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The Vented Spleen

Abstract

Stimpson, Catharine R. J.R.R. Tolkien.

THE VENTED SPLEEN

by Claire Howard

To deepen my understanding of J. R. R. Tolkien's work, I read as much critical writing as possible. So with high hopes I bought an attractive-looking pamphlet (\$1.00) called *J. R. R. Tolkien*, by Catharine R. Stimpson. This is No. 41 in the series *Columbia Essays on Modern Writers*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1968. The author is an assistant professor of English at Barnard College. The essay seemed promising and I looked forward to learning something new about Tolkien. Learn something I did, but little new about Tolkien and a lot about Prof. Stimpson. I discovered that a supposed scholar can be most unscholarly. (In her essay the Professor discusses Tolkien's other fiction briefly, but concerns herself mostly with *The Lord of the Rings*. My remarks are confined to the latter.)

I've always thought it redundant or sterile to review a review. But the essay in question is so dishonest that I felt it deserved a challenge. My principal objection to it is not that it is unsympathetic, which it is, but that it is unobjective. So slanted is it that it neither gives Tolkien the chance to speak for himself nor the reader the chance to draw his own conclusions -- except about Prof. Stimpson. The Professor states clearly from the outset that she is not one of Tolkien's admirers. Nevertheless, one has the right to expect from a writer of Prof. Stimpson's undoubted academic qualifications the ability to review a work with a readable degree of responsibility to the work and the reader both. One is entitled to expect fair, even if unsympathetic, judgment. Unfortunately, Prof. Stimpson's essay is the type of display of undiluted venom that critics use against non-books like *The Love Machine*. But *LoTR* is a work of literature and Tolkien is not Jacqueline Susann.

Prof. Stimpson's aversion to Tolkien proceeds, I suspect, from the rather strange political and historical message which she draws from his work. (I am not going to discuss that here.) Her bias has led her into careless errors of fact, the tendency to arrive at conclusions that are nowhere indicated in Tolkien's text, the doubting of Tolkien's honesty as a writer, and the use of acid language whose purpose can only be to prejudice the reader against Tolkien from the very beginning.

Let's start with the mistakes. Prof. Stimpson repeatedly refers to "the Gollum," as if this were a generic term rather than a proper name. Hobbiton is written "Hobbitown." In her bibliography the Professor includes Donald Swann's song-book but calls it *The Road Goes On Forever*. This is, of course, *The Road Goes Ever On*. The final confrontation between the forces of Mordor and the West, the Professor claims, took place on the Battle Plain of Dagorlad. In fact, it took place before the Morannon of the Tower of Cirith Gorgor, south of the Battle Plain. The Professor describes Sam and Frodo, at the end of their quest, as "standing by for a rescue by the eagles." The two hobbits actually had no hope of rescue; they were resigned to their death. In discussing the Rings of Power, the Professor says: "A ring gives man... long life... at the risk of fading to the substance of a shadow." There was true only of those rings fallen under Sauron's control. These are errors of fact. When Prof. Stimpson characterizes Boromir as "given... to self-love and tardy horn blowing," this is not only a factual error but a piece of gratuitous nastiness. Boromir had only one aim: to save Gondor, even at the sacrifice of his own life. He blew his horn "tardily" because he was too weakened by orc-rounds to do anything else.

Prof. Stimpson has a habit, common among some critics, of authoritatively interpolating meanings and ideas that cannot be substantiated by the text. She claims, for example, that "a star always means hope, enchantment, wonder; an ash heap always means despair, enslavement, waste." The Entwives, she says, "settle down to garden, anticipating divorce decrees on the grounds of mutual incompatibility." ("I") She is sure that the Shire is "a little smaller than West Virginia." Denethor, she writes, "aspires to be a wizard." "Fire symbolizes energy," she says. (Traditionally, fire has meant purification and/or destruction.)

