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Letters

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Letters

Authors

Christopher M. Cornell, David Bratman, Patricia Reynolds, Melanie A. Rawls, Diana Waggoner, Arden R. Smith, and Chris Seeman

Letters

Readers' Letters are an important form of feedback and exchange, an opportunity to comment on past issues, and to raise questions for other's comments. Each letter that is printed extends the writer's subscription by an additional issue. Please send your letters directly to the Editor, Glen GoodKnight, 740 S. Hobart Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90005 USA.

Christopher M. Cornell

Philadelphia, PA

I am a long-time (half of my life) admirer of Tolkien's mythopoeisis, but a newcomer to *Mythlore*. I'm very impressed with what I've seen, and hope, in the future, to add, in some small way, my voice to the ongoing debate and discussion of these works.

But, first things first. In the first issue of *Mythlore* that I ever encountered – Number 55 – I read and was amused by a piece by William Blackburn entitled "Dangerous as a Guide to Deeds," in which the author seems to want to steer the reader away from taking Tolkien's political theories seriously since, he proclaims, they are just barely saved from "simple fascism." I can't imagine how Mr. Blackburn can think that a mid-1960s America, still smarting from the assaults of fascism that all-too-recently threatened it around the world, would embrace a book like that. And yet that's what happened.

But Mr. Blackburn errs not only in commission, but in omission. If he *really* wished to demonstrate Tolkien's less-than-democratic tendencies, he should have pointed to the somewhat suspect description of Aragorn's popular mandate.

Then Faramir stood up and spoke in a clear voice: 'Men of Gondor, hear now the Steward of this Realm! Behold! One has come to claim the Kingship at last. Here is Aragorn, son of Arathorn, Chieftain of the Dunedain of Arnor, Captain of the Host of the West, bearer of the Star of the North, wielder of the Sword Reforged, victorious in battle, whose hands bring healing, the Elfstone, Ellessar of the line of Valandil, Isildur's son, Elendil's son of Numenor. Shall he be King and enter into the City and dwell here?'

And all the host and all the people cried "yes" with one voice. — III 302-303 (paperback)

I know a philosophy professor at an East Coast university who still uses this scene from *The Lord of the Rings* to define the difference between the concepts of "de jure" and a "de facto" government. If we believe Tolkien, and every

single human being within the sound of Faramir's voice agreed with his extremely glowing nomination speech (imagine the half-hearted recommendation Faramir's brother Boromir would have voiced, in the same situation), then – and only then – would have Aragorn have had the right to assume absolute power over them. Tolkien seems to want us to believe that this was the case, and that Aragorn took the throne of a "de jure" government.

But this East Coast professor would go on, what if there was a small neighborhood in Minas Tirith that remained loyal to the House of the Stewards, because it had done so for hundreds of years? To these people, Aragorn's impressive credentials would have meant nothing and the acquiescence of Faramir (who, it must be pointed out, was Denethor's *younger and less-publicly praised son*) would have been viewed as traitorous. To the loyalists of the old guard, Aragorn would be to these people no less than a vile usurper.

If that was the scene, as seems almost inevitable if one considers the realities of human nature, then there were, perhaps, a few voices in Minas Tirith that may have actually shouted "Nay!" Indeed, – the argument goes – if even one crotchety old geezer in some back courtyard stood up at Faramir's question and shouted "Nay!", then Aragorn's new Reunited Realm, as popular as it appeared to the hobbits who reported the story, was only a "de facto" government, ruling by might, rather than by right.

Surely here is the most heinous example of Tolkien's political views. What would have Locke or de Tocqueville have thought of this business of shouting in the streets (what? no secret ballots?) as a method of granting absolute monarchical power to one man and his descendants for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years? It's my guess they might have had a few reservations.

