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Progress Report on the Variorum Tolkien

Abstract

Chronicles an early effort to create a variorum edition of Tolkien's works, starting with *The Lord of the Rings*, using materials at Marquette University. As a preliminary finding, the author announces that "Middle-earth" appears to be the correct capitalization and punctuation of this term.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Spelling and punctuation; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*—Variorum editions

PROGRESS REPORT ON THE VARIORUM TOLKIEN
Richard C. West

William Ready is the Agnew of Tolkien criticism, but there is one thing for which we can thank him: while he was connected with the Library of Marquette University in Milwaukee, he arranged for the purchase of many of Tolkien's papers for the Memorial Archives there. That was in the days before the epidemic of hobbitmania, and it is said that Prof. Tolkien simply stuffed what literary remains he could find into a box and shipped it off, and then bought a house with his payment. Marquette must also be satisfied with its bargain, for the Archives now house manuscripts, typescripts, and galley proofs for The Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings, Farmer Giles of Ham, an unpublished short story called "Mr. Bliss" (a delightful little piece), and a few letters written by Tolkien while he was arranging for the sale of this other material. Included are writings in Tolkien's own hand, many passages canceled or revised in the printed versions, and a number of never-published illustrations made by Tolkien himself. To a scholar, it is as rich a find as the discovery of a vein of mithril.

Since coming to Wisconsin, I have spent many fruitful hours examining the Tolkien Papers in Marquette's cool subterranean vault, thanks to the warm hospitality of Fr. Raphael N. Hamilton, S.J., the tall, spare, gentlemanly historian who is the present archivist. Within about the last year I have been joined in this study by a group of other Tolkien enthusiasts, and we have begun a variorum edition of Tolkien. A variorum is an edition containing different versions of a certain text, and sometimes the editors also furnish scholarly and critical notes and commentaries. We are doing both, though the notes will be kept to a minimum.

Banks Mebane long ago provided an excellent "Prolegomenon to a Variorum Tolkien"¹ in which he detailed changes from the first edition of Lord of the Rings made by Tolkien for the Ballantine edition. But our project is even more ambitious than Mr. Mebane envisaged, for there are more than the two versions of the text of LOTR that he considered. For our edition, we are comparing a holograph text (i.e., a manuscript in Tolkien's own hand), two typescripts, two galley proofs, the first and second editions by Houghton Mifflin, and the second edition as it initially appeared in Ballantine paperback. Our method has been to accept the Ballantine edition as our basic text (for, though the second Houghton Mifflin edition is really Tolkien's final say on the matter and therefore more authoritative, the Ballantine version is the one most people are likely to own) and note all variants from that.

Now, these papers do not represent the complete evolution of the Ring story, for there are certainly some links missing. The holograph, though written (and much scratched over) on the backs of examination papers and other scraps, is much too coherent to be Tolkien's first draft. There are enough differences between the first and the second typescripts to suggest that there may have been a version between them (and the second typing seems not to have been done by Tolkien personally). We do not have the page proofs, and changes were certainly made by Tolkien between the second galley we have and the first printing. But we do have enough to see the story taking shape. There are two basic recensions (the first represented by the holograph and the first typescript, the second by the later texts), and both have undergone much revision at every stage. For Tolkien is indeed a perfectionist and is constantly polishing his work. In this respect, he might be called the Flaubert of fantasy.

Carleton W. Carroll, William F. Orr, and I have done the bulk of this study so far, but occasionally Ivor and Deborah Rogers have come from Green Bay to assist us in finding all added sentences and altered

punctuation, and once James Robinson drove with us from Madison to Milwaukee to help collate the different versions. We plan to append a variorum Hobbit to our variorum Lord of the Rings, and here Mrs. Bonnie Jean Christensen of Northern Illinois University will be of invaluable help, since she has already examined these manuscripts in connection with her research for her dissertation. And she, like Jared Lobdell, is interested in helping to edit the rest of the Ring cycle as well, though neither has yet been able to accompany the fellowship to Marquette for this purpose. I am supposed to serve as the coordinator for all of the efforts of our group, but thus far I have done little in that capacity beyond listening to suggestions advanced by my associates as to how to proceed, wishing I had thought of that, and approving.

Earlier this year we approached Houghton Mifflin with word of our project, and in March we received as much encouragement from them as we could have expected. Naturally they cannot approve such a venture without the consent of Mr. Tolkien and his British publishers, or without seeing a sample of what we have in mind. But they were interested in seeing such a sample; and to accomplish this we had hoped to finish editing the Prologue and perhaps obtain permission to print it here, until it became obvious that the text of the Prologue with its variants would by itself be enough to fill an issue of Orcrist, and that it would be senseless to delay this issue further while we negotiated for printing rights.

However, we really are progressing with our work: in fact, as I write this in September, 1970, we hope to finish editing the Prologue any month now. Alas, there are a legion of variants in this section, and all of us have many other duties and cannot often get together in Milwaukee to edit a variorum.

But perhaps you are wondering what value we find in a study demanding so much careful labor and patience?

