of *Beowulf*, he had to support his claim with some fifty pages of argument. Similarly, he had to write a defense of the value of fairy stories to adults, because they had been relegated to children and old women, to whom no one assigned much prestige.

It's no accident either that his efforts were devoted to persuading his audience of the importance of reading, enjoying, and critiquing a text as a text.

5 Which is not to say that earlier works, especially Chambers, are not still read profitably, but they have thus far been less influential in guiding the production of other studies. Shippey's compilation of early *Beowulfiana* (1998) may help reverse the trend by making these works more accessible.

After over a hundred years of Analysis, source studies, and historical quarrying of texts, he had no reason to believe that studies of that nature would go away. He merely did not want them to overshadow other approaches that he valued.

In other words, rather than trying to eliminate certain areas of study, Tolkien was seeking to fill a gap. Specifically, he was trying to carve out a space for literary criticism in the study of *Beowulf* and other works. Studies that are not literary criticism, as he often acknowledged, are of value, but he argued that they should not drive out, or be mistaken for, the study of literary criticism. In this light, we can see where Tolkien saw his own work fitting into a tradition of literary scholarship, and why to all appearances he discouraged source studies of his work.

In quote (9), Tolkien predicted that “the search for sources [was] going to occupy academics for a generation or two,” and expressed a wish that this need not be so. Reading his words in the context of *Beowulf* scholarship before his influential essay, and remembering that he was generally trying to add to existing scholarship rather than subtract from it, softens his implied strictures against source studies and helps ease any moral qualms about ignoring his express wishes concerning studies of his own work. In the context in which he wrote, it makes sense to take the operative word of quote (9) as “occupy.” When Tolkien dreaded source studies of his own work, one can imagine his great weariness at the thought that he would be subjected to a continuation of the same one-sided approach that he was reacting against in works such as *Beowulf*. His concern, then, would not have been so much a concern that scholars would be interested in source studies, but that they would be interested in source studies to the exclusion of all else. He must have feared not being judged at all on his own merits. The reader who does not mistake a well-thought-out source study of Tolkien for all that anyone needs to say concerning Tolkien, is in harmony with Tolkien's guidelines toward the study of *Beowulf* or folklore.

Another feature of quote (9) that gives the impression of discouraging all source studies is that on several occasions Tolkien frankly stated his own lack of interest in such studies: “To my mind, it is the particular use...that is the most interesting thing.” Moreover, his language sometimes verged on passing objective judgment instead of stating a subjective preference. Though he usually qualified his preferences--when not comparing the preferences of others to emetics--it is easy to overlook qualifications such as “to my mind,” “it seems to me,” and “I feel,” especially when they precede advice on how to carry out scholarship. In such cases, it helps to keep in mind that Tolkien's interests focused on certain areas, such as literary criticism, and that he was seeking to define the boundaries

of literary criticism.

For instance, Tolkien imagined a hypothetical scenario in which all medieval literature had been lost to us. He concluded that in this scenario, there would be both readers who appreciated Shakespeare's works as literature, as well as students of history who quarried them in search of detail about the preceding period of medieval history, to compensate for the loss of medieval literature. The work of the historians attempting to learn about the medieval period, he speaks of positively.

- (18) This would be a *legitimate* [emphasis mine] procedure--to use Shakespeare in the course of research prompted by a special curiosity about the past. But it would *not* [emphasis in original] be the chief function of Shakespeare *criticism* [emphasis mine] (2011, 37).

In the final draft, leaving out the comparison with Shakespeare and an imagined loss of medieval literature, Tolkien acknowledged in so many words the value of *Beowulf* in investigating poorly attested periods of history, while distinguishing that pursuit from literary criticism.

- (19) The historian's search is, of course, *perfectly legitimate* [emphasis mine], even if it does not assist criticism at all (for that is not its object), so long as it is not mistaken for *criticism* [emphasis mine]. To Professor Birger Nerman as an historian of Swedish origins *Beowulf* is doubtless an important document, but he is not writing a history of English poetry (1936, 247).

In other words, it was always to the literary critics who claimed that *Beowulf* was of no use other than as a historical document, and that it was not worthy of being studied as literature, that Tolkien objected, never to the historians whose primary interest was in reconstructing the past.