The point of this facetious little commentary is that, in scholarly study, it is important to consider the contest, not just the text. To worry overmuch that Tolkien is speaking against democracy in a minor scene of *The Hobbit*, is to ignore the context of "feigned history" into which Tolkien, with considerable care, placed his Middle-earth tales. His hobbits, through whose eyes we see these powerful political events unfold, are wise in very common sense ways, but they know nothing of political maneuvering. So if operatives in Aragorn's camp met with operatives from Faramir some time before the ceremony, and worked out some kind of a deal to pay off or otherwise silence the

loyalists within Minas Tirith, we never hear about it. Certainly it's unlikely such a meeting would have been open to outsiders such as the hobbits. So, in the history the hobbit historians have handed down to us, Aragorn's ascension is smooth and almost God-like. In much the same way, Bilbo's description of the political maneuvering in Lake-town must be considered as necessarily colored by Bilbo's simplistic political view.

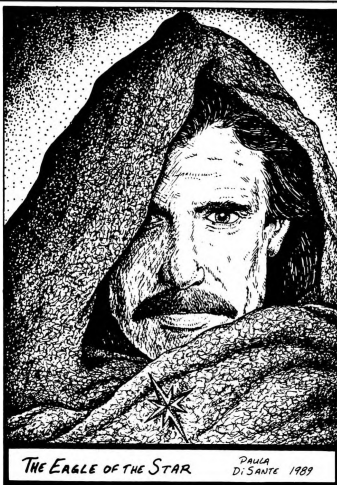
Blackburn's purpose seems to be to dissuade unsuspecting students of Tolkien – who may be innocently reading the stories, perhaps only for that politically irrelevant concept of "fun" – from embracing some abstract political concepts Blackburn mistrusts. Reading this imaginative fiction is all well and good, he seems to be saying, up to and until the point where it threatens to suggest alternative political ideas to impressionable readers. To avoid that, he has plucked – out of context – moments from Tolkien's fiction that he thinks embody those concepts he thinks are dangerous. Whether or not there's a snowball's chance in Mordor that the author intended to convey that meaning, does not seem to be of any importance.

From the days when American critics decided that *The Lord of the Rings* was a call to arms against the Soviet menace, commentary on Tolkien's works has always suffered assaults from people like Blackburn and their insensitivity to the intentions of the author. I imagine it always will. Indeed, I think one of the reasons Tolkien's works are so misunderstood by the general public has to do with the large number of zealots and scoundrels who have seized upon Tolkien's writing for their own purposes. However, I would not, as one reader did in the letter column, call for this sort of commentary to be excluded from *Mythlore*. Better we should see this sort of behavior for what it is, right out in the open, with the hope that rehabilitation for them may come. ♦

David Bratman

Los Altos, CA

Undoubtedly William Blackburn meant to be provocative in his article on Tolkien and politics, but if so, he has failed to be anywhere near as convincing as he could have been, through insufficient familiarity with his subject. Dr. Blackburn has found some excellent examples in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* of the axiom that "power corrupts", but it's embarrassing to watch him groping around in Tolkien's fiction and "On Fairy-Stories" for clues to the author's political opinions, when some very helpful explicit statements exist in the published *Letters*. His discussion of stewardship, for example, would have been immensely strengthened by a consideration of the statement, "[T]he most improper job of any man ... is bossing other men. Not one in a million is fit for it, and least of all those who seek the opportunity." (Letter 52) There are also some letters which would help indicate precisely how



"dangerous as a guide to deeds" Tolkien thought his fiction was (for he would surely have agreed with that basic point of Dr. Blackburn's).

There are also in the article a few statements about *The Lord of the Rings* itself that I thought peculiar. Dr. Blackburn asks scoffingly who could "wish that Frodo had delegated the Ring's disposal to a committee?", but forgets that the Council of Elrond was nothing more than a committee meeting to discuss the disposal of the Ring. And to describe Gollum, in his appearance at Sammath Naur, as "a most timely monster *ex machina*" is to confuse Tolkien with some of his lesser imitators, who really do write that way. Something "*ex machina*" comes (often literally) out of the blue. Gollum's appearance here, though, is not a random event but an entirely plausible result of his long and painful relationship with Frodo and Sam. Indeed, taking Tolkien's special mixture of determinism and free will into account, Gollum's action is a logical outcome of everything that had happened since pity first stayed Bilbo's hand. But a critic intent on discovering an author manipulating his plot may not realize this.

