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Tolkien's Modern Reading by Holly Ordway

Kris Swank
Pima Community College

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Abstract

Ordway's book aims to challenge an assumption that J.R.R. Tolkien is "fundamentally rooted and grounded in the past, partaking only minimally of the modern world" (5). She hopes to accomplish this by proving her main argument that, "Tolkien's modern reading was both more extensive, and more significant in its influence on the legendarium, than has hitherto been recognized" (291). Ordway gathers 148 authors and more than 200 titles that Tolkien is known to have owned or read, and traces their influence on the development of Middle-earth. Despite a number of factual errors, and a flawed assumption that those interested in Tolkien are largely unaware of his interest in modern literature, the text is engaging, avoids academic jargon, and gathers a large amount of information under one convenient cover.

Additional Keywords

Mythlore; Tolkien's Modern Reading by Holly Ordway; Kris Swank; Source studies



TOLKIEN'S MODERN READING: MIDDLE-EARTH BEYOND THE MIDDLE AGES. Holly Ordway. Park Ridge IL: Word on Fire Academic, 2021. vii + 382 p. ISBN 978-1943243723. \$29.95 (hardcover).

IN *TOLKIEN'S MODERN READING: MIDDLE-EARTH BEYOND THE MIDDLE AGES*, Holly Ordway claims the common and widely-held view of J.R.R. Tolkien is "fundamentally rooted and grounded in the past, partaking only minimally of the modern world" (5). Ordway's book aims to challenge this assumption by providing "a fresh view, and to correct the critical imbalance that has affected Tolkien scholarship" which, she says, largely stops with his medieval interests, "making scant attempt to trace his engagement with subsequent literature" (8). Her main argument is that "Tolkien's modern reading was both more extensive, and more significant in its influence on the legendarium, than has hitherto been recognized" (291).

After a brief, fictionalized "Prelude" in which Ordway imagines a young John Ronald Tolkien standing outside the Birmingham residence of Joseph Henry Shorthouse, author of the celebrated nineteenth-century novel, *John Inglesant: A Romance* (1881), Ordway begins Chapter 1 with an appraisal of the popular image of "Tolkien the Medievalist." She explores several flaws in that image, particularly the weight given to some of Humphrey Carpenter's dubious statements concerning Tolkien (10-17). Ordway writes, "The picture of Tolkien as fundamentally backward-looking, happily living in total rejection of the modern world, must be abandoned" (24). She contends, rather, that Tolkien had an "omnivorous mind" and "throughout his life, read a great deal of modern literature, in a surprisingly wide range of genres. We know this for a fact. We know it chiefly from his letters, but also from references in his nonfiction writings, and from interviews that he gave and other conversations that were recorded by friends and acquaintances over the years" (Ordway 21).

Having set out her primary argument in Chapter 1, Ordway defines the scope of her study in Chapter 2. She begins from the premise that acknowledging the contribution of modern (i.e. post-1850) English literature to Tolkien's "creative process will enhance our ability to interpret and enjoy his work" (9). This premise places Ordway's book squarely within the field of Tolkien source studies, an area of Tolkien studies currently flourishing with

recent publications such as *Tolkien and the Study of his Sources: Critical Essays*, edited by Jason Fisher (McFarland, 2011) and Oronzo Cilli's *Tolkien's Library: An Annotated Checklist* (Luna Press, 2019). Fisher's excellent definition and guide to Tolkien source criticism divides Tolkien's source material into four categories which can be used to interpret and enjoy his work: *direct sources* which Tolkien himself acknowledged as influences; *indirect sources* which Tolkien is known to have read, owned, enjoyed, or commented on; *possible sources* which Tolkien never explicitly mentioned but which are no more than one step away from an explicit statement; and highly *speculative sources* which were known by Tolkien's close associates, even if he never mentioned them himself (Fisher 36-37).