Furthermore, Prof. Stimpson brings in "explanatory" material whose source she fails to credit. In discussing Tolkien's use of language, she mentions his "insatiable desire for the historic Finnish." Describing Tolkien's supposed criticism of modern man's use of technology, which creates only ugliness, she adds:



"...despite his wrath, Tolkien wants the blessings of technology." She mentions the Palantir to prove her point. Apparently, Prof. Stimpson has forgotten that *LoTR* is a fairy story, and, as in so many fairy stories, there are magical devices that are taken for granted. (I wonder why she didn't include Galadriel's mirror or Gandalf's staff to bolster her argument.) The Professor also goes into biographical detail about Lewis Carroll as well as Tolkien and the other Inklings to "explain" why they wrote fantasies. I can't understand Prof. Stimpson's need for such explanation. To me it seems irrelevant, albeit interesting. Why not accept a fantasy for what it is?

Prof. Stimpson even writes utter nonsense. Again, talking about Tolkien's use of language, she points out that "Tolkien's heroes use lots of 'l' sounds, his villains lots of 'k's and 'z's." The beginnings of a dangerous orthodoxy are apparent." Obviously, the Professor has overlooked the Dwarves who, unlike the other heroes, use lots of k's and z's. That last remark about a "dangerous orthodoxy" makes me wonder if the Professor feels threatened by *LoTR*.

In the same paragraph Prof. Stimpson writes: "He... frequently treats a word, neither as reference nor gesture, but as a thing, a dead end, unto itself." Since she cites no examples, I can't fault her meaning. Later on, comparing Tolkien's work to other fantasies, myths, romances and epics, she says: "For reading Tolkien is not (her emphasis) like reading real (my emphasis) books, like *Alice in Wonderland*..." What on earth is a "real" book? The Professor doesn't say.

Prof. Stimpson further reveals her antagonism in other comments on Tolkien's use of language in *LoTR*, besides those quoted above. She acknowledges Tolkien's delight in, and love of, language, and notes that many Tolkien figures have their own characteristic speech. Then she goes on to make some odd remarks about it. The trolls in *The Hobbit*, she says, "speak filthy, rough, working-class Cockney. Recently, of course, musical groups have shown us the wit and poetry of working-class English speech." The trolls' speech is certainly rough, and appears to be Cockney. But it is Prof. Stimpson who assumes this speech is "filthy," not Tolkien. There is filthy speech, but it is characteristic of the Orcs. The latter, interestingly enough, speak standard English, not Cockney. How would Prof. Stimpson explain that, in light of her comment about working-class English speech?

The Professor also objects to Tolkien's use of archaic-sounding syntax. Tolkien dresses English in costume, writes Prof. Stimpson, "to frame and then regain a vanished past." Granted. She correctly notes that Tolkien uses archaic rhetoric "to give a sense of both antiquity and freedom from trivia." She then follows this observation with, "Stunning ordinary diction, he also wrenches syntax. If we expect 'They got angry,' he will write, 'Wrathful they grew.' If we expect, 'He came to an island in the middle of the river,' he will write, 'To an eyot he came.'" (Why should we expect "They got angry" and "He came to an island..." if we accept LoTR on its own terms?) Supposedly a professor of English ought to have some knowledge of the history of the language and some acquaintance, I would hope, with other Germanic languages, at least modern ones. Prof. Stimpson's comment about wrenching syntax makes me doubt that she has such a background; or perhaps she has it and ignores it.

Look at the two sentences Prof. Stimpson quotes. Syntactically they are similar:

"Wrathful they grew." Predicate (adj.) + subject + verb
 "To an eyot he came." Predicate (adv.) + subject + verb

Any student of modern German, say, or any modern Scandinavian language learns that a sentence can begin with a predicate, as in the two examples above. In that case, the order of the following subject and verb must be inverted. For example:

(Ger.) Hier bin ich. Literally, "Here am I." -- Predicate + verb + subject
 (Swed.) Har ar jag. Literally, "Here am I." -- Predicate + verb + subject

(Ger.) Einen langen Brief hat er geschrieben. Literally, "A long letter wrote he." -- Predicate + verb + subject
 (Swed.) Ett langt brev skrev han. Literally, "A long letter wrote he." -- Predicate + verb + subject

In modern English there are vestiges of this kind of word order, as in, "Here comes the judge." In Old English meanings were carried by inflectional endings rather than by word order. Old English word order was therefore freer than ours. The literature abounds with sentences of the inverted verb-subject type, and of other types not under discussion here. There are also fairly "regular" sentences (i.e., subject preceding verb), like this one from the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, from the Alfredian version of the *De Consolatione Philosophiae*: "... and hire saule mon acwilde laetan to helle." Literally, "... and her soul (predicate object) one (subject) should lead (verb) to Hell (predicate adverb)." LoTR has many, many sentences of this type.