The other articles in *Mythlore* 55 also made good reading. I decided to reserve my comments on Joe Christopher's "J.R.R. Tolkien, Narnian Exile" (mostly en-

thusiastic noises on the lines of, "Yes, and did you consider ...?" after reading the words "To be concluded in the next issue" at the end, when I'm sure he'll get to them without my help. I enjoyed the chases after the secret of that elusive butterfly, literary style, made by Angelee Sailer Anderson with Dunsany, and Don King with Lewis and Russell. Most interesting, and profoundly well researched, is Mason Harris' comparison of power in Tolkien and Orwell. One of the strengths of *The Lord of the Rings* is the wideness of its applicability, and I found Prof. Harris to be very effective in demonstrating how Tolkien and Orwell were often saying the same thing in their profoundly different ways; yet he never stoops to the laziness of implying that anything in their books is interchangeable.

Lastly, I'd like to thank David Doughan for bringing A.N. Wilson's *Penfriends from Porlock* to our attention in the letter column. Thanks to his mention, I knew enough to browse through the book when I stumbled across it in the library, and found that the essay on Lewis is one of the most interesting and thoughtful writings on him that I've yet seen. ♦

Patricia Reynolds

Milton Keynes, England

Thank you for the new *Mythlore* [55]. I like the typeface especially – it looks good in italics and in small pitches. There were some great articles too. I can't wait for the conclusion of Joe Christopher's piece. [It was concluded in issue 56.]

I think Kevin Aldrich's idea that "escaping from death or trying to (by the 'escapes' of serial longevity and hoarding memory) ... in the story is a foolish and wicked thing to attempt," while being correct, does not present the full picture of the 'escapes' in *The Lord of the Rings*. Kevin Aldrich only points this out and then turns his attention to Death and Immortality.

Nowhere is *LotR* does Tolkien say that the 'escapes' are, *per se*, bad things. It is true that they are earthly, and therefore have a potential for corruption, as do beauty, good wine and pipeweed. Nowhere is their evil potential so well exemplified as with the case of Denethor, the last steward of Gondor.

In fact, the two escapes are also shown with full approval: take the Hobbits as described by Tolkien in the Prologue:

All hobbits were ... clannish and reckoned up their relationships with great care. They drew long and elaborate family trees with many branches. (*LotR* I,16.)

Yet they kept a few words of their own ... a great store of personal names out of the past. (*LotR* I,12.)

Hobbit behavior thus combines both escapes. They delight

in the family line, and in the names of the past. These names are continued in use, at least partially, to honor their previous owners, thus Sam Gamgee's firstborn son is called Frodo, shortly followed by Rose (family name), Merry, Pippin, Hamfast, Daisy (family name), Bilbo, Ruby (family name), Robin (for Robin the Shirriff?) and Tolman (an old family name). Of all Sam's children, only Elnor, Goldilocks and Primrose are uniquely named.

Or take the character of Aragorn, who is, above all else, an heir. Kevin Aldrich notes that Aragorn is "the last man in whom the blood of Númenor ran true," acknowledging the importance of serial longevity. Or consider the death of Boromir. Boromir did not choose his death for the prowess it would bring, yet Aragorn regrets that he cannot raise a great mound over his body (*LotR* II,17) and the lament also makes it clear that his name shall never be forgotten:

O Boromir! the Tower of Guard shall ever northward
gaze to Rauros, golden Rauros-falls, until the end of days.
(*LotR* II,20)

Hoarding memory, certainly, but not condemned by Tolkien.

The point separating "good" and "bad" earthly immortality is that of achievement. One *could* say that to seek immortality is bad, but actually the distinction is more subtle than this.

The distinction is more sharply focussed in *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhtelm's Son*, Part III *Offermode*, than in *LotR*. In this section Tolkien discusses

this element of pride, in the form of the desire for honour and glory, in life and after death, tends to grow, to become a chief motive, driving a man beyond the bleak heroic necessity to excess – to chivalry.