Ordway dispenses with these last two categories and limits the scope of her book strictly to documenting "works of fiction, poetry, and drama published after 1850, written in English, that we know for certain Tolkien read, considering only their possible role as sources for and influences upon his Middle-earth writings, not their bearing on his other publications" (27). These firm boundaries give Ordway's study a clear-eyed focus. As she admits, "the decision to impose these limitations on my chosen territory is a practical one, intended to keep the material within manageable bounds, though even within these parameters, I expect there will be things I have overlooked" (Ordway 28). The book does not analyze Tolkien's nonfiction reading, his reading of works published prior to 1850, nor sources for works outside of the Middle-earth cycle, such as *Leaf by Niggle* or *Smith of Wootton Major*. Sources and influences on the posthumous Middle-earth publications (e.g. *The Silmarillion*, *Unfinished Tales*, and *The History of Middle-earth*) are of less interest to Ordway than sources and influences on *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, those Middle-earth novels published during Tolkien's lifetime. Ordway collects her evidence from a variety of sources: "Tolkien's own writings, published and unpublished [including letters]; interviews with him; accounts by family, friends, colleagues, and students; biographical studies; and finally, material in Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond's magisterial *J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide* (revised 2017 edition)" (30). Using the works of Catholic Cardinal John Henry Newman as an example of the application of her guidelines, Ordway writes that Tolkien's several associations with Newman throughout his lifetime make it "a dead cert" that he would have read at least some of Newman's works, but lacking "solid, provable evidence of his familiarity with particular titles," she leaves Newman out of her study (33).

Ordway also counters the common objections to source criticism as a legitimate lens through which to analyze Tolkien's works. As to C.S. Lewis's oft-quoted statement—"No one ever influenced Tolkien—you might as well try to influence a bandersnatch" (*Collected Letters III*, 1049)—Ordway points out that this statement has been soundly debunked from a number of directions

including Diana Glycer, Verlyn Flieger, and even Tolkien himself (34-35). As to Tolkien's own famous objections to having his works subjected to source criticism, Ordway contends that Tolkien discouraged poorly done or reductive source criticism, but that well-researched books can help Tolkien's readers gain a deeper appreciation of his creative processes (39-41).

The majority of Ordway's book comprises a series of narrative chapters surveying key authors from Tolkien's modern reading, and exploring possible intersections between books we know that Tolkien read and Tolkien's own Middle-earth writings. Chapter 3 concerns Victorian children's literature by George Dasent, E.H. Knatchbull-Hugessen, Lewis Carroll, and Andrew Lang, while Chapter 4 covers Post-Victorian children's literature by E.A. Wyke-Smith, Beatrix Potter, Arthur Ransome, Hugh Lofting, E. Nesbit, C.S. Lewis, and Kenneth Grahame. Chapter 5 is on George MacDonald. Chapter 6 examines adventure stories by S.R. Crockett, Alexander Macdonald, Herbert Hayens, John Buchan, and J.M. Barrie. Chapter 7 is on William Morris, and Chapter 8 covers H. Rider Haggard. Chapter 9 concerns works of science fiction by H. G. Wells, Joseph O'Neill, Olaf Stapledon, David Lindsay, E.R. Eddison, Charles Williams, and C.S. Lewis. Chapter 10 analyzes the fabulous stories of Lord Dunsany, Francis Thompson, Algernon Blackwood, and J.H. Shorthouse. Finally, Chapter 11 gathers the remainder of the works which fall within Ordway's criteria, especially works by Sinclair Lewis, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Dorothy Sayers, Agatha Christie, and G.K. Chesterton. There are few surprises here for those familiar with Tolkien source studies, as Ordway lightly recapitulates previous research by Douglas A. Anderson, Dimitra Fimi, Flieger, John Garth, John D. Rateliff, and several others.