His words regarding the study of fairy stories are strikingly similar. At the time that he wrote, anthropologists made much comparative study of fairy-tales, but it was not considered fashionable for adults to read the tales themselves for enjoyment, as indeed continues to be the case. Just as he distinguished between history for its own sake and literary criticism, he distinguished between comparative folklore and literary criticism. He said of the collection of folklore motifs:

- (20) Such studies are...the pursuit of folklorists or anthropologists: that is of using the stories not as they are meant to be used⁶, but as a quarry from which to dig evidence, or information about matters in which they are interested. A *perfectly legitimate* [emphasis mine] procedure in itself... (1947, 47).

Just as with *Beowulf*, Tolkien drew a line between using folklore to give us information about ancient customs, and taking a folktale as a literary object in its own right. The concerns of one, he argues, are different from the concerns of the other.

- (21) The least useful question, therefore, *for literary critics at any rate* [emphasis mine], to ask or to answer about Iphigeneia, daughter of Agamemnon, is: Does the legend of her sacrifice at Aulis come down from a time when human sacrifice was commonly practised (1947, 85)?

In other words, the literary impact of the story on the reader may be independent of whether human sacrifice was more familiar to the original tellers of the story or as shocking to them as it is to us. However, historians, anthropologists, archaeologists, and others may be very interested indeed in the development of the practice of human sacrifice in the real world! In their case, all that is needed is a proper methodology for asking and answering such questions.

In passages (18)-(21), Tolkien on the one hand acknowledges the value of the existing scholarship on *Beowulf* and folklore, while on the other hand contrasts it with literary criticism. By making this contrast, he is able to show there exists a gap in the scholarship, and that gap is literary criticism. In both *BMC* and *OFS*, he is not attempting to eliminate historical, anthropological, archaeological, comparative, and other such analytic approaches, but to add literary, holistic approaches to them.

Why have Tolkien's successors so readily missed his support of these other approaches? No doubt because his approval is expressed in a mere "perfectly legitimate," while page after page is devoted to passionate defense of the importance of literary criticism. Why did Tolkien structure his arguments this way? For the same reason that he defended the poetic value of *Beowulf* and not

⁶ This need not be a disparagement, whether or not Tolkien intended it as such. The same may be said of almost anything that a historian or archaeologist studies. For instance, law codes were meant to be obeyed and buildings to be occupied.

Homer. Historical and analytic approaches to *Beowulf* and folklore, like appreciation of the Homeric poems, did not lack supporters; were, in fact, taken for granted as part of the intellectual clime. Rhetorically, he had to be forceful in order to be heard over a choir of voices all singing the same tune. How much Tolkien personally valued source studies can be seen from quote (22).

- (22) I do not deny, for I feel strongly, the fascination of the desire to unravel the intricately knotted and ramified history of the branches on the Tree of Tales. It is closely connected with the philologists' study of the tangled skein of Language, of which I know some small pieces (1947, 48).

As a philologist deeply invested in the study of Indo-European, particularly Germanic, linguistic reconstructions, Tolkien could hardly have felt otherwise. Using his knowledge of reconstructed Germanic roots, he liked to write in Gothic using words and forms not attested in that language. He was able to do this by rendering words from other Germanic languages as they would have appeared in Gothic according to the regular laws of sound change. He evidently did the same for a Germanic language of his own invention, which he called “Gautisk” and was probably meant to be the language spoken by Beowulf and his Geats (Garth 2003, 17). Tolkien would not have been able to engage in such pastimes, were it not for scholars in the nineteenth century who broke down the attested languages to find what they were made of, and he well knew this.

Moreover, it should not surprise us that he treats language and literature together in this manner. In his own oeuvre, both fictional and nonfictional, language and literature were inextricably intertwined. In the wider body of scholarship, such intertwining was more characteristic in the nineteenth century than in later times. In Tolkien's valedictory address to Oxford in 1959, he lamented the growing rift between “Lang” and “Lit” in universities. Source studies are the analogue of philological reconstructions, and Tolkien's undoubted passion for the latter, even without his admission to the fascination of the former, should tell us that he could not wholly disapprove of source studies. In both cases, he liked to use them as stepping stones for his creative activities: writing stories and creating languages. What he disapproved of was the exclusive claims of analysis in both language and literature. He expressed his horror that university students' only encounter with early English was with sound changes to be memorized, and never with the literature, and he tried to remedy this (Carpenter 1978, 26). Not by eliminating the study of sound changes, a sine qua non for any of his invented languages, but by stressing the importance of Lit to the Lang

people, and vice versa.