Tolkien describes the "personal good name" as an "alloy" to the "gold" of "enduring even death unflinching." If "personal good name" *cannot* exist without "pride" there seems to be a problem of stories-without-names comparable to reproduction-without-lust. Tolkien resolves this in this essay by referring to the love and loyalty which prompted the heroism of Beorhtnoth's companions, of Gawain, of Wiglaf. When these men act heroically, it is with total unawareness of self, of their own names: they act as servants, as hearth-companions. Their "good names" are something external. So, I believe, it is with Aragorn. ♦

Melanie A. Rawls

Atlanta, GA

Allow me to add my compliments on the new typeface. It is attractive and easy to read.

On items on *Mythlore* 55: I enjoyed "The Psychology of

Power" by Mason Harris. I think it should be noted that among other characteristics which demonstrates Aragorn's fitness as a king and Steward are his various renunciations of power and some of its perquisites. For example, instead of grabbing all the territory he could hold, he decrees both the Shire and Druadan Forest wholly off-limits to humankind, himself included, and their inhabitants self-ruling. He makes over a prime piece of real estate to Faramir and has him upgraded to prince – the cynical might say that he was setting up a rival for himself or his heirs. And he places Gondor in the grateful recipient of "largesse" when he comments to Eomer about Rohan's generosity in giving its fairest "thing" to Gondor, in the person of Eowyn's hand in marriage to Faramir.

During the siege of Gondor he first enters the city as a Ranger and healer, rather than king, and instructs that the keys and the governance of the city remain with the Prince of Dol Amroth to avoid speculation and confusion. In other words, as a steward of the public's good, Aragorn is prepared to renounce the perquisites of power until such time as he feels is appropriate.

Which leads me to William Blackburn's "Dangerous as a Guide to Deeds." Indeed, it is dangerous to take too literally the deeds of fantasies and fairy tales: "The Frog Prince" is not a prescription to run around kissing frogs or even froggy-looking young men in hopes of finding a prince. "The Frog Prince" is about the importance of keeping promises and how beneficence may come from the most unlikely sources. So even if one is not in favor of the monarchic form of government, one may still learn from Aragorn, principally about stewardship and patience.

Bruno Bettelheim touches on these matters in *The Uses of Enchantment*. The rules of the psyche, and those things that flow from it, namely dreams, myths, fairy tales and fantasy, are different from those of the so-called outside world or the "objective" world; and a confusion of these rules and roles results in chaos and destruction.

In *Mythlore* 56 I very much enjoyed Nancy Ester James's poem, "A Door Opens" and Brian Atteberry's "Reclaiming the Modern World of Imagination." Atteberry's essay gave points of reference for better understanding recent works of fantasy.

Diana Waggoner

Beverly Hills, CA

Mythlore 55 has some of the best articles you've ever run. I found the following particularly interesting: Kevin Aldrich's "The Sense of Time in LotR", Christine Thompson's piece on "Norse and Celtic Elements" in Earthsea, Don King's piece comparing C.S. Lewis and Bertrand Russell, Joe Christopher's piece on Tolkien's attitude on Narnia, William Blackburn's "Dangerous as a Guide to Deeds," and – the star of the issue – Mason

Harris's long but very rewarding article comparing Tolkien George Orwell, and Ursula LeGuin. The range of subjects is heartening. We fantasy "aficionados" (p.29) tend to focus too narrowly on our own favorite authors and to overlook the fact that they were, and are, powerfully influenced by writers outside the field. So the broadening of subject shown in the Harris and King articles is most welcome.

About that word: at first I thought it a misprint for "aficionados." It is, ts, ts! But it occurs to me that Mr. King may have coined it on purpose, in which case it does seem to fill a need in the language. After all, the standard word "aficionado", although derived from the Spanish word for "affection," only connotes "devotion" or "adoration" in English, not "affection." "To adore," with its religious overtones, is not the same as "to like," which implies a more equal feeling. I did notice a bad mistake on p. 24 in Paul Nolan Hyde's article on *The Father Christmas*



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Letters: "tet-et-tets" is a pretty far cry from the correct "tete-à-tetes." Your new computerized typesetter (which makes such beautiful pages!) ought to have a spelling checker! ♦

It does have a spell checker, but it doesn't recognize either French (tete-à-tetes) or such as your "tsk, tsk." As HAL would say, "The error has always been found to be human." — G.G.

