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Perchance to Touch: Tolkien as Scholar

Abstract

Recounts the author's encounters with Tolkien's written scholarship at Oxford, and attendance at a Tolkien lecture.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Personal reminiscences; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Scholarship

PERFORMANCE TO TOUCH

TOLKIEN AS SCHOLAR

BY PETER MILWARD

Nowadays the name of Tolkien is inextricably associated with the race of hobbits which he so ingeniously invented some forty years ago. He has almost come to seem like one of them himself. He belongs to that world of fantasy and fairy-story in which his imagination moved so easily, as if he were its oldest inhabitant. It is the old world of the past, of myth and saga and legend, which he has renewed - with some assistance from his good friend C. S. Lewis - for our time.

It was not, however, as a story-teller but as a scholar that he first came to my acquaintance, when his writings were first recommended to me by my Oxford tutor in English, Professor C. L. Wrenn. From the beginning of my studies in the School of English, in the Trinity term of 1952, I was plunged into the poetic world of *Beowulf*; and Professor Wrenn, as my guide through this unknown territory, kindly indicated which books and articles would be useful for my purpose. Among them all he specially singled out the work of his colleague at Merton College, Professor J.R.R. Tolkien, as the one man of genius then teaching in the English School. At that time there were many men of outstanding talent there, C. S. Lewis himself, Nevill Coghill, H. V. Dyson, Lord David Cecil and others; but only to Tolkien would my strict tutor grant the title of genius.

The Lord of the Rings had not yet been published; and I knew nothing of *The Hobbit* - nor apparently did my tutor think it worth while mentioning it to me. The first work of Tolkien's genius to which he drew my attention was a British Academy lecture for 1936 entitled "*Beowulf*: the Monsters and the Critics". I dutifully read it, as a relaxation from my arduous labour in working through the Anglo-Saxon epic; and I was duly impressed. Here was indeed the work not of a mere academic scholar, disinterring the bones of the long dead past, but of an imaginative critic, reviving those bones and breathing into them the spirit of life. In the poem he found a powerful myth whose significance, he said, "is not easily to be pinned on paper by analytical reasoning. It is at its best when it is presented by a poet who feels rather than makes explicit what his theme portends: who presents it incarnate in the world of history and geography." Tolkien was himself, I felt, just such a poet, gifted with the ability to enter into the spirit of the old poem and to interpret it to his twentieth-century readers. Thus he vividly presented the world of *Beowulf* as one within which, "as in a little circle of light about their halls, men with courage as their stay went forward to that battle with the hostile world and the offspring of the dark, which ends for all, even the kings and champions, in defeat."

Another work of his on the same subject, to which Professor Wrenn drew my attention about the same time, was his Preface to John Clark Hall's prose translation of *Beowulf and the Finnesburg Fragment* (revised by Wrenn himself and published in 1940). Here, too, I felt the magic of Tolkien's genius, as he in turn commented on "the unrecapturable magic of ancient English verse for those who have ears to hear", with its "profound feeling

and poignant vision, filled with the beauty and mortality of the world." In particular, the way he dwelt on the Anglo-Saxon phrase, "*Onband be-adurune*" (for our much weaker "prepared to speak") was deeply impressive. "The expression," he remarked, "has an antique air, as if it had descended from an older time to our poet: a suggestion lingers of the spells by which men of wizardry could stir up storms in a clear sky."

From *Beowulf* in Old English I went on in the following term to study *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in Middle English. Here, too, Professor Wrenn guided me to further work of Tolkien; though it was hardly necessary for him to do so, as the standard text of this poem had been edited by Tolkien with E. V. Gordon and published by the Oxford University Press many years before in 1925. This was a poem I found no less baffling, perhaps even more so, than *Beowulf*. But the edition was a model of what such editions should be, with a detailed introduction (presumably by Tolkien himself) on the manuscript, the story of the poem, the history of the legend, the source and its analogues, the author and his work, the date and dialect of the poem - as well as abundant notes (by Gordon) and a glossary (compiled by Tolkien). Only here I felt more of the academic scholar than the imaginative critic. Either the editor was less inspired by the mediaeval romance than by the Anglo-Saxon epic, or his imaginative genius had yet to blossom and bear fruit, or else it was limited by the requirements of scholarly collaboration.

That term it so happened that Professor Tolkien was giving a series of explanatory lectures on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Naturally my tutor encouraged me to attend them; and naturally I, too, was desirous to hear the words of wisdom proceeding from the mouth of this man of genius. But, alas, I was late in arriving for his first lecture and could only find a place for myself at the very back of the lecture-room in Merton College. I strained my ears to catch every word he spoke, but in vain. I could hear next to nothing. He spoke in a kind of muttered whisper, which only those seated in front could have heard at all clearly; for in those days there were no microphonic aids for lecturing at Oxford. So I came away little wiser than before; and for some reason - perhaps because of another more audible lecture being given at another college at the same time - I never repeated the attempt. That was the only term I had the opportunity of hearing him lecture - and I abandoned it. The other terms, I suppose, either he wasn't lecturing or I felt it useless to listen to words I couldn't hear.

In connection with Middle English one more work of scholarship by Tolkien to which my attention was drawn by Wrenn was an article contributed to *Essays and Studies* for 1929, on "*Ancrene Wisse and Hali Meidhed*" (two early mediaeval writings in prose). Here, too, I found rather the scholar than the imaginative critic or poet. Yet here and there were sentences that impressed me and I copied out - sentences that showed the scholar's deep love of a

living tradition, as he found it in the West Midlands where these writings evidently had their origin. He admires the language of the *Ancrene Wisse* as being "in close touch with a good living speech - a soil somewhere in England"; and he dwells with nostalgic affection on such a place "where native tradition was not wholly confused or broken" and "where the native language was not unfamiliar with the pen".