For this reason, I am in agreement with Bratman, quoted below, contra Flieger in quote (16), that Tolkien did *not* consider quarrying a “gross misuse” of the material, but merely elevated above its importance when treated as its *only* use.

- (23) In a famous essay, Tolkien complained that *Beowulf* has been used as a quarry of fact and fancy far more assiduously than it has been studied as a work of art' (MC 5). He did not mean that scholarly quarrying was necessarily a misuse of *Beowulf*, and still less is it a misuse of *The History of Middle-earth*, which requires its editor's elucidation merely to be generally comprehensible. But I hope to have shown, as Tolkien did for *Beowulf*, that there *is* art in this unique and valuable series of books, and that readers will find their way to it (Bratman 2000, 89).

As the latter part of Bratman's quote shows, he is concerned to relate Tolkien's words on *Beowulf* and folklore to the legitimacy of studies concerning Tolkien's own work. His essay defends the *History of Middle-earth* as having both literary merit as well as being prime quarrying ground. The concern is real, since Tolkien expressed some strongly negatively opinions, seen in section 1, concerning studies of his own work. Alongside those discouraging passages, as has been noted by Fisher, he had some more encouraging things to say, such as the suggestion that investigation into the sources of Bilbo's and Gollum's riddles might be fruitful (Fisher 2011, 32). Is he being self-contradictory, as has been concluded? Without engaging too much in the dangerous game of mind-reading, it is possible to fit these remarks into the framework of his thinking as laid out more explicitly in *BMC* and *OFS*.

The first question to ask is, if Tolkien did not object to source studies per se in *Beowulf* and folklore, might he not feel the same way about the value of source studies for his own work? His remarks about the riddles certainly lend support to the idea that it was not the source studies but the possibility they would “occupy scholars for a generation or two” that he objected to. Everything in his scholarly background would have prepared him to expect and dread this very outcome. *Beowulf* was judged not on its own merits, but dismissed as a work of literature and “knocked down” like his allegorical tower in *BMC*. As Shippey has convincingly argued from Tolkien's own words in *BMC*, Tolkien identified so strongly with the *Beowulf* poet that he did not hesitate to engage in mind-reading, so convinced was he that he was the only one who understood the *Beowulf* poet,

because (Tolkien believed) they had the same approach to writing (2007a 5). It is little wonder if Tolkien strove to forestall the same fate for his own work.

Fortunately, while many critics from the literary establishment have dismissed the literary quality of Tolkien's work, they are generally not the ones writing source studies. Those who defend his literary value are the same ones who defend his relevance for scholarly study of all sorts. I think it fair to say that source studies have not occupied the body of scholarship as a whole, though many have been written. He is thus in a better position than the one he had to rescue *Beowulf* from, and the one he dreaded.

Another difference between Tolkien's opinions on his own work, expressed in the 1960s and 1970s, in contrast to his opinions in the two essays of the 1930s, is that he occupied a privileged position with respect to his own work. If he believed he was uniquely qualified to understand the *Beowulf* poet, then he left no doubt that in his case, the author was emphatically not dead. He did not support study of his own work while he was alive. When asked if he approved of research into his works, he responded, "I do not while I am alive anyhow. I do not know why they should research without any reference to me; after all, I hold the key." (Resnick 1967, 38). Shippey (2011) is spot-on on this point: Tolkien knew for a fact when source studies were wrong, just as he knew when allegories were not intended. He tended to lump them together, as in quote (10). Naturally, he grew more exasperated when dismissing the thoughts of scholars on his own work than on the works of anonymous, long-dead storytellers. Furthermore, in his letters, he was writing in a more private, personal context than in his essays, where fair scholarship dictated that he acknowledge the validity of the claims made by others. We can therefore not be surprised to see language stronger and less carefully crafted in the letters.

