



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 9
Number 4

Article 13

12-15-1983

Letters

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Recommended Citation

Hanger, Nancy C.; Purdy, Margaret R.; Doughan, David, et al. (1983) "Letters," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 9 : No. 4 , Article 13. Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol9/iss4/13>

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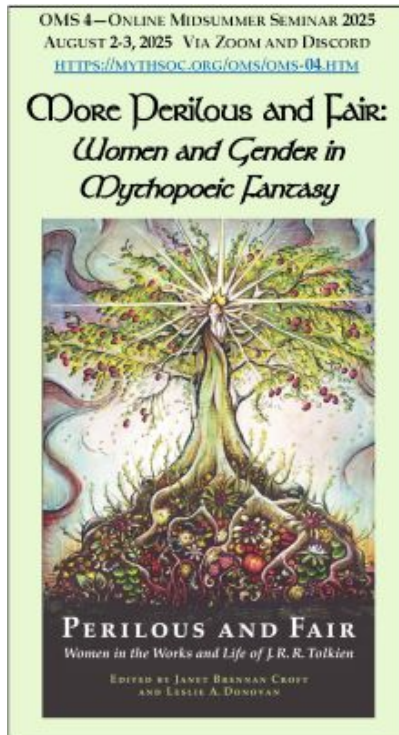
Online MidSummer Seminar 2025

More Perilous and Fair: Women and Gender in Mythopoeic Fantasy

August 2-5, 2024

Via Zoom and Discord

<https://www.mythsoc.org/oms/oms-04.htm>



Letters

Additional Keywords

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Nancy C. Hanger, Margaret R. Purdy, David Doughan, Stephan Peregrine, Wendell Wagner Jr., Anders Stenstrom, and Scott Smith

LETTERS

Those readers whose letters are printed are given a one issue extension of their subscription.

Nancy C. Hanger

Wenham, Mass.

I am writing in regards to Nicholas Grimes' review in Mythlore 32, "The Dragon in Summer," to express my concern, shock, and utter horror at his inconceivably weak grasp not only of the subject of the Dragon (however metaphorically put) but also each film criticized.

Excalibur perhaps does show the Dragon best of all four films, if Mr. Grimes is referring to the archetypal Dragon of Fire and Lust. I would never state that Excalibur "has not been adapted to public taste," for indeed, this was the entire motive of its scriptwriters. "Public taste" is not quite a "ninny"--one glance at the majority of the movie industry's output or television's focus may confirm this. It is, instead, fitted to the general public taste of adults who prefer to see grown men raping other husband's wives, throwing lances into fellows' chests, and gouging people's eyes out. Lovely stuff... "Undiluted and unhomogenized" is perhaps a diplomatic way of putting it, whether or not Mr. Grimes realized this at the time he wrote the article.

Excalibur is far from a "retelling of the original sources of the King Arthur legend." I'm not quite sure what he imagines the original sources to be, but one must go back much further than Malory to be "original." In fact, one must go back beyond the Mabinogian, where he seems to procure his idea that Arthur was a Celt. Arthur is not, and never has been portrayed as a Celtic leader in any reliable source of legend. In the earliest mention we have of Arthur as a warrior, he is quite definitely Roman of origin. The Historia Brittonum written by a ninth century monk named Nennius, compiles information of sixth century documents attesting to Arthur's title of "dux bellorum"--a Roman commander-in-chief. Arthur was most likely of mixed background, but primarily Roman, and Christian, in thought and action. The use of cavalry tactics, for instance, points to Romanized up-bringing--Celts fought primarily on foot until a much later period. Who, also, is "Morgana"? There was a Morgan le Fay (evil) and a Morgause (good), both sisters of Arthur in Malory. Whoever wrote this script apparently had no conception of the real original sources of Arthurian legend.

I cannot grasp the idea of believing that Arthur had united feudal Britain under a "com-

mon morality," as Mr. Grimes has put it, on the basis of viewing Excalibur. What sort of morality he is speaking of must be beyond my ken, for I certainly saw little of what I consider morality to be, portrayed on the screen. And as to the rather sweeping statement concerning the languages of England, France and Germany that "originally, these countries had dialects which would be understood by one and all,"--many linguists would be very interested to learn of this! Indeed, if he wishes to return to the origins of Proto-Indo-European speech before 3000 B.C., he may certainly do so; but this would not help any further research into Arthurian legend. If any sort of Arthur figure did exist, he would have lived sometime during 470-511 A.D. (depending on the time shift allowed for with Pope Leo's change of the Ecclesiastical calendar, causing a dislocation in many records). Until 981 A.D., Anglo-Saxon dialects were spoken in Britain (at least four dialects within the Heptarchy), and Celt, Welsh, and Cornish in their own regions. A unified English language did not appear until Chaucer's time--Middle English c. 1100 - 1500 A.D. During the 1st - 8th centuries of Germany, five separate dialects appeared (Anglo-Frisian, Old High German, Old Saxon, Old Low Franconian, and High German which separated itself by sound shifts during this period.

