

Fall 10-15-1970

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Recommended Citation

Christensen, Bonniejean (1970) "Report from the West: Explotation of *The Hobbit*," *Tolkien Journal*: Vol. 4: Iss. 3, Article 5.

Available at: https://dc.swosu.edu/tolkien_journal/vol4/iss3/5

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Report from the West: Exploitation of *The Hobbit*

Abstract

Reports on commercial tie-ins to Tolkien such as sales of posters and buttons, and in particular on one musical adaptation of *The Hobbit*. Updates the Ace publication controversy as well.

Additional Keywords

Ace Books (Publisher); Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*—Adaptations; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*—Publishing history



"REPORT FROM THE WEST: EXPLOITATION OF THE HOBBIT" by BONNIEJEAN CHRISTENSEN~

Commercialization of the Hobbit theme has been kept at a minimum because of Tolkien's withholding approval in most instances. The Ballantine posters and map of Middle Earth have enjoyed a good and a legitimate sale. Buttons and bumper stickers have been produced on the East and West Coasts by private entrepreneurs, but their messages have generally been of a joyful nature, and what hobbitomane could object to being assured that "Frodo Lives" or being urged to support "Gandalf for President"? The most serious objection has been that the West Coast for a while harbored a man selling buttons purporting to be in Elvish but having incorrect vowel pointing.

Unfortunately, the West Coast has the stigma of harboring other individuals equally willing to take advantage of the interest in Tolkien's creations, advantage that is tasteless in execution and immoral in intent and result. This report from the West will deal with a dramatic script, a musical for children, and a radio station advertising ploy.

The script, available in the Los Angeles Public Library, is based after a fashion on The Hobbit (Patricia Clark Gray, J. R. R. Tolkien's "The Hobbit", Chicago: Dramatic Publishing Co., 1968) and claims to have the author's approval, though this is incredible. In this 87-page horror Bilbo Baggins is literally a squealing rabbit capering on the stage, saved at one point by a fairy queen--complete with magic wand--and at another by a triumphant Thorin in the treasure hall who stabs Smaug to death. It can only be hoped that this perversion of Tolkien's treatment of heroism will be overlooked by teachers and other earnest adults who have the care of children and who desire something exciting and violent for their charges to perform.

Such adults this past spring (1969) supported a presentation that claims to be a musical inspired by The Hobbit. It was shown to student theatre-goers all over the Los Angeles area as part of a Saturday culture-kick encouraged by well-meaning adults lacking judgment. An organization--such as the Inglewood Junior Programs--sees to local advertising, sending fliers home with elementary school children, and supervising the children who attend the programs at local high schools. The productions are slick and the young actors competent at dancing if not at singing.

A Tolkien fan may not have children bringing home fliers that are pretentious enough to list The Hobbits [sic] as a "reference work," but he can still learn of the production through the newspaper. "Come to Middle Earth" announces a title under the heading "Children's Theatre" in the entertainment section of the Los Angeles Sunday Times. He buys his ticket at the door but does not get his program until the conclusion of the program, apparently because the ladies in little red capes ranging up and down the aisles do not trust the theatre manners of the youngsters. At the conclusion he learns the names of those responsible for the outrage:

DON AND FRED BLUTH PRESENT
DOWN IN MIDDLE EARTH
AN ORIGINAL MUSICAL BY FRED BLUTH
Inspired by the J. J. [sic] Tolkien book 'The Hobbit'

The cast, in order of appearance: Gandalf [sic]; and Poke, Put, and Scratch--three hobbits who sing about the "now generation" and later double as the three wargs; Phoebe, a girl-hobbit they are in love with but who of course is in love with Bilbo, who wanders about looking distractedly at a large paper butterfly in his hands; three butterflies named Aphrodite, Butterfly No. 1 and Butterfly No. 2; Flip, with snapping fingers and silver tights, accompanies the butterflies; and Voulfgone, who seems to be a senior warg or junior cossack in black coat and ratty kaftan.