For instance, he put scare quotes around 'criticise' in (7). Since he explicitly said he did not "forbid criticism of the soup as soup," and devoted two essays to arguing for the importance of real criticism and warning against mistaking what is not criticism for criticism, he surely did not mean in (7) that he wished readers not to criticize his works. What is most likely is that he meant that readers--or worse, non-readers--will engage in what they believe is literary criticism but actually is not. With that said, now that he is dead and can no longer be queried, we seem to have his goodwill in investigating the sources of the riddles, and by extension, other matters. Since Tolkien clearly drew on many sources, his objections to wrong-headed studies do not at all address the legitimacy of valid approaches to his acknowledged use of, say, Kullervo's story.

A third difference between the essays and the letters is that we can

identify, especially with the help of Drout's work, what work of scholarship Tolkien was alluding to in any given passage of *BMC*. In the case of the letters, such as the one in which he warns against meddling in the affairs of wizards (8), we cannot know what "analysis of this kind" refers to. In his essays, Tolkien had a number of things to say on the subject of methodology. It is possible that he thought the study in quote (8) was a particularly poorly judged approach to studying his work, in the same way that he believed that any attempt to reduce LOTR to allegory was doomed to fail. Such quotes should be taken to mean not that a certain class of studies should not exist, but that they should be done well and avoid certain methodological pitfalls.

There is a final point of consistency in Tolkien's writings that has been noted by Librán-Moreno (2005, 27-8): he was personally less interested in analysis than in literary criticism. On several occasions he uses phrases such as, "to my mind...is the most interesting thing," "it seems to me...is more important," and "I feel that it is more interesting," in which he is expressing not only his own opinion but clearly encouraging the reader to believe that what he is interested in is more important to study. In other cases, he attempts to put himself in the shoes of someone of a different mindset, such as the history professor to whom *Beowulf* is legitimately first and foremost a historical document (20), or the anthropologist who is interested in the history of the practice of human sacrifice, and he concludes that their concerns are not of primary importance to literary criticism. Tolkien's case is strongest if he is taken to be asserting that his domain is literary criticism, and that he is concerned only with what is of value to strictly literary criticism and interpretation. Other studies that may be of value fall outside his domain.

In sum, then, the way in which Tolkien expressed his opinions, and their apparent one-sidedness, can be understood in light of the following conclusions:

- He defended what he felt needed defending--literary criticism--not the analytic body of scholarship whose existence was taken for granted.
- He frequently qualified his statements with acknowledgements of the value of the studies in which he was less interested.
- He sometimes stated his personal interests using language that verged on an objective statement about inherent value rather than a subjective preference.
- He objected to misguided studies.
- He objected to scholarly studies of his own work while he was alive in

favor of consulting him.

- He did not want to end up like *Beowulf* in the nineteenth century, read only for mining and not for enjoyment.

If these points are taken into account, then we can conclude that Tolkien believed that it is not only permissible but important for some--but not all--scholars to engage in analytic studies of *Beowulf*, folklore, and his own works, as long as these are grounded in a sound methodology. This much suffices to give Tolkien's blessing on studies that do not qualify as literary criticism.

6. An Apology for Analytic Study

The present essay has until now examined what Tolkien said and what he meant in context by what he said. I have argued that his opposition to historical, source, comparative, and other studies was not as one-sided as has been assumed. In fact, he encouraged the continued existence of many of these studies. When he discouraged them altogether, he often did so in a limited context for a valid reasons, such as studies that are poorly conducted and draw erroneous conclusions through their invalid methodology.

Having considered what Tolkien believed, said, and meant, I now turn to presenting my own arguments in defense of these studies. In some cases, that will involve respectfully disagreeing with what others, including Tolkien, have said. In particular, this section examines some of the rhetorical devices used to persuade the reader of the lack of value in certain forms of study.

Tolkien's best-known metaphors portray analysis of literature as a "destructive" process. Most famously, he compared analysis of *Beowulf* to a man who builds a tower from which he can see the sea, and the critics who tear down the tower, looking for the stones that make up its foundation, or for coal under the soil. This causes them to lose sight of the finished object as a tower. On at least two occasions, in quotes (7) and (8), Tolkien he Gandalf's words that "He that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom" with application of "breaking" to the analysis--etymologically "loosening up"--of texts.