I cannot agree more with Mr. Grimes that Clash of the Titans grossly misrepresented not only human experience, but also Greek and Roman mythology. It is the only movie I have walked out of in sheer frustration. I am, however, boggled that Sir Lawrence Olivier is now "Lord." As far as I recollect, only an act of birth can concur the title of Lord upon a gentleman; while the Queen can quite certainly knight him "Sir."

Raiders of the Lost Ark did indeed employ the adventure story genre to convey its message of the Dragon (still out of focus in Mr. Grimes' hazy and ambiguous description), but what exactly did he want to "engage" him "in any time or place" within the film? Titles in large Roman letters stating: "SOUTH AMERICA 1936" cannot be more specific. To go even further, "the Dragon", he states, "doesn't make us do the impossible..." I must disagree here, too. The Dragon is the impossible, but not necessarily the improbable. Aristotle once said: "That which is probable and impossible is better than that which is possible and improbable." How fantastically true this is in regards to the archetypal Dragon that

Mr. Grimes seems to be trying to discover through his clouds of words. I now understand why he unfortunately "never felt the victory in my own spirits over challenging odds." He, nor anyone else, can until he accepts the impossible and rejoices in it.

In fact, I still cannot grasp exactly what Mr. Grimes tried to convey as a description of the Dragon metaphor employed throughout the review. Perhaps, it is supposed to be that which is always evading description; in which case, the author did an excellent job in evasive techniques. The archetype of the Dragon seems to be hinted at as being elusive, "mischievous," "perverse," (in Excalibur's case, I agree here!) and "contradictory." I'm not quite sure what sort of Dragon Mr. Grimes has met in his lifetime, but my experience has allowed me to meet a Dragon which is indeed elusive, but also powerful, wise, vital, immense, and delightfully impossible. Perhaps our two Dragons should meet--the outcome should prove to be illuminating.

Margaret R. Purdy

Ridgewood, NJ

This letter is intended to serve as a "response from the faithful" to the gauntlet flung down by John Schwindt in the letters column of Mythlore 33 on the subject of The Silmarillion.

First off, the fact that I am eager to ride into the lists in its defense makes it obvious that I did not find The Silmarillion dull, nor did it present any severe test to my "patience and endurance." Perhaps I am a more "ardent Tolkien idolator" than even Mr. Schwindt has previously encountered, but I do not think so. Nor do I think that it was my admitted fascination with sheer "lore" that eased my passage through the book. I think, rather, that Mr. Schwindt's problem with it, and, I suspect, that of many other readers and critics, lies in not recognizing the kind of book they are dealing with.

This failure is easy to forgive, for The Silmarillion is, I might almost dare to venture, a totally unique work. It is not a novel, which is what Mr. Schwindt seems to have expected. Nor is it simply a collection of diverse tales, as he characterizes it in his letter. It is the attempt of a single man to do in a single lifetime what in the normal order of things is done by an entire culture over a span of centuries--create a mythology. Small wonder that it took him an entire lifetime to write it (we have Christopher Tolkien's word for it that up until the end of his life he never ceased to work on it), and that many parts of it remain, well, unfinished tales.

It is the essentially mythological character of The Silmarillion that underlies most of what Mr. Schwindt sees as the book's flaws. Seen as a novel, the book is certainly episodic and disjointed in plot. But compare it with Bulfinch's Mythology and it will suddenly seem to have a marvelous unity of direction and theme. Not a fair comparison, perhaps, since Greek mythology really is a collection of very diverse tales from diverse sources, whereas The Silmarillion is the work of one man. Still, it is a more valid comparison than that of The Silmarillion with The Lord of the Rings, which is much closer to the traditional novel.