First of all, it is possible to watch the story growing as Tolkien adds, rejects, and revises. We find that he was telling no more than the truth in admitting that he initially had no idea who Strider was when he came climbing secretly into Bree: indeed, he at first thought the name was "Trotter," so let us be grateful that he changed his mind. We can watch as a romance between Aragorn and Eowyn is excised, and the character of Arwen is written into the narrative. We can see Elvish names of constellations replacing a description of a moonlit night, as Tolkien improves both his natural descriptions and the mythic ambience of Middle-earth. We can read the original titles for the six Books, moving from "The First Journey" to "The Journey of the Nine Companions" to "The Treason of Isengard" to "The Journey of the Ring-bearers" to "The War of the Ring" to "The End of the Third Age," noting how these underline such basic themes in LOTR as the quest and the passing of an era. All this we can learn, and much more. True, we witness some of the things Tolkien cancelled for good reason, but if we pick them out of the scrap heap it is only to show how wise the author was to throw them there. And sometimes we happen upon something worthwhile, like those chapter titles.²

Or we may discover how an error came about. In the holograph we learn that the rare modern Hobbits are "shy of the 'the Big Folk'," and that this dittography has been mechanically repeated in both of the printer's galleys and in all published editions of LOTR. You will find it on the first page of the Prologue in any edition you may have.

Or we may settle some vexed point. We now have overwhelming textual evidence establishing that Tolkien prefers to capitalize the first element of the compound words he hyphenates, but not the second. It would take too much space to give the evidence for this here, and

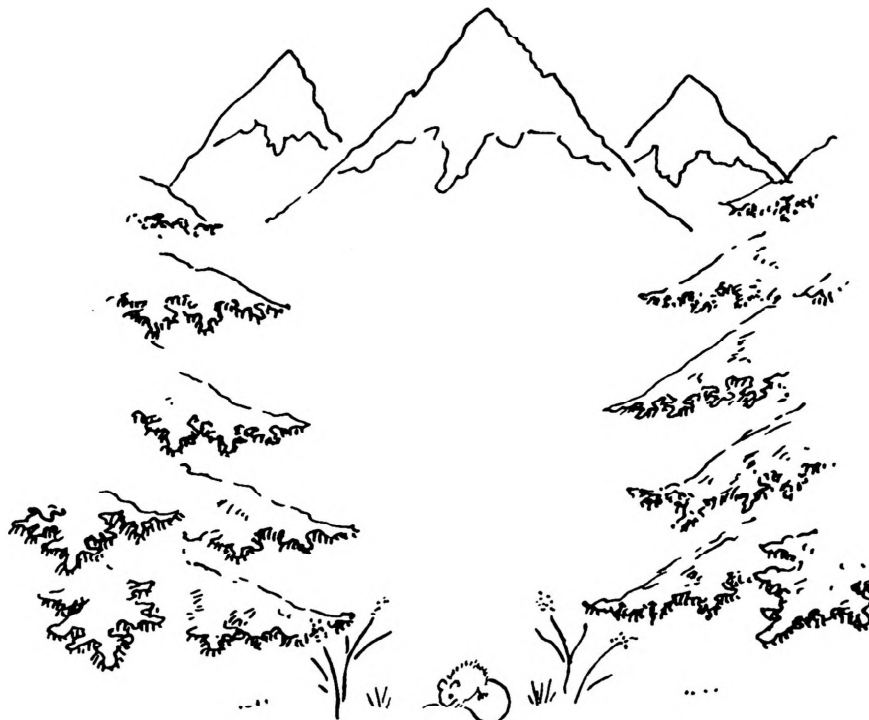
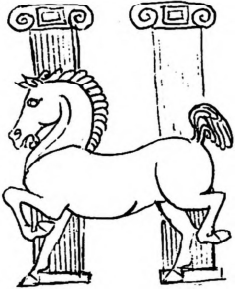
I hate to sound dogmatic, but we have seen so many instances of this that there can be no doubt on the matter. Hence, any time in the future "Middle-earth" is spelled any way but that (and who among us has not in confusion sometimes written "Middle-Earth" or "Middle Earth"?), it can safely be deemed non-standard.

But most of all, in examining the stages undergone by this narrative from its inception to its final form, we are privileged to witness the creation of an artistic masterpiece, and may learn something of the imaginative processes that produce this. Once our variorum edition of Tolkien is ready, anyone can share in this discovery without repeating our long labor.

NOTES

¹Entmoot No. 3 (February, 1966), pp. 17-21; reprinted in *The Best of Entmoot* (March, 1970), pp. 35-38. The first-mentioned issue has long been out of print, but the latter may still be available for one dollar from Greg Shaw, 64 Taylor Drive, Fairfax, California 94930.

²As Tolkien wrote to an American student: "Of course, the present division into Volumes, mere practical necessity of publication, is a falsification. As is shown by the unsatisfactory titles of the last two Volumes. The work is in no legitimate literary sense a 'trilogy.' It is a three-decker novel. The only units of any structural significance are the 'books.' These originally had each its title. Personally I should have preferred that this arrangement should have been preserved, with the volumes designated merely by numbers. But I can see the objections to this from a publishing point of view..." See Caroline Whitman Everett, "The Imaginative Fiction of J. R. R. Tolkien," M. A. thesis, Florida State University, 1957, p. 87.



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