



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

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

Volume 36 | Number 1 | Issue 131, Fall/Winter

Article 20

10-15-2017

Laughter in Middle-earth: Humour in and around the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien. Eds. Thomas Honegger and Maureen F. Mann

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Recommended Citation

Croft, Janet Brennan (2017) "*Laughter in Middle-earth: Humour in and around the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien.* Eds. Thomas Honegger and Maureen F. Mann," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 36 : No. 1 , Article 20.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol36/iss1/20>

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Mythcon 50

Looking Back, Moving Forward

San Diego, California

August 2-5, 2019

Laughter in Middle-earth: Humour in and around the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien.
Eds. Thomas Honegger and Maureen F. Mann

Éva Antal discusses the presence of the fantastic in the science fiction of H.G. Wells (*The Time Machine, When the Sleeper Wakes*) and Edward Bellamy (*Looking Backwards 2000-1887*). Iva Polak looks at *The Last Lemurian: A Westralian Romance* (1898), by George Henry Firth Scott, a lost-race fantasy of Western Australia which mixes elements from H. Rider Haggard's *She* and Ernest Favenc's *The Secret of the Australian Desert*.

Klára Kolinská looks at the odd case of *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* (1888), posthumously published by a Canadian author, James de Mille, who was largely seen as a writer of cheap fiction until the New Canadian Library reprint of the book in 1969. Finally, Tom Hubbard discusses a number of Scottish artistic figures, including Robert Louis Stevenson and lesser known ones like John Davidson and Patrick Geddes.

Overall, I found the minutiae of the various essays more interesting and accomplished than the collection as a whole.

—Douglas A. Anderson



LAUGHTER IN MIDDLE-EARTH: HUMOUR IN AND AROUND THE WORKS OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN. Edited by Thomas Honegger and Maureen F. Mann. Walking Tree Publishers, 2016. 242+ pp. ISBN 978-3-905703-35-1. \$24.30.

TOOD SHIPPEY, IN HIS FOREWORD TO THIS ESSAY COLLECTION, reminds us that “Laughter [...] is not the same as ‘funny bits’” or “comic scenes” (1). As he points out, there are around two hundred and forty mentions of laughter in *The Lord of the Rings*, about fifty in *The Hobbit*, and even thirty in *The Silmarillion*. But laughter (bitter or mirthful), humor (sunny or black as orcish jests), satire, and the comic have been very little studied in previous scholarship on Tolkien. Of course, there is always the risk, with humor, of breaking a thing to find out what it is and thereby leaving the path of wisdom, as Gandalf reminds Saruman (*LotR* II.ii.259). But for the most part, these essays avoid that trap.

Maureen F. Mann's lead paper, which I encountered in its earlier form at the *Return of the Ring* conference at Loughborough in 2012, tries to determine what ‘nonsense’ means to Tolkien by examining both his texts and his letters. Tolkien grew up on the high Victorian nonsense found in the Alice books and Edmund Lear's poetry, as well as nonsense in nursery rhymes and folktales, and these roots are readily apparent in his work. In “‘Certainly not our sense’: Tolkien and Nonsense,” Mann characterizes such early work as poems in his invented language Animalic as “full of ludic fun and a giddy enjoyment of pricking the pomposity of polite decorum” (12), exhibiting a “delight in

neologisms" (13) that is one of the keys to Tolkien's brand of humor—his sheer delight in words and what can be done with them, his "primal delight in simply the human creation of sound" (15). Mann draws on critical essays on humor by Roderick McGillis, George Orwell, G.K. Chesterton, and Roland Barthes, among others, to support her notion of Tolkien's carnivalesque delight in the "pleasure of language play" (28) and the ability of "nonsense [to deflate] high seriousness" (29).

Laughter in Arda can be divided into two main categories: the gloating, over-confident, or deceptive laughter of villains, and the mirthful, open, or subversive laughter of the good. Alistair Whyte's essay, "A Fountain of Mirth: Laughter in Arda," explores the significance of both types of laughter, both to the narrative and as related to Tolkien's themes about "spiritual or moral conflict, the limitations of worldly power, and [...] the inevitability of change" (40). The laughter of the good "destabilizes the oppressor's assertion of dominance" (48), while the laughter of the evil signifies misplaced confidence and the absurdity of its plots in the face of the long arc of Ilúvatar's plan. In both cases, laughter "indicates the continuing relevance of hope and the nonexistence of absolutes and certainties in a changing world" (55).

Jennifer Raimundo finds the key for her analysis of mirthfulness in Tolkien's "On Fairy-stories," linking laughter and humor to Escape, Recovery, and Consolation. The hobbits are exemplars of the value of giving laughter and simple enjoyment a central place in one's life; as Raimundo points out, Bilbo's last act in *The Hobbit* is "to laugh in gratitude for how small he is in this wide world" (65). The wisdom of mirth lies in its ability to provide "escape from the prisons of envy and bitterness and fear" (70) and a cathartic recovery from the "danger of taking oneself too seriously" (71). A particularly interesting point Raimundo makes in "Mirth's Might: The Tenacity of Humour in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien" is that every defeat of the One Ring's temptation to individual power is characterized by laughter: from Galadriel's "sudden clear laugh" to Boromir's final smile at the moment of his death (78).

