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Three Letters by J.R.R. Tolkien at the University of Texas

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Abstract

Describes briefly three letters in the collection of the University of Texas at Austin: a 1939 letter to John Masefield, and two 1956 letters to Terence Tiller.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R. Letters

bureaucratization of Middle Earth. To do this he recognizes areas like the West March and establishes hierarchy so that the governing authorities of the colonies are answerable to him. with the help of the *palantiri* he reestablishes communication throughout his realm reopening roads and personally visiting various provinces. He replaces tradition with new laws (one of which forbids Men to enter the Shire) and establishes embassies with foreign lands. He holds Pippin to his vows as a knight of Gondor and sends him out as an agent to the Shire, even as Sauron and Saruman once sent their agents. But this time the purpose is for

good rather than evil. The extent to which Aragorn's kingdom will be a success will be largely determined by his ability to rule justly through chosen subordinates, create effective laws and integrate the diverse peoples in his kingdom; in a word, to *bureaucratize* effectively.

It is conventional wisdom that the ends do not justify the means. It is also true that the ends do not condemn the means. Bureaucratic means provide a great strength which the inhabitants of Tolkien's world turn to good ends as often as bad ones.

THREE LETTERS BY J.R.R. TOLKIEN

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS

NOTED BY J.R. CHRISTOPHER

In the summer of 1977 I spent two weeks working at the Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, Austin, mainly concerned with preparing notes of the Dorothy L. Sayers manuscripts there. Sunday evening before the first Monday I was to spend in the library, I relocated the building (I had been there just once before) and found a display of fantasy works in the lobby, including the manuscript of G.K. Chesterton's The Man Who Was Thursday. (Appropriately enough for fantasy works, the display vanished--having been up for two weeks, I was told--between Monday morning and noon on my first day in the library.) Later, when I was discussing the display with Wendell Wagner, Jr., a fellow Mythopoeic Society member who was working in the H.R.C. that summer, he mentioned that the rest of the display, unseen by me on an upper floor, had included a letter or two by J.R.R. Tolkien. Delighted with the chance of holding some of Tolkien's manuscripts in my hands, I worked in time to look at his letters; there were three of them, and I made the following descriptions.

1. To John Masefield (1878-1967). Dated Friday, 14 July (no year). Handwritten (actually printed, as Tolkien normally did) on both sides of a small piece of grey stationery, with Tolkien's Oxford address (20 Northmoor Road) and telephone number printed at the top; signed.

Tolkien writes apologetically because he has missed the deadline for the program (of the year's Oxford Summer Diversions); he had looked through The Canterbury Tales and some of Gower (probably Confessio Amantis, since it is in English) for something suitable and then had to grade some Civil Service papers. Last night he finally worked out the reading: either the same as the previous year, or a cut version of "The Reeve's Tale" with one revised link for one passage cut and with the Northern dialect as worked out in Tolkien's article.

Comment: this letter belongs to 1939, for that was the year Tolkien recited "The Reeve's Tale" from memory at the Summer Diversions; the previous year he had done "The Nun's Priest's Tale" (Humphrey Carpenter, Tolkien: A Biography [Boston: Houghton Mifflin Com-

pany, 1977], p. 214). Tolkien's article referred to it in the letter as "Chaucer as a Philologist: The Reeve's Tale", in Transactions of the Philological Society (1934), pp. 1-70. The lines proposed for cutting in the reading were ll. 57-66, 257-352 (with a supplied link), 363-364, and 397-398.

2. To Terence Tiller (1916-). Dated 2 November 1956. Handprinted on both sides of a piece of stationery with Tolkien's Oxford address (79 Sandfield Road, Headington) and phone number at the top; signed. Two pencil lines on the back side opposite a comment about the Rohirrim.

Tolkien thanks Tiller for copies of the first three scripts (of Tiller's adaptation of The Lord of the Rings for B.B.C. radio); Tolkien replies to a question about accents, indicating he does not think modern dialects, such as Cockney, should be used to characterize species, such as Orcs; in particular, none of the inhabitants of Minas Tirith--since it was the source and standard of Common Speech--would have accents; the Rohirrim might speak the Common Speech somewhat carefully, as a learned language, but even that is not always true, for Theoden was born in Gondor, etc.

3. To Terence Tiller. Dated 6 November 1956. Handprinted on both sides of the same type of stationery as in (2); signed.

Tolkien has now read the three scripts and finds them clear; but, privately, he asks Tiller what the point is of condensing The Lord of the Rings into such a cramped form when the book needs more time; he points to several episodes which have been overly condensed in this handling, and regrets that the form could not have been more narrative and less dramatic.

Comment: Tolkien is on record against the use of fairy material in stage plays ("On Fairy-stories", in Tree and Leaf [London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964], 46-48, 67-68); but he does not comment on radio drama, which is a partly narrative form in its use of an announcer to set scenes and bridge between dialogues.