She does offer a welcome correction to Humphrey Carpenter's outsized effect over Tolkien biography. In one case, she lays out a number of pieces of evidence which, woven together, show that Tolkien's feelings about C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* were neither as wholly-negative nor as cut-and-dried as Carpenter portrays (75-81). However, her unrelenting criticism of Carpenter throughout the book is probably more than Carpenter deserves. Some of her counter-arguments to Carpenter are also thin. For instance, she states, "Carpenter's inaccurate assessment of Tolkien's reading habits has shaped subsequent approaches to the topic, both at the popular and at the scholarly level" (Ordway 278). For scholarly evidence she offers only Michael Ward, a C.S. Lewis scholar who wrote in his book *Planet Narnia* (2008) that Tolkien disliked "most modern literature in general" (Ward 9). Ordway says that Ward revised his earlier judgment after reading a draft of her book, admitting in an email, "I'm no specialist on Tolkien" (quoted in Ordway 278).

This brings us to the elephant in the room. Those who *are* specialists on Tolkien have long recognized the importance of modern literature and

modernism on Tolkien's work, and even the most-cursory investigations of Tolkien's private reading habits will conclude that medieval literature was only one of his many and varied interests. In his letters, Tolkien lists a fair number of modern authors whose books he enjoyed (see Tolkien 377, for example). Anna Vaninskaya, in her contribution to the two-volume *Tolkien and Modernity* (2006), quickly amasses a list of modern writers with whom Tolkien is known to have engaged (many of whom Ordway also includes in her book) (Vaninskaya 3, 10). Vaninskaya proclaims, "the nineteenth and twentieth centuries formed an indelible part of [Tolkien's] mental landscape" (15). Patchen Mortimer argues in his 2005 article that "it is vital that Tolkien's work be placed in conversation with his contemporaries [...] as part of the literary current" (113). A similar premise undergirds Ralph C. Wood's *Tolkien Among the Moderns* (2015). In his 2016 review of Wood's collection, Thomas Honegger noted "Tolkien's relationship and connection with writers of modernity such as Joyce, Eliot or Orwell has grown into an important area of research for Tolkien studies," and we "can therefore look back onto a critical discourse of almost two decades" (295). Five years on from Honegger's review, we can no longer pretend that Tolkien's modern influences have gone unrecognized or underappreciated by Tolkien scholars.

If Ordway's conclusions are not news to Tolkien scholars, they might be eye-opening for some of Tolkien's fans. Indeed, the book's aim to gather a large amount of information under one convenient cover, its low retail price, Ordway's engaging writing style which avoids academic jargon, and her concise sections on each author or title should appeal to the popular market. Yet, I hesitate to recommend it to that readership due to a number of errors which could have easily been fact-checked in the editorial process.

I'll offer a few representative examples. First, Ordway states, "Tolkien moved back to Oxford to take up his professorship at Pembroke College" in 1926 (263). Tolkien actually began his tenure as Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon and Fellow of Pembroke College, Oxford in the autumn of 1925. He did, however, work simultaneously at Leeds during the fall term and did not move his family back to Oxford until January 1926. Second, Ordway states that Irish author Joseph O'Neill (1886-1952) wrote "five" novels of which "*Land Under England* (1935) is the only one to remain in print" (208). A quick check of online booksellers shows that a sixth novel, *The Black Shore*, published posthumously in 2000, is also in print. Although the book was written under the pseudonym of Michael Malia, the cover clearly identifies the author as O'Neill. Third, in discussing the possible influences of C.S. Lewis's space trilogy on Tolkien's work, Ordway writes, "it would not be at all surprising if his [Tolkien's] concept of the Ban of the Valar and the fall of Númenor was shaped in part by his admiration for *Perelandra*" (220). It would surprise me. Scull and

Hammond (who Ordway calls “the gold standard for factual information about Tolkien,” 30), estimate the initial composition of *The Fall of Númenor* occurred sometime in 1936-37 (*Chronology* 192-193). Lewis’s *Perelandra* was begun in 1941, for he wrote to both Sister Penelope and Arthur Greeves late that year that he had begun another novel, this time sending Elwin Ransom, his *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938) protagonist, to Venus (Lewis, *Collected Letters II*, pp. 496 & 504).