So too with the characters. Characters in a novel are depicted in many ways: their actions, their words, their thoughts and feelings to which the reader is often privy. In myth and saga a character is defined almost totally by his actions, less often by his words. We don't get a guided tour of the inside of Hercules' head, or long explanations of the motivations of Oedipus (that is left to the Freudians, centuries later). Instead, we see that Hercules is the kind of man who does thus-and-so. Similarly, Túrin is the kind of man who jumps to conclusions, who insists on his own way, who slays a dragon and who commits suicide. Haleth is the kind of woman who is ready to take charge when all her kinfolk are slain and hold out indomitably against an enemy. She is also the kind of woman who takes no husband, whatever that may say about her. Finrod is the kind of elf who loves on sight beings different from himself, maintains good relations with every non-evil race he encounters, and finally sacrifices his own life for another's. These are just three of the highly memorable characters I encountered in The Silmarillion. Fëanor is another one. My own Tolkien discussion group has spent a good part of two sessions talking about Fëanor's character. The problem, I think, is that we are all too used to the detailed depiction of character in the novel, which leaves little to the imagination. The more mythic style of The Silmarillion gives you the facts and leaves you to infer personalities from them (as, I might add, one must often do in real life).

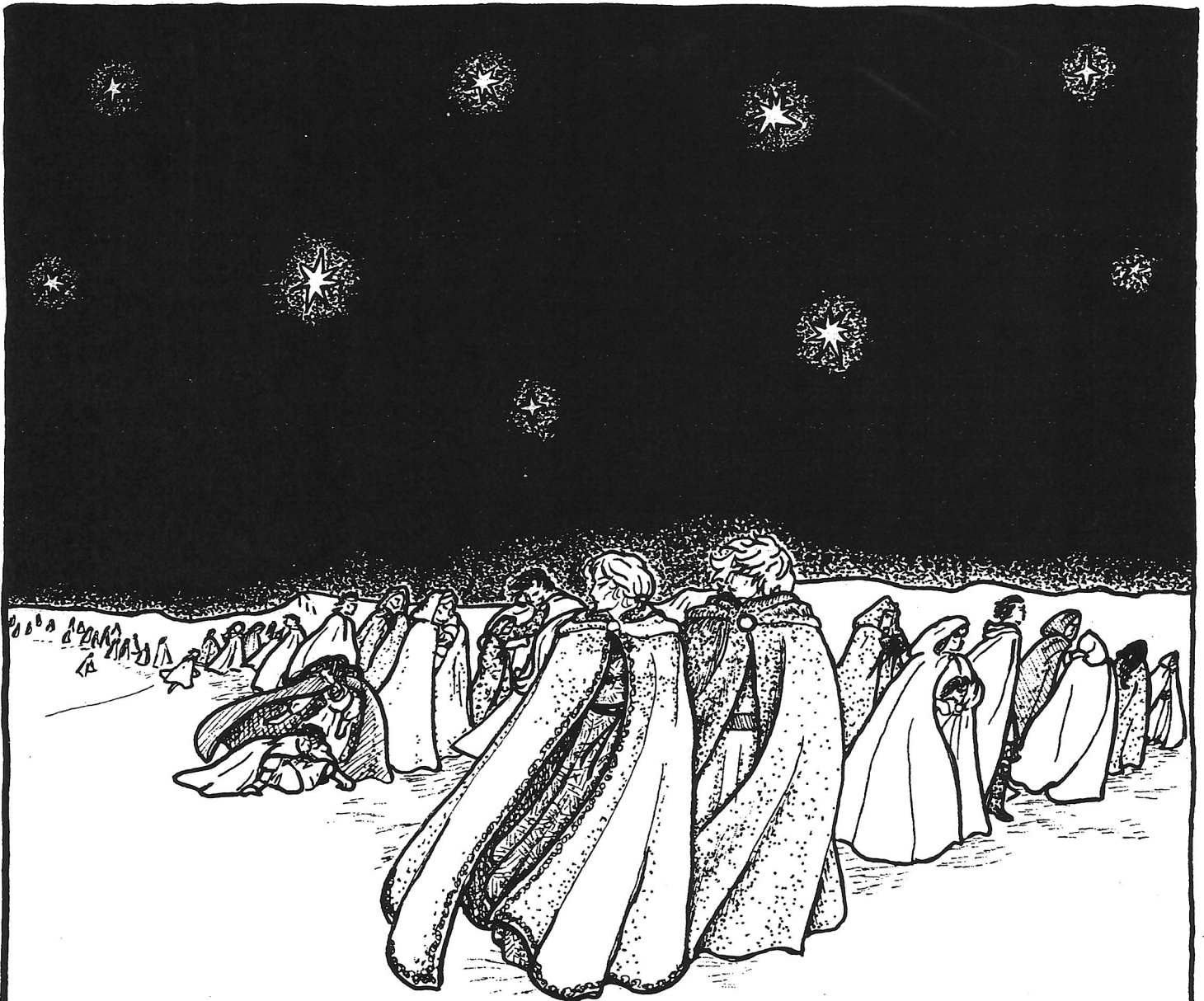
The "detailed pastoral descriptions" that Mr. Schwindt misses in The Silmarillion are also more suited to the novelistic treatment than the mythic; as are the "ecological or environmental concerns." Granted that these features are an integral part of the magic of The Lord of the Rings, but that is a different kind of work. It may be, as Mr. Schwindt said, that Tolkien did not "learn how to write about nature" until later in his career, but even had he done so, I doubt that thematically such concerns would have been germane to The Silmarillion. It deals with other matters.