I suggest that Tolkien does not "wrench" syntax. I suggest that he is attempting to echo not just archaic speech but specifically archaic English (a Germanic language) speech, in order to convey a sense of specifically German antiquity. (Incidentally, there is an excellent discussion of language in LoTR in Bruce A. Beattie's article "Folk Tale, Fiction and Saga in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*," *Mankato State College Studies*, Vol. II, No. 1, Feb. 1967.)

Another element that Tolkien uses to evoke a convincingly Nordic setting in LoTR is concepts of heroism and fame. Warriors were among the aristocrats in the life of the Northmen, and valor in battle was highly esteemed, as Prof. Stimpson shows she is aware. A man died heroically, not only because he would then be



seated among the brave in Valhalla, but because, by so doing, he would win everlasting fame and honor. As Johannes Brøndsted points out, honor was an outstanding Viking value.² Honor was not merely fame and fortune; it meant esteem and security. Brøndsted quotes from the *Havamal* (The Sayings of the High One, an Eddic poem): "Cattle die, kinsmen die, I myself shall die, but there is one thing which I know never dies: the reputation we leave behind at our death."³ Since one's reputation never died, it was important for that reputation to be honorable. A man's great deeds could be immortalized in runic inscriptions, for example, or in song. As Brøndsted writes: "To the Viking acclaim was like rain upon a parched meadow. When a skald sang the praises of an earl, everyone heard it; and when the earl rewarded him with a gold ring, everyone saw it: mutual appreciation!"⁴ Despite Prof. Stimpson's (apparently) wide reading in Northern mythology, she fails to grasp this point. As far as she knows, "Characters even (my emphasis) seek to be the subject of a song. *The Lord of the Rings*, lacking a complete eschatology, makes poetry a version of the afterlife." Nordic mythology, as Brøndsted notes, also lacked a complete eschatology. We can assume that Tolkien is aware of this.

Tolkien has absorbed mythological traditions more thoroughly than Prof. Stimpson seems to realize. She says, for example, "A king's hands and herbs play at penicillin." The role of king (or chieftain) as magician, medicine-man, bringer of bountiful harvests, etc., has an extremely long history and has been prevalent in many parts of the world. Sir James Frazer's mention of the survival of belief in the king as a healer in England and France even in relatively modern times. (We should not overlook Christian mythology, in which Jesus Christ heals the sick with his touch.)

Another objection of Prof. Stimpson's is that in LoTR rulers inherit their power, and societies are rigidly stratified by class. I find this an odd objection. Although commoners sometimes do play an important part in myths, legends and fairy tales, the central figures are most often royal and aristocratic. One may as well object to Shakespeare's plays on the ground that they revolve mainly around the fortunes of kings.

Prof. Stimpson is also averse to the masculine tone of Tolkien's work. As there are few females in LoTR, the Professor is sure that Tolkien is hostile toward and contemptuous of women. Tolkien's females, she says, are either hackneyed stereotypes to whom men give "callow, shallow, and mawkish" devotion; or they are merely a "necessary adjunct to a domestic scene" (Rosie Cotton, e.g.). Eowyn is simply a "fillip for the plot." The Entwives, in Prof. Stimpson's view, are "less spiritually refined" than the Ents. The Professor finds Shelob a revealing index to what she considers Tolkien's hostility toward women. She claims that Sam forces the spider to impale herself "somewhere in the region of the womb." This is another of the Professor's unsubstantiated interpolations.

Prof. Stimpson is irritated by Tolkien's attitude toward women, as she imagines it. She is also displeased to find in Tolkien's





Sauron, from the Lost Statue done in Numenor in the Reign of Ar-Pharazon the Golden

work so much affection and warm fellowship among men. (Lest we suspect otherwise, she magnanimously hastens to reassure us that Tolkien, unlike some modern writers, is no homosexual!) Perhaps the Professor fails to realize that this emphasis on masculinity is traditional in the mythology of almost any nation. It is very strong in the Northern tradition, in which Tolkien writes. There are goddesses, shamankas, giantesses and heroines, of course, but the main figures are masculine.