In one respect, this is not a fair comparison to an approach toward studying literature. Namely, there exists only one tower in the real world, and once it is pushed down, or "broken", no one can climb it to look at the sea. In that case, it might make sense to discourage a study that would ruin it once and for all. This is one of the dilemmas of archaeologists, who struggle to gather knowledge while leaving the object of study, or more modern structures built atop it, intact. In literature, however, innumerable critics can write studies of whatever sort they

please, and the finished text is still there to be appreciated as a work of art by those who have a mind to. The pursuits of critics are not mutually exclusive, but complementary.

The only way in which one approach is destructive is if the intellectual trends of the time discourage any other approach. This was, as we've seen, the case when Tolkien was writing. It was not the historical or source studies of *Beowulf* that pushed the tower down, but the insistence that it was not worth studying as a poem, which therefore discouraged other scholars--we cannot know how many--from writing studies they might otherwise have been inclined to write, until Tolkien produced his defense of the poem. His essay resulted in the converse intellectual trend, and is now being used as an excuse for discouraging studies not currently in fashion. Likewise, no amount of analytic studies of Tolkien's own works can destroy appreciation of his artistry. Only discouraging studies is destructive.

“Breaking a thing down” is a rhetorical device advocating for holistic approaches to literature. Yet if we apply this maxim to disciplines other than literature, it becomes obvious that we would lose much of our understanding of the world. Our knowledge of anatomy and physiology comes in significant part from dissection, long forbidden on religious grounds. Trees are cored to count their rings and determine their age as well as details of the climate in years past. Phonetics is the study not of speech as an art form, but of the production of individual sounds. Engineers take apart machines to see how they work.

Notoriously anti-technology, Tolkien might not have approved of all of these methods. His approach to science seems to have restricted itself to observation: of the stars, of plants, of the climate. Saruman, to whom Gandalf's reproach is addressed, is the most obvious proponent of the Industrial Revolution in Tolkien's fiction, and he is portrayed as mistaken in his use of machines, not only in his evil purposes. There are no characters who are portrayed as using the same technology in a morally upright fashion, because Tolkien did not think it was possible. As is true of Tolkien's stance on any particular issue, inevitably some of his readers will find themselves in agreement, while others will respectfully disagree. On the subject of the value of breaking something to study it, I respectfully disagree.

Similarly, I draw on another discipline, the study of human history, to support the value of tracing origins. When he encourages readers to resist the temptation to trace the development of a motif through different works of literature, Tolkien compares it to tracing a thread through a tapestry (OFS 47), despite the fact he also compares it to the study of his own discipline, historical

linguistics, and acknowledges that it has some fascination. He nevertheless denigrates it in comparison with synchronic study that takes in the whole of a limited part of the picture at once. He prefers--not only as a matter of personal taste, but argues for the objective superiority of--the study of language or story as a living monument to the study of the development of some part of language or story.

The tapestry in his analogy is an effective rhetorical device that presents the reader with a reason to believe that they will gain little from the exercise. Yet the diachronic development of a motif makes as much sense as an object of study as the diachronic development of anything else. You might find in a library, for instance, a study of the development of the parliamentary body in Europe, from the Icelandic Althing to the modern bodies. Such a study might not tell you much about the effects of the parliament on the lives of the citizens of any country today. Just as a story is meant to be read, a parliament is meant to pass laws for people to live under. Studying them diachronically is not using them as they were meant to be used. But the history of the parliaments might be read with interest by someone with an inclination toward that sort of study, and ignored by others. These others would have no lack of synchronic studies of history to read. As readers, they would suffer nothing from the existence of the diachronic study. As seen above, Tolkien himself used *Beowulf* to argue for a particular historical situation, and it did not ruin his or anyone else's ability to appreciate the poem as a work of art.

For these reasons, it cannot simply be stated that breaking a thing to learn more about it is unwise, particularly when, as argued in the previous section, the breaking metaphor is a poor fit for the study of literature. Nor is tracing a thread in a tapestry a fair comparison, since the study of the development of a phenomenon is often very rewarding.