The sentence that really made me wonder whether Mr. Schwindt and I had read the same book, however, was "Tolkien has fate determine the destiny of his characters, rather than allowing the moral choices of his characters [to] determine their fate." Surely the entire sequence of events in The Silmarillion stems from the choices of the characters! The entire plot of "Quenta Silmarillion" hinges on Fëanor's choice to possess the silmarils rather than to give them up. Had he not chosen as he did, the Flight (and Fall) of the Noldor would never have taken place, and none of the subsequent events would have occurred. Their oath binds Fëanor and his sons throughout the story, but it is an oath that they chose to take in the first place; they are merely undergoing the consequences of their choice. The so-called Curse of Mandos is not a pronouncement of some unavoidable fate being meted out by the Doomsman of the Valar; it is rather a prediction of what will happen if the Noldor continue in the path that they have chosen. It is notable that at this point Finarfin and many of his people are able to repent and turn back. All through the book, characters are faced with choices such as this, and very rarely is there any indication that they are being forcibly pushed into one decision or the other (a possible exception to this is Túrin, who is supposedly influenced by Morgoth's curse, but even then his choices are explicable in light of his personality. Túrin is a fatalist, even if Tolkien isn't). The fact that many characters make the wrong choices is perhaps what makes the tone of this book so much darker than that of The Lord of the Rings, which contains a good many more right choices.

This is not to say that Mr. Schwindt is wrong in saying that "The Silmarillion is permeated by the Northern pagan spirit." Tolkien did indeed derive much inspiration for both The Silmarillion and The Lord of the Rings from the Norse and other Scandinavian mythology, the ethos of which he so insightfully explored in his Beowulf essay and in "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son." And what, may I ask, is wrong with that? Why should the "Northern epics" not be "appropriate models for modern fantasy"? Mr. Schwindt may think that "paiens ont tort et Chrestiens ont droit," but he cannot expect

everyone else in the world to agree with him. Modern fantasy, indeed, models itself on all kinds of mythologies--Greek, Celtic, Oriental, Hindu--and produces works of great beauty and power. The Silmarillion blends the Northern spirit with Christian elements (more Genesis than the Gospels, admittedly--but then, this is the genesis of Middle-earth) and achieves a flavor all its own.

The important thing to remember is that, whatever its flaws, The Silmarillion underlies all of Tolkien's later fantasy. The Lord of the Rings remains the indispu-



The Noldor crossing the Grinding Ice

SARAH BEACH. 82.

table pinnacle of Tolkien's creation, but like a tree, it could not grow without roots. The Silmarillion is the root of Middle-earth; without it, there would be no Lord of the Rings. I would not hand The Silmarillion to a new Tolkien reader, certainly; I would give him The Lord of the Rings first (not The Hobbit, mark you, unless he was a child). However, I would advise him to reread The Lord of the Rings after having read The Silmarillion, if he truly wished to understand its beginnings and plumb the depths of its meanings, just as I might advise the student of Western culture to study the mythologies, classical, Christian, or whatever, that shaped that culture.

I hope that this response is the kind that Mr. Schwindt intended to provoke. I would also like to thank him for provoking it, and thus helping me to clarify my own thoughts on The Silmarillion. I hope that, in my turn, I may have stimulated the thoughts of others on the subject.

Nai i Valar tíruvar tiðlmanna

David Doughan

Surrey, England

As I open my latest Mythlore, I frequently have a vision of the miracles of modern communication which have brought it to me--I envisage Pony Express from Sacramento to Nantucket, then Peguod to the coasts of Labrador, and finally Mr. Brunet's Great Western to Liverpool... I am prompted to these thoughts by seeing final deadlines of a month before date of receipt. Nonetheless, I include my directory entry, just in case you can fit it in. But please do think of us overseas subscribers and the speed of second class mails!

