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Abstract

Discusses the then-nascent field of Tolkien studies, noting trends such as consideration of Tolkien as an “Oxford Christian” and source studies in medieval literature and culture.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Critical reception

Tolkien Criticism

George Thomson

For more than 30 years now, J.R.R. Tolkien has had an excellent press. He has been praised by four groups: reviewers, scholars, science fiction fans, & journalists.

The Hobbit and *Farmer Giles of Ham* were widely reviewed and commended. *The Lord of the Rings* had its greatness proclaimed by W. H. Auden, Richard Hughes, and C.S. Lewis. This stirred up a little resentment, but for the most part the response from Canberra to Los Angeles to London was enthusiastic. Dissenters, in the face of such acclaim, were driven to a contrary extravagance. R.H. Flood wrote: "Pretentious snobbery is the best description for this scholarly off-shoot of a once-done fairy tale." "This book is not recommended; there is no 'moral' problem involved except injustice by the publisher or a waste of time by the reader." (*Books on Trial*, January-February 1955; Tolkien has not had an especially warm reception from the Catholic press.)

A more thorough dismissal attempted by Mark Roberts in *Essays in Criticism* was blighted by cavalier treatment. Among reviewers, only Edwin Muir scrupulously balanced unquestionable merits and severe strictures. In the *London Observer* (August 22, 1954, November 21, 1954, November 27, 1955) Muir stressed the black and white quality of the narrative. He attributed this two-tone effect to Tolkien's deficiency in sensibility or imagination. He concluded that nearly all the characters were boys at heart and that *The Lord of the Rings* was a brilliant boy's adventure story.

With the new editions (paper, 1965, hardcover, 1967) history has repeated itself. Most reviews have been favorable but vituperation sinks to a new low in Paul West's outburst in *Book Week* (February 27, 1967): *The Lord of the Rings*, "far from being another great saga, is a *Nipplungenlied*, and the cult is an unweening quest for the unmeaning." Matthew Hodgart in *The New York Review of Books* (May 4, 1967) assumes the role of Edwin Muir and expounds Muir's thesis.

The scholars came next on the scene, led by Douglas Parker with his review essay in the 1956-7 number of *Hudson Review*. Until 1968 they contented themselves with the publication of essays and articles.

One direction of scholarly attention was determined by an interest in the fiction of Charles Williams and C.S. Lewis. Tolkien was rapidly assimilated to this preoccupation. He was pronounced a member of the Oxford Christians and one of a small group calling themselves the Inklings. In a recorded telephone conversation with Henry Resnick (published in *Niekas*, No. 18, 1967) Tolkien at least makes clear that he was not influenced by either Williams or Lewis.

The idea of Tolkien as one of the Inklings further expresses itself in the treatment of *The Lord of the Rings* as Christian document. For the most part, Tolkien's fiction is not well served by this specialized interest, for it leads to some form of allegorical interpretations which is precisely what the author deplors. Tolkien has insisted that he intended "a monotheistic world of 'natural theology'" and that "the 'Third Age' was not a Christian world" (*Diplomat Magazine*, October, 1966).

A second stream of Tolkien scholarship, much less developed, has for its subject language, myth, epic, and medieval narrative as these relate to Middle-earth. The fullest exposition so far is by J.S. Ryan in *Folklore* (London, Spring, 1966).

Researching Tolkien's world from the inside is an enterprise begun by W.H. Auden in "A World Imaginary, but Real" (*Encounter*, November, 1954). It was this quality of *as-thought-real* which from the first attracted a fellowship of the ring. The work of exploration begun by Auden,

has since been carried forward with great vigor by the fanzines. In a contribution to the 1967 Tolkien Birthday Number of the *Tolkien Journal*, Edmund Meskys gives a valuable run-down of the more than a dozen fan magazines which have published Tolkien material. The fanzines now encroach on all areas of Tolkien study. Special mention should be made of *Niekas*, edited by Ed Meskys, which has published far more Tolkien material than any other magazine.

Reviewers, scholars, and committed readers prepared the way for the fourth phase of writing about Tolkien. A copyright feud, sales figures, and cult status propelled a quiet Englishman, his hobbits, and Middle-earth onto the world stage of universal journalism. News-style items described his sales figures, his copyrights, and his activities. The sales figures were impressive: by the end of 1968 Ballantine had five single paperback volumes in print along with several promotional items and total sales were five million.

Meanwhile popular articles described Tolkien's works, his character, and his cult status with the young. The majority of these efforts were straightforward and reasonably accurate; they were also routine. This tide of journalistic outpourings has now receded. For real information and hard facts the reader must turn to fan magazines and scholarly journals.