In a fourth example, Ordway mentions that Tolkien drew on Lewis Carroll’s *Sylvie and Bruno* for an illustrative quotation using the word *smirkle* as part of Tolkien’s work on the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Ordway adds in a footnote, “It is the only suggested quotation by Tolkien that has survived from his work on the OED” (Ordway 52). This claim is later repeated in a caption for an illustration from *Sylvie and Bruno* that the OED slip for the word *smirkle* in Tolkien’s hand “is the only one of his word slips that have survived” (Ordway 123). However, Peter Gilliver wrote that “apart from a single quotation for the word *smirkle*, taken from Lewis Carroll’s *Sylvie and Bruno*, no quotations in Tolkien’s handwriting for words outside the letter W have come to light” (Gilliver 175, some italics added). Presumably Ordway’s source of information is Gilliver’s 1996 article which appears in her bibliography, though she fails to take into account Gilliver’s complete statement. Also listed in her bibliography is Rachel A. Fletcher’s 2020 article presenting the recent discovery of sixty-six additional word slips appearing to bear quotations in Tolkien’s hand (Fletcher 3). Such errors as in these examples naturally raise questions about the text’s overall accuracy.

There are also unsubstantiated claims of influence between two things that merely resemble one another. A case in point is Tolkien’s and G.K. Chesterton’s use of the word “shire”: not an uncommon word in Tolkien’s England, but Ordway writes, “there is perhaps a small debt to Chesterton here” (265). Her intriguing comparison of Matthew Arnold’s “The Scholar Gipsy” with his “hat of antique shape, and cloak of grey” and Tolkien’s Gandalf is a more fleshed out argument, particularly as it is supported by additional relevant quotations from Arnold’s poem and Tolkien’s enduring affection for the William Russell Flint prints he removed from Arnold’s book and framed (Ordway 270). Yet, Ordway falls back on a simple association of two things which merely resemble one another with her identification of Arnold’s “lonely Tree against the western sky” and the Shire’s Party Tree or Sam’s Mallorn which replaces it (Ordway 271). There is some similarity between Flint’s “The Fir-Topped Hurst” and Tolkien’s “The Hill: Hobbiton-across-the-Water” (Ordway 272), but the landscape and landmarks in Tolkien’s “Hill” are more consistent with a 1936 Shell Oil advertisement of Faringdon Folly, as John Garth argues (Garth, *Worlds of Tolkien* 23).

Several of the sources in later chapters are listed quickly without mention of their possible significance for Tolkien. For example, Ordway simply writes that Tolkien provided “an introductory note” for the poetry collection by his friend, Geoffrey Bache Smith, *A Spring Harvest* (1918) (267). Tolkien actually edited Smith’s poems and got them published after Smith’s death in World War I. Further, Smith and Tolkien were Oxford undergraduates together who, according to Garth, “understood each other’s social background and maternal upbringing; they had shared a school, a university, a regiment, and a bloody page of history; they had been akin in their reverence for poetry and the imagination, and had spurred each other into creative flight” (Garth, *Great War* 250).¹ Ordway likewise mentions Tolkien’s familiarity with Tennyson’s “The Voyage of Maeldune,” reprinted in *The Irish Fairy Book* (1909), which appears on Tolkien’s bookshelves in a photograph (Ordway 267). But, she fails to note the importance of Irish voyage tales (*immrama*) on the development of Tolkien’s legendarium as discussed by scholars such as Charles Huttar, Norma Roche, and Swank (“Irish Otherworld Voyage” and “Child’s Voyage”).

Nevertheless, Ordway is laudable for her deep dive into sources. In addition to previous Tolkien scholarship in peer-reviewed journals and books, she unearthed various unpublished Tolkien drafts and letters, examined the letters of other authors who corresponded with Tolkien, read interviews with numerous people who interacted with Tolkien, and analyzed at least one old photograph containing Tolkien’s bookshelves to determine which titles he owned. Ordway’s book is further enhanced by its ancillary sections: the gallery of over 40 photos, the appendix, the index, and the extensive bibliography. Ordway’s “Appendix: A Comprehensive