The plot, if I may use the word, concerns the love pentangle and the theft of the Ring from the hobbit palace (!). All the hobbits are too frightened to go after the wargs, so Gandalf invites Bilbo to come into Bilbo's mind where he can become a hero by knowing himself and thus getting the Ring back. The fuzzy allegory proceeds through the exploitation of the considerable dancing ability of the four black teen-agers in the cast. There are two sides warring in Bilbo's mind, but they do not represent clear opposites of Good and Evil as they would in a Faustus. The two sides are lechery and, I think, hunger or death or something. Lechery is easy to identify. It's represented by Aphrodite and her companion butterflies. The three nubile girls, graceful and sexy, are distinguishable from each other only by the extremeness of their naturals. They are joined occasionally by a hip-talking Flip who shows Bilbo Truth and Beauty. They also sing of their desire for man or gorilla, so long as he turns them on like Godzilla (my apologies for my loose translation, but it is not as loose as their song). The audience is not taken aback, since it has already adjusted to--or been equally oblivious to--the homosexual allusions made in the opening scene by the hobbits Poke, Put, and Scratch. Anyway, Bilbo is carried about on stage, a la Sir Laurence at the conclusion of his Hamlet, until the wargs and their cossack (a retreaded Gandalf) appear and scuffle about with the butterflies. Bilbo at last triumphs, shadow-wrestling with himself, against a backdrop enlarged from the Ballantine covers and psychedelically lighted in flashes of white and blue. After he has knocked down and driven off butterflies, Flip, the wargs, and the wandering Russian, he comes to himself in time to receive Gandalf's wisdom: You can always be a hero by repressing your thoughts. After accepting this dubious bit of psychiatric counseling, Bilbo--in physical possession of the Ring regained inside his head--presents it to Phoebe, thereby becoming the Lord of the Ring.

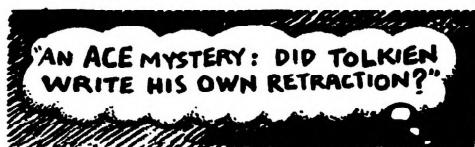
Although this plot is incredible nonsense, its summary is more coherent than the production. The production does violence to the events Tolkien records, but more serious, it does violence to Tolkien's vision



of Middle Earth. It is absurd and--because its victims are children--vicious. They are exploited by adults who concoct such tasteless performances and by well-meaning ladies in the community who apparently lack standards of judgment, literary discrimination, and sensitivity to children.

FM radio station KPFK often provides programs of great public interest and of wide literary appeal. Apparently the manager has doubted that quality is sufficient inducement for listeners, for in the fall of 1968 he distributed leaflets advertising a series of readings from *The Hobbit*. The pitch was to listen to a work by a "controversial" writer, by a "fascist." I objected to the inclusion of such questionable biographical material and was invited to make a tape for broadcast denying the allegation. Such a tape would only have added fuel, and I could only answer that a response to an irresponsible charge is fruitless.

No excuse can be manufactured for what is happening in the West, and I fear elsewhere, but the reason is obvious: *The Hobbit* is current and the name is synonymous with profit for those willing to exploit it.



Much space has been given in the *Tolkien Journal*, *Publishers' Weekly*, and *National Observer* to the dispute between Tolkien and Ace Books over royalties. We recognize his voice in the letter quoted by Richard Plotz in *TJ*: "[The law] says in effect [that] if any property is left unguarded, by inadvertence or otherwise, a person who appropriates it cannot be called a thief, even if he can be shown to have known to whom the property in justice belonged."¹ We also accept as his the "Statement from the Author" found on the back cover of the Ballantine editions of *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*: "This paperback edition, and no other, has been published with my consent and cooperation. Those who approve of courtesy (at least) to living authors will purchase it, and no other." But can we accept as his the letter that Ace Books attributes to him in a press release early in 1966? The press release, announcing that an agreement has been reached with Tolkien, concludes with this citation:

Gentlemen:

I am happy to accept your voluntary offer to pay full royalties on all copies sold of the Ace editions of *THE LORD OF THE RINGS* trilogy, even though you have no legal obligation to do so.

You may advise those who may be interested of our amicable arrangement.

Yours sincerely,
(signed J. R. R. Tolkien)²

Could Tolkien have written that letter? I think not. He might have agreed to it, for the sake of ending debate and assuring royalties, but he could not have written it. The tone is not his. The letter writer is abject, servile, hewing to a legalistic line. The facts are not those that can be sifted from the various publications and understood from Tolkien's published comments. And the text of the letter is not in his style: it lacks his personal voice, his characteristic use of subjunctives, his normal way with prepositions, and his methods of medial sentence modification. In addition it refers to *The Lord of the Rings* as a "trilogy," a term he abominates for his work and would not be likely to use.

I suggest that Tolkien merely signed a release prepared by an American lawyer in Ace's employ, and I urge that this letter not be admitted to the canon of Tolkien writings.

NOTES

¹*Tolkien Journal* Vol. 1, No. 2 (1965), pp. 1-2.

²*Tolkien Journal* Vol. 11, No. 2 (1966), unpag.