Arden R. Smith

Berkeley, CA

If there is ever any sort of award given for the best *Mythlore* cover illustration, I would like to cast my vote now for Pat Wynne's magnificent drawing of Galadriel on the cover of *Mythlore* 56. I fell in love with the picture when I first saw it at the 19th Mythopoeic Conference art show, and now, with the added border, it's even better.

I would also like to extend a hearty "laila tárienna" to Paul Nolan Hyde for his "Quenti Lambardillion" in issue 56. Paul's column is the primary reason why I subscribed to *Mythlore* in the first place, and this is the best one yet. Leaves like "Narquelion" are my favorite part of Tolkien's Tree, and I send my sincerest thanks to the executors of the Tolkien estate for letting Paul show this particular Leaf.

I do have some complaints about Paul's tengwar version on the back cover, however. Aside from a few minor gripes of the "I would've done it differently" sort, I have noticed a few definite errors in the transcription. Firstly, the title, *Narquelion*, should be spelt with a *númen* rather than a *nvalme*. Secondly, line 3 of the tengwar version reads "sangaro vor" instead of "sangan vovo". Thirdly, the *silme* should be doubled in *tarasse* (line 16). Finally, there is (consistently) no distinction made in the tengwar test between long and short vowels.

Returning to the column itself, I have one question: does PNH really believe that *Daur* (Frodo's name in Sindarin) and *daur* "stop, pause" (see p. 51, entry *Torwa*) are the same word? It just doesn't make sense to me. Couldn't they be etymologically unrelated homophones?

A lot of great material in this issue — keep up the good work! ♦

Chris Seeman

Novato, CA

John Treloar's article in *Mythlore* 56 entitled "Tolkien and Christian Concepts of Evil: Apocalypse and Privation" succeeds in uncovering the richness of the philosophical and theological traditions grounding Tolkien's writing. This is a topic which promises to be fruitful to Tolkien criticism as the article admirably demonstrates. I am in agreement with Father Treloar's basic conclusions but I would like to comment on his argument in two places.

Firstly, on page 59 he draws on Auden's insight that the capacity for free will seems to be correlative with the capacity for speech. Treloar suggests that Tolkien may have been evoking the medieval criterion of rational discourse as a prerequisite for free will. Within the larger framework of Tolkien's thought, however, the capacity for speech is more properly a function of the power of subcreation. While the medieval criterion of rational discourse may be an allusive facet of Tolkien's intention here, it is subcreation — not rationality — which figures predominantly in his discussion of human activity in "On Fairy Stories" and which is found in "applied form" in the "Ainulindale" with regard to the origin of evil (Melkor is the creature invested with the greatest subcreative power).

Secondly, on page 57, Treloar seeks to classify Tolkien's evocation of evil into two modes: apocalyptic and privational. In his assessment of the former he draws out similarities in function between the Ringwraiths and the four horsemen of the apocalypse: "The forces are personified for literary emphasis, but metaphysically they are expressions of destruction of reality." I would modify Treloar's wording here — the Ringwraiths are not merely "expressions" of destruction, they are real agents of corporate and physical destruction; apocalyptic is not merely the personification of otherwise metaphysical forces, it is the experience of metaphysical (if privational) evil as embedded in concrete and real forces. In this sense (fully consonant with the *Apocalypse of John*) apocalyptic is the mode in which evil is encountered, engaged, and overcome within concrete situations arising in the narrative. At key points within the plot the wider framework of privational — and metaphysical — evil is considered by the characters. Father Treloar's article is a significant addition to our reflection on Tolkien's philosophical conception of evil. The next step will be to clarify the framework within which these two dimensions of evil interact. ♦

⇒ ⇒ ⇒ MOVING? ⇒ ⇒ ⇒

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