Łukasz Neubauer categorizes and explicates some examples of Tolkien's philological jests relating to place names (toponyms) and character names (anthroponyms and zoonyms) in "Plain Ignorance in the Vulgar Form: Tolkien's Onomastic Humour in *Farmer Giles of Ham*." "Pseudo-classical reframing" finds humor in the contrast of faux-formal names with down-to-earth characters like Ægidius Ahenobarbus Julius Agricola de Hammo; "Replication of reality" similarly uses such names to comment on character, as in the name of the blacksmith, Fabricius Cunctator, with its implications of delay and falsification. "Semantic reversal" Neubauer uses to refer to names like Little John, nickname of Robin Hood's very large companion; here Giles's dog Garm fails to live up to the ferocity and alertness of his namesake, Garmr, the Norse

hound that guards the gates of Hell and warns of Ragnarok. The final category, "False etymology," is most evident in the explanations of the place-names Worminghall and Thame.

A large part of the charm and delight of *The Hobbit* can be tracked to its "lampooning" of "ordinary forms of politeness" even as it makes a "deeper point about true politeness and moral courage" (107). In "'This is of course the way to talk to dragons': Etiquette-based Humour in *The Hobbit*," Laura Lee Smith compares Tolkien's use of etiquette-based humor to similar humor in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, George MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin*, A.A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh*, and E.A. Wyke-Smith's *The Marvellous Land of Snergs*; a comparison of Eeyore's response to Pooh's "Good morning" with Gandalf's response to Bilbo is particularly apt. Referencing the works of "Miss Manners" (Judith Martin), Smith makes a case for close study of the deployment of manners as strategy and as barometer of power in *The Hobbit*.

At this point the collection shifts from the study of humor *in* Tolkien to a consideration of humor *about* Tolkien. Evelyn Koch looks at "Parodies of the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien," pointing out that parody requires both familiarity with the original on the part of the audience and traits in the original work that allow for parody, such as a distinctive style or vocabulary. Strategies of parody may include exaggeration, understatement, casting a hero as an anti-hero, making a quest trivial, satirizing naming conventions, or adding vulgarity. *The Lord of the Rings*, in both book and movie form, is quite easy to parody, and Koch touches on everything from the early book-form parody *Bored of the Rings* (1969) to more recent *Epic Rap Battle* (2016) between Tolkien and George R.R. Martin, which can, surprisingly enough, trace its ancestry to medieval flying contests.

Sherrylynn Branchaw focuses her attention on a particular comic response to Tolkien: *The Stupid Ring Parody*, a cooperative work written by some seventy contributors on a now defunct (but fortunately archived) Netscape message board between 2002 and 2012. She details some of the "strategies of humour" used by the authors as they draw upon the materials of Tolkien's entire legendarium, the Peter Jackson films, fan and popular culture, and, recursively, the parody itself. The parody takes the form of a screenplay, and part of the humor resides in the blurring of categories as the speakers may at times represent their character as written, the film version of their character, or a fan version of the character, and characters such as film crew, fictional narrators, and so on may be introduced. The fourth wall may as well not even exist. Branchaw also demonstrates that the authors of *The Stupid Ring Parody* knew when to step back from scenes of genuine seriousness and emotion and pay homage to their original source in the books.

Davide Martini's contribution, "Humour in Art Depicting Middle-earth," is perhaps a little unfocused, starting with an unnecessary first section

demonstrating—through multiple reproductions—that there has been little to no humor in illustrations for *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Silmarillion*. The second section suggests that there was nothing funny in Tolkien’s own illustrations for *The Hobbit*—but does admit that his illustrations for *The Father Christmas Letters* and *Mr. Bliss* were humorous. The third section deals with illustrations for other editions of *The Hobbit* and the difficulty illustrators had in interpreting Tolkien’s descriptions of Bilbo and Gollum—illustrations primarily humorous only because they subvert our current expectations of how the characters should look.

Jared Lobdell’s contribution on “Humour, Comedy, the Comic, Comicality, Puns, Wordplay, ‘Fantastication’, and ‘English Humour’” is also a bit unfocused—or perhaps it would be better to say *kaleidoscopic*. In Tolkien’s work he finds “aspects of carnival” (213), and points out that the eucatastrophe can occur in Comedy as well as in Romance (214), but these hints at theory are not really followed through. What we do get is a useful definition of the “Tolkienian pun [...] the kind of playing with words one would expect of an historical philologist” (215) as “the exact application of an original exact meaning of a word now often otherwise used” (219). We also get an assessment of the other Inklings in terms of their humor: “Lewis’s strong satirical impulse” (217), Dyson’s mimicry, Barfield’s satirization of himself and Williams’s of other literary forms, etc. (229). The Inklings’s parlor game of reading the works of Amanda McKittrick Ros till reduced to helpless laughter gets a mention (232; see the article in *Mythlore* #107/108 for more on this game). So too does the production of Clerihews by and about the Inklings (223-225 and 238-239)—a tradition happily continued by the Mythopoeic Society with the Not Very Annual Mary M. Stolzenbach Memorial Clerihew Contest at Mythcon, the winners of which are published in *Mythprint*.

In addition to the wide variety of works reproduced in Martini’s chapter, *Laughter in Middle-earth* includes illustrations and cartoons by Chris Riddell, Jef Murray, Ulla Thynell, Ted Nasmith, Anke Eissmann, Graeme Skinner, Kay Woollard, Patrick Wynne, and Tim Kirk. Altogether an enjoyable production, whimsical as well as insightful.

—Janet Brennan Croft

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