"All texts must be interpreted" means only that in the body of literature on a text, some studies should interpret it, or the body of literature will be incomplete. It does not mean that every study must interpret the text, nor that interpretation is of such overwhelming value that every reader will benefit from interpretation. Many, probably most, readers of Tolkien's work enjoy the experience of reading it, without ever reading interpretations of it. They might ask "So what?" about the literary studies in which they are not interested. The studies exist for readers of a certain mentality who feel they have gained something by reading an interpretation. The reading of the book is enough for some people. Other people will say "So what?" of the book itself. That was in essence Iva Gordon's response when she learned that Tolkien had been spending his time

writing fiction. She would have preferred that he spend his time editing medieval texts (Anderson 2003, 24). The pursuit of editing medieval texts in turn has garnered a strong “So what?” from those in more lucrative disciplines. The humanities are under fire from administrators who are shutting down departments, because the departments are having to defend themselves against “So what?” from people who don't see the point in what they do. “So what” is a dangerous question to ask. Ultimately, every pursuit both serves other ends and is an end unto itself for a subset of readers.

This arrangement in turn may sound dangerous: to permit gathering facts for their own sake. Might this not lead to an accumulation of data without usefulness? I submit that if prevailing attitudes do not discourage scholars from pursuing their own interests, a variety of studies will flourish according to the inclination of a diverse group of writers and readers. Some people are inclined to gather data and delight in the facts themselves, without needing to see larger patterns. Others are good at recognizing patterns, but find the process of gathering data tedious, or simply time-consuming. These scholars benefit from collections of studies completed at length by others, which allows them to make discoveries that would take more than a lifetime to achieve *ex nihilo*.

If we are not allowed to delight in learning as an end in itself, then everything must have a practical use. This leads, as Tolkien said, to Cattle-breeding and Agriculture to the exclusion of Zoology and Botany (1981, 192), and as Shippey laments (2007, 155), to the shutting down of departments in universities. Zoology and Botany might be said to be gathering and delighting in knowledge for its own sake; Cattle-breeding and Agriculture, answering “so what?” Both are beneficial to study, and both will be studied as long as no one insists that only one or the other is valuable, but personal preference is recognized and encouraged.

Even if one has a particular question in mind, one must gather data that may or may not turn out to hold the answer before one can find the answer. Furthermore, the questions one can think of before research are only a subset of the questions that can be answered. If only studies that contribute in direct and obvious ways to interpretation are permitted, interpreters will be limiting themselves to questions they have already thought of. Reading an analytic study that was conducted for its own sake may inspire still further questions and answers by scholars whose inclinations lead them toward interpretation, but whose pursuits might never have led them to these facts on their own. For this reason, I am more optimistic than Tolkien when he wrote that historical study does not serve criticism, for that is not its purpose. I would say that it *need* not

serve criticism, for that is not its purpose, but it may very well end up serving criticism. As Shippey and Drout have argued, criticism has suffered by narrowing its range of permitted studies.

The collection and comparison of elements in different stories is also not necessarily as dangerous as Tolkien thought. Tolkien feared that stories would suffer from a comparative approach, that they would be seen as no more than the sum of their elements, and that they would be unfavorably compared to stories that the well-read reader might think that another story had handled the same element better. This was one of the reasons he gave for the difficulties of critics of his own time in appreciating *Beowulf*: that the Anglo-Saxons would have had fewer points of comparison and would have been content to appreciate the story on its own merits. "I cannot help feeling that stories or plots may sometimes have seemed triter to [W.P. Ker⁷] the much-read than they were to some less-read old or medieval authors and their audiences, and that he did not always realize that" (Tolkien 2011, 48).

Likewise, immediately following quote (3) in OFS, he is at pains to emphasize the unique quality of each work, which does not become less striking merely because of the existence of similar themes in other works. "Spring is, of course," he writes, "not really less beautiful less beautiful because we have seen or heard of like events." Phrased in this manner, the sentiment assumes the need to defend against a contrary position: that one who reads and compares many texts develops a sort of fatigue. He advises, therefore, that each text be approached afresh, rather than as a part of a set of similar material.