As for John Schwindt on The Silmarillion: I submit that the trouble with it is not that it is "an apprenticeship piece," which is blatantly is not. It is simply far too short! Compare the Tuor fragment in Unfinished Tales with the corresponding passage in The Silmarillion. Expanded to this length, The Silmarillion would run to about 30 volumes! What we have is but a skeleton. No wonder it seems a bit thin and dry.

Stephan Peregrine

Poughkeepsie, NY

Gerald Gillespie's article on Irish mythology and Tolkien's Eldar (Mythlore 30) reminded me of something that's probably not an original thought, but has been on a back burner of my mind for some time now. It concerns the name of the Fomorian warrior Balor and the curious anatomy of his people, who apparently had one eye, one leg, and one arm--a peculiar physiognomy for able-bodied soldiers. My interpretation of this description is a speculation based on the name Balor, which seems to relate to Bel or Baal, (whose burning solar eye appears to have been carried to America--this according to Barry Fell in his America B.C.). If the baleful eyes of Baal and Balor are one and the same, this would neatly dovetail with the idea that the Fomorians were sailormen, perhaps descendants of Phoenician traders seeking Irish gold and tin. (The waters getting a bit deep for me here--but perhaps someone out there knows whether there might be a linguistic relationship between "Fomorian" and "Phoenician.") Under the Ptolemies, the Egyptian navy was largely manned by Lybian Baal-worshippers... If the eye of Baal is drawn in the style of the Egyptian eye of Horus (another solar deity), it takes on 'one arm' and 'one leg'. Possibly this eye was a Fomorian national symbol leg arm that was carried into battle in the same way that the cross has decorated the standards of Christian armies through the centuries... (Of course, this sort of game



can be carried on forever; no doubt one could put together a learned thesis 'proving' that the Druids were in fact Chinese Taoists.)

Wendell Wagner, Jr.

Laurel, MD

There is an error in Joe Christopher's "Inklings Bibliography" in issue 17 which has never been corrected in Mythlore, to my knowledge. Christopher claims that Humphrey Carpenter was wrong in stating in Tolkien: A Biography that Tolkien worked on the book of Jonah, rather than Job, in The Jerusalem Bible.

But Tolkien did work on the book of Jonah. Anne Etkin, a local Mythopoeic Society member, has told me that she wrote to Longman's, the publishers of The Jerusalem Bible, and they verified that on their contracts it clearly says that Tolkien worked on Jonah.

Further, Anne has been able to discover the probable original source of the error. (It has appeared several other places.) She says that Clyde Kilby, in a letter to her, has written that he once misheard Tolkien's mumbling when interviewing him. Because he thought Tolkien has told him that he had worked on the book of Job, he reported it that way in Tolkien and the Silmarillion.

Black Magic Indeed!

Anders Stenstrom

Stockholm, Sweden

One morning in the spring of 1982, more than one of the Forodrim was shocked awake by his morning paper. Those who didn't see the papers were given the news on the telephone from those who did, or by placards that Svenska Dagbladet (a large Swedish newspaper) used in the Stockholm area: "Tolkien Societies accused of 'black magic'." To most of us it was a complete surprise, but there was a rather extensive background.

Our attacker was Ake Ohlmarks, a Swedish Tolkien-translator. Whoever has read Tolkien's published Letters knows how much Ohlmark's deficient translation of The Lord of the Rings annoyed Tolkien, and that probably was where it all started. Ohlmarks affronted Tolkien with his arrogance in translation matters and by publishing wild and non-factual speculations on Tolkien's life and the purposes of his work. When The Silmarillion was to be published in Sweden, an ultimatum was made to the publishers that they would not get the translation rights if they let Ohlmarks do the translation. Ohlmarks' answer was the book Tolkien's arv (Tolkien's Legacy), where he denigrated J.R.R. and especially Christopher Tolkien. Yet he maintained that The Lord of the Rings was a masterpiece even though its author was a self-deluded churl; even in January of 1982 Ohlmarks publicly expressed his great appreciation of Midgards Fylking (the Tolkien Society in Upsala).

Then, at the end of January, an event occurred which made him detonate. A certain Tolkienian visited his home. What really happened is not completely clear, but in the night, after the Tolkienian had left, Ohlmarks' wife was intoxicated, and in the morning she smoked in bed, causing a minor fire.