During all this time I never had the opportunity of speaking with Professor Tolkien in person, though I often observed him from afar - not only when I attended that one lecture of his, but also when he came to my college, Campion Hall, for an occasional guest-night. I always held him in high

reverence as a scholar of genius, whom I admired, if not for his lectures, at least for his few precious publications. Professor Wrenn had merely pointed out his genius to me; but in a couple of terms I came to realize it fully for myself. Yet during all this time I never knew he had also written and published a book called *The Hobbit*. And it wasn't till after my graduation in 1954 and my arrival in Japan in the September of that year, that I read a glowing review in the *Times Literary Supplement* of a newly published book entitled *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Immediately I wrote home to my father, asking him to send it to me from England; and so in Japan I turned my attention from Tolkien as scholar to Tolkien as story-teller and master of the world of fantasy.

A NOTE ON MYTHOPOEIC HOLDINGS IN THE KERLAN COLLECTION

The University of Minnesota's special collection of children's books, founded in 1949 by Dr. Irvin Kerlan, holds some items that would interest Mythopoeic Society members visiting the area. (The collection does not circulate, although some limited microfilming and photocopying are available through Inter-library Loan. The collection, in Walter Library, East Bank, University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, is open 8-4:30 M-F). Although the Kerlan is not a major center for Mythopoeic research such as is to be found in the Wade Collection at Wheaton College in Illinois, the general coverage of children's books includes several interesting items. Visitors to Wheaton might consider a side-trip to Minnesota.

The Kerlan's most unusual specialty is the collection of material showing books in the making: manuscripts, notes, correspondence, galleys, dummies, proofs, drawings, sketches, etc. This original material includes some of Pauline Baynes' artwork: ink illustrations from *The Fury of the Northmen* (by Rhoda D. Powers) and *Miracle Plays* (by Anne Malcolmsen); and a drawing in ink and pencil, and the jacket drawing in tempera, ink and pencil, with text overlay, from *The Upstairs Donkey* (by James Morris). These books, the books by Tolkien and Lewis she illustrated, and a baker's dozen other books illustrated by her are also in the Kerlan. Several editions of the Narnia books are present, including a Dutch translation of *The Last Battle*; the Bodley Head (English hardback) edition of *The Last Battle* is autographed by both Baynes and Lewis.

The clipping file holds three picture-articles by Baynes, two on Christmas ("Preparing the Christmas Feast" backed by "An 18th-Century Kitchen," *Holly Leaves*, 1959, pp. 41/42; "The Christmas Tree in History and Legend," *The Illustrated London News*, Christmas 1958, pp. 5-8), and one on "A Royal Sport: Queen Elizabeth I Hawking" (*The Sphere*, Nov. 12, 1959, p. 11). There are also three of Baynes' Christmas cards, one reproducing the hawking scene and two (looking rather Narnian) illustrating "Good King Wenceslaus," all signed. One card from Lewis -- who did not approve of Xmas -- is in the files as well, with an unimaginative commercial birds-in-winter-scene.

The Tolkien material is standard, except for the presence of a Danish translation by Ida Nyrop Ludvigsen, and a Swedish edition illustrated by Tove Jansson (famous for the Moomintroll books) and translated by Britt G. Hallquist.

Some interesting editions of George MacDonald are present. At the Back of the North Wind, il-

lustrated by George and Doris Hauman (NY: Macmillan, 1950), is signed and inscribed by the artists with a drawing of Diamond riding Diamond -- sitting too far back on the rump to give any guidance with the reins, I should think. Another edition, illustrated by Charles Mozley (London: Nonesuch, 1963), is autographed by the artist. *The Light Princess*, illustrated by Dorothy Lathrop (NY: Macmillan, 1926) and *Sir Gibbie*, edited by Elizabeth Yates (NY: Dutton, 1963), are briefly inscribed, by Lathrop and Yates respectively.

Nora S. Unwin put a brief inscription with a border of cobwebs in the copy of *The Princess and the Goblins* (NY: Macmillan, 1951, illustrated by Unwin). Her inscription in *The Princess and Curdie* was more personal: "Inscribed for/ Irvin Kerlan/ with greetings as long as Lina's tail" written over a sketch of a dove hovering (in Grandmother's blessing?) over the drawing printed on the endpaper, of the Princess, Curdie, and Lina (NY: Macmillan, 1954). The originals of many of Unwin's drawings for *The Princess and the Goblin* are in the Kerlan collection -- 47 ink drawings each with one separation, and one ink drawing.

One type of study which could well be followed at the Kerlan is the development of the Mythopoeic story in children's literature. The collection holds most of the important modern children's books, as well as much earlier material. (a 1974 count showed a total of 28,600 volumes, 2500 of them dating from 1925 or earlier, the earliest from 1717.)

Many writers of Mythopoeic fantasy are represented at the Kerlan by manuscripts as well as by printed books. Some of the most important of these: John Bellairs, corrected typescripts (and corrected galley-proofs of the first two) and correspondence from his fantasy-suspense trilogy (*The House with a Clock in its Walls*, *The Figure in the Shadows*, and *The Letter, the Witch, and the Ring*), and a typescript from *The Treasure of Alphaeus Winterborn*; Elizabeth Coatsworth, material from many stages of many of her books, including *The Cat Who Went to Heaven*, *The Enchanters*, and *Pure Magic*; Padraic Colum, xerox of corrected galleys of *The Boy Apprenticed to an Enchanter*; Dahlov Ipcar, material from many stages of many of her books, including *The Queen of Spells* and *The Warlock of Night*; Jane Langton, corrected typescript of *The Swing in the Summerhouse*; Ruth Nichols, corrected typescript of *A Walk out of the World*;

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