It is greatly to Prof. Stimpson's discredit that she fails to take Tolkien on his own terms. She does not ask if the artist has succeeded in doing what he set out to do. Instead, she imposes her own narrow boundaries on the author's material and faults him for failing to observe them -- a malady among some critics, who presume to tell the creative artist what and what not to do. The Professor seems to think that Tolkien is trying to deceive us; that he is trying to impose on the gullible reader his Christianity, bogus mythology and parodied research. She refuses to believe Tolkien's emphatic assertion that his purpose is to tell a tale that delights, excites and moves the reader. She declines to accept Tolkien's denial that *LoTR* is an allegory. Prof. Stimpson insists that it is. She does not see Tolkien as a mythmaker, weaving motifs of earlier legends, myths, etc., to create something new. She calls *LoTR* a pastiche and leaves it at that. She accepts some aspects of Tolkien's mythmaking (the Elves' immortality, dreams as prophecies, e.g.) and rejects others, but there is no pattern to her accepting and rejecting. In summarizing Tolkien's fiction, she accurately sketches the sources of Tolkien's themes, characters, concepts, etc. Having made us aware of these sources, she then attacks Tolkien for having used them.

For me, the most objectionable aspect of Prof. Stimpson's essay is her calculated use of negative, indeed vicious, language. For example, her absurd description of Boromir, quoted earlier, and her remark about the king's hands playing at penicillin. She calls Tolkien's natural imagery "banal." In his handling of romantic love, Tolkien "seems a little childish, a little nasty and evasive." And when Tolkien writes about romantic love, he "sidles up" to it. His narrative is "often tedious and weary." He makes "terrible errors of taste" in using phrases like "lo and behold." He uses "greeting-card diction." His intellectual, emotional and imaginative energies are "timid and jejune." He "spews forth" what the Professor says is a "reductive, yet redemptive, allegory of the human urge to fail." The hobbits are "palestine." The Professor mentions John Tinker's essay, in Tolkien and the Critique, on what she calls the "incestuous" familiarity between Anglo-Saxon and the speech of the Rohirrim. The latter, she says,

were "a horsey Aryan tribe." Tolkien has "rummaged through" Western culture for his themes, settings, characters, etc. *LoTR* is "the obsessive obituary" of the Third Age. Tolkien "sneaks in" magical devices to do what modern machines do. The Palantir is a "sinister" version of Merlin's glass ball in *The Faerie Queene*. Tolkien's heroes are his "pets." And so on.

The Professor's antagonism is not restricted to Tolkien. It extends to the Inklings as well. They were "conscious of the cute pun" (the name of their group). They delighted "boyishly, even fatuously, in each other's company." The Inklings, "a brilliant, but condescendingly and oddly silly, group," "blotted on" until 1954. They were verbally eloquent, but "often stammered emotionally." "They seemed to think themselves a company of noble, gorgeous knights, beseege in their tower of virtue by the dark forces of evil and intrigue, vulgarity and commerce...."

Prof. Stimpson is entitled to whatever opinion of *LoTR* she chooses, and to any interpretation of it she pleases to make. But it seems to me that a reviewer who egotistically tries to ram his/her personal taste down a reader's throat is rendering a great disservice to literature and to the reader. The series of which Prof. Stimpson's essay is a part includes such notable writers as Germaine Bree, Walter Kerr, Robert Gorham Davis and Martin Esslin. Among the advisory editors is the distinguished Jacques Barzun. From such writers as these, one has the right to demand fairness, at the very least. Unfortunately, Prof. Stimpson has allowed her hostility to overpower her judgment. It thus blunts the edges of her critical perceptions, precludes fairness and renders her essay spurious as a piece of literary criticism.

FOOTNOTES

1. James W. Bright, *Anglo-Saxon Reader* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Oct. 1965; rev. by James R. Hulbert, Ph.D.), p. 5.
2. Johannes Brondsted, *The Vikings* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 316.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 250.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 317-8.
5. Sir James Frazer, *The New Golden Bough* (New York: Mentor Books, pub. by the New American Library, 1964; rev. and ed. by Theodor H. Gaster), pp. 93-4.

Across the Brandywine by Bernie Zuber