Soon Ohlmarks had the picture clear: the Tolkien mafia was obviously after him--but he would fight! In a month's time he found out what he could about Swedish and British Tolkien Societies, by reading a few copies of Medlemsbladet and Amon Hen. What he found he reinterpreted as he pleased, wrote a book on it, and then prepared to break it to the press.

And that is why his picture appeared one morning on the first page of Svenska Dagbladet, with an article pre-



From chapter 7 of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*

senting his accusations: Tolkien's books are focused on Evil, therefore Tolkien fandom leads to Satanism and is a threat to Swedish youth. In the following weeks a number of other newspapers contacted, or were contacted by Ohlmarks or us, which resulted in more of his indecencies getting publicity, but also some of our defense. By and by, Ohlmarks managed to accuse us of practically every known depravation: abuse of drink and drugs, sex-orgies, fascism, violence, black masses... Behind it all, he said, was an international syndicate that craved heavy annual tribute from its members--money that eventually found its way to Christopher Tolkien and his relatives. From America he reported the case of a boy who was abducted and tortured by a group that once called itself "Tolkien Society" (they were in fact Dungeons and Dragons fans gone cracked, I have been told), and ascribed it to the same Tolkien mafia, branches of which were apparently mushrooming in the United States.

Our response was first and foremost to show the truth that Tolkien societies are cultural and creative, and predominantly consist of charming people, which was a better way to meet the lies than just to say "this is false." The high point of general interest was reached when Ohlmarks was given opportunity of a radio debate with Prince Dallben (Jorgen Peterzen) of the Forodrim. It was a fascinating encounter, mainly taken up by Ohlmarks' quite obviously unsubstantiated abuse and frantic interruptions. After that the daily papers dropped the case.

Ohlmarks' new book was eventually published and titled *Tolkien och den svarta magin* (Tolkien and the black magic). In addition to the general libel listed above, it contains specific attacks on persons that Ohlmarks dislikes more than others. One chapter is devoted to showing that *The Silmarillion* is a shameless potboiler of Christopher Tolkien's. The reviews of Ohlmarks' book were mostly negative, though many jeered at Tolkien fandom as well as at him.

Well, what was the effect of it all? This is perhaps hard to judge from within Tolkien fandom. It cannot

be denied that Ohlmarks' campaign has created a somewhat suspect aura around us. Nowadays you have to count on that when you mention your membership in a Tolkien society; the question "What about those bad rumors, then?" may be asked. On the other hand nobody who is at all culturally oriented will have been impressed by the notoriously dubious Ohlmarks. Actually, to the Forodrim (and I think to other Swedish Tolkien societies) the affair has turned out positively in two ways. First several old members have rejoined our banner, or reinvigorated their membership. Secondly, there are some people who have at last heard about us through the publicity created by Ohlmarks and become able to join. "It's an ill wind as blows nobody no good, as I always say."

Scott Smith

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Thousand Oaks, CA 91360

Tolkien purportedly made some favorable comments about Esperanto, the International Second Language. If anyone knows the source for these, please contact me.

One-Handed

*As left hand traces the line of battle
Across spread chart in shadowed pavilion,
A loop of gold on the least finger
Catches the light of a lone candle.*

*I wear it there now, since hands grew larger,
The slender hands of an eager elf-child,
His grey eyes wide with his love and wonder
At a golden gift of his sire's crafting.*

*A red stone flashes the fire of the forges;
As the son watches, the father fashions,
And hands of a skill still unsurpassed
Shape fantasies of a fiery spirit.*

*Those were the days when hands were open,
When giving was gladness great as making,
Ere the holy fires claimed love and spirit
And stole all light with their light's stealing.*

*The red stone flashes the fires of Losgar,
The red of blood on the forged weapons;
The hands of skill in ash have perished,
Left spirits bound in the Oath's irons.*

*Now a golden bracer binds empty wrist;
The left hand serves for the sword's wielding,
But one-handed there will be no crafting,
And to Valinor there is no returning.*

Maedhros Hilde Fëanáro

Margaret R. Purdy

Wanted

Mythlore would like to add a new section which would keep readers abreast of new works of fiction based on fantasy or mythological themes. It also could use the services of a promotion manager to handle incoming and outgoing advertising. If you are interested in either one of these areas, please write the Editor, Glen GoodKnight, giving some background and/or expression of interest.