Certainly Tolkien's concerns were not unfounded. There are scholars and readers who experience such fatigue, and to whose work he was responding. He may well have been right about Ker. He was certainly right to caution against the short-hand of comparative folklorists in referring to one story as "the same" as another, because they fall under the rubric of similar motifs. The execution of each story, as Tolkien reminds us, may be quite different.

Nevertheless, while I acknowledge that the comparative study of motifs or investigation of sources *may* detract from enjoyment in some readers, it does not necessarily follow that such study *must* have this effect. I would not go so far, as Tolkien does, as to say that the study of motifs, themes, and origins will never benefit anyone in writing or enjoying literature.

7 A *Beowulf* critic who expressed negative opinions of the quality of *Beowulf* as poetry, against which Tolkien defended the poem.

- (24) The analytic study of fairy-stories is as bad a preparation for the enjoying or the writing of them as would be the historical study of the drama of all lands and times for the enjoyment or writing of stage-plays (OFS 71-72).

Using the *Gilgamesh* epic as an illustration, I argue the contrary, that the analytic and comparative study of motifs can illuminate otherwise obscure episodes within a text. For instance, without an understanding of Near Eastern aetiological motifs, Enkidu's early life emerges in isolation as a series of arbitrary events. He first lives as a wild man and hunts among the animals as one of them, then has sex with a woman, is rejected by his erstwhile animal companions, is taught to drink beer and eat bread, and goes to Uruk. Only with the comparison of other works in which a similar motif appears, depicting the transition of mankind from hunter-gatherers into city-dwellers, is the meaning of his episodes revealed. Enkidu can both have a distinct personality unique to him in his story, as Tolkien would insist we remember, and also symbolize early mankind.

Similarly, it is not clear, especially in the presence of many lacunae at critical points in the text, why Enkidu alone has to die for crimes committed by both him and Gilgamesh. Comparison with other ancient Mediterranean legends can provide both an explanation within the plot as well as reveal thematic motivations for Gilgamesh's survival. His divine parent, Ninsun, may well have interceded on his behalf in a counsel of the gods, much as Thetis intercedes for Achilles in the *Iliad*. Thematically, the story of Gilgamesh embodies the widespread motif of the semi-divine hero losing his wholly mortal companion, often in a manner that foreshadows the hero's own mortality. The emotional ramifications of *Gilgamesh* thus can gain rather than lose power through the application of the comparative approach, by invoking other emotionally powerful stories, such as the story of Achilles and Patroclus in the *Iliad*, Heracles and Hylas in the *Argonautica*, and *Theseus and Pirithous* in Horace 4.7.

Tolkien's own work may benefit in the same way, despite his fears. Like Enkidu, Aragorn can both retain his unique personality and yet have his trajectory fruitfully compared to the hero's journey in other stories. Likewise, the reader who recognizes that the minor characters Elladan and Elrohir were inspired by divine twin motifs (Branchaw 2010) has the opportunity to mentally flesh out their rather sparse backstory and characterization. They become no longer a pair of twins who randomly have a mother who needs rescuing, but part of a pattern. One can, of course, decide that they are less interesting because someone else has told a story of twins rescuing their mother, but one need not.

In place of the defensiveness that currently characterizes source studies of

Tolkien's work, such as that seen in Fisher (2011), therefore, I emphasize the importance of diversity. Analytic studies are not inherently destructive. They need not be denigrated because they are not holistic studies, any more than holistic studies should be denigrated because they are not analytic. Many good works will contain elements of both holistic and analytic approaches, but a pure example of one or the other has value too. Tolkien himself acknowledged this. Despite the emphasis of his metaphors on the destructive aspects of analysis, he also portrayed the prism as a positive device in OFS, when defending the practice of subcreative fiction:

*Man, Sub-creator, the refracted Light
through whom is splintered from a single White
to many hues, and endlessly combined
in living shapes that move from mind to mind (OFS 72-73).*

Though an author, such as Tolkien or the *Beowulf*-poet, may be borrowing individual elements from other works, from history, or from life, the result is not destructive but constructive. Analysis and holism are not threats to each other, but complementary.

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