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The Status of Tolkien Scholarship

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The Status of Tolkien Scholarship

Abstract

Assesses the contemporary state of Tolkien scholarship, dismissing “Middle-earth studies” as not true criticism.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Critical reception

THE STATUS OF TOLKIEN SCHOLARSHIP

by Richard West

There are now numerous fanzines devoted wholly or in part to articles on Tolkien's fiction, many essays on his work have appeared in various journals, and there have even been several books on the subject from university presses. Bob Foster has now given us a glossary, bibliographies are available, and some work on a variorum edition has been done. A conference or two is held almost every year. I don't know whether it is true, as some suggest, that "the Tolkien craze" has abated (at any rate, articles entitled "The Hobbit Habit" no longer appear very frequently in the popular press), but the hobbits seem still to have devoted friends, both within and without the groves of academe, whom we can expect to add to this already large body of writing.

The old charge that LORD OF THE RINGS is "escapist trash" can still be heard occasionally, but is no longer so common. The scattered attempts to answer it were never thorough enough to be satisfactory, and for years now it has simply been ignored by critics who not only take Middle-earth very seriously but take it for granted that they can. Sometimes, "escapism" is even used as praise. The people whom David M. Miller called neo-Goths are still with us, still reveling in the sturm und drang of a heroic age. The produce some pleasant enough gush, but no real criticism (i.e., no appreciation of the aesthetic experience provided by LOTR beyond pointing to the thrill, with no analysis of the art behind even that). I am describing their position, not quarreling with them: they have their reward. But other rewarding responses can be had in addition.

One possible response, much exploited in the fanzines, is to pretend that the subcreated world is the primary one, and examine its geography, geology, systems of coinage, and so on. This is not criticism, either, for it does nothing to enrich our appreciation of the text; nor is it scholarship, since it does not provide relevant background information. But it is a game that provides fun for many people. My own interest, however, is in actual criticism and its Siamese twin, scholarship.

Most of the attempts (*essais*) to criticize Tolkien's art take a rather limited number of approaches. Myth criticism seems to be far the most popular. It is used to examine sources and narrative patterns for LOTR, as well as to explain Tolkien's widespread vogue by reference to his offering a mythic wholeness and resonance that deeply satisfies our fragmented and symbol-starved society. It is a very fruitful approach, though it has tended so far to concentrate too exclusively on northern European sources (I confess with a sigh, being myself fascinated by "the Northernness") to the neglect of other areas (especially Greek and Eastern, though even the Celtic has been largely slighted). Many of the myth critics focus on Christian associations--another valid and valuable tack. But they do sometimes tend to forget that the Third Age was intended to be pre-Christian and that Christianity has much in common with other mythologies and religions. Then there are the genre critics (and nearly everyone has had a go at defining the genre of LOTR), who have also stuck to those genres making most use of the stuff of myth: epic, romance, saga, fairy tale, heroic fantasy. I think myself that the reason there has been no agreement in this regard is that LOTR is one of those masterworks that creates its own genre, utilizing many types.

Another common approach is to place LOTR in what I like to call the "twentieth-century medieval renaissance" and consider its adaptation of much medieval material for a modern audience. A good deal of my own critical efforts takes this line, so plainly I find it revealing. But again I must point out its limitations: Tolkien also drew inspiration from earlier periods than the Middle Ages; nothing is so typically medieval that it is exclusively medieval; we must not forget that medieval art held a great deal of variety, not only fantasy; and LOTR is, in the final analysis, a contemporary book.

The criticism of Tolkien's fiction has been largely favorable, even adulatory. Where it is seriously adverse, it has usually been due, in my opinion, to bewilderment at the teeming variety of Middle-earth. Some critics will

focus on one strand of the story (e.g., the struggle of Frodo and Sam to reach Orodruin), not just to discuss one important aspect at length, but because they take everything else for mere trimming. Mutterings about LOTR as an "Establishment" book are sometimes heard from the Left, but usually on so simplistic a level that I am tempted to write a "radical" interpretation myself just to show them how it could be done (Mordor as military-industrial complex, the scouring of the Shire as a people's war of liberation from foreign imperialist colonialist aggressors, etc.). Of late, accusations of racism, sexism, and glorification of war have been leveled with some show of cogency (though frankly I think them wrong-headed) and will no doubt prompt replies.

I can't claim to be very happy with the present state of Tolkien criticism. The approaches taken are good ones, by and large, but often shallow and often couched in turgid prose. Nor has LOTR escaped the penchant of our age for politicizing everything. Sturgeon's Law wins again. Yet work has been done that does enrich our reading, and Tolkien's fiction is so popular with large numbers of people of very different outlooks that there is likely to be a continuing audience for scholarly investigation of it. Where LOTR can kindle enthusiasm even in pedants like me, there is every hope that not all future scholarship will be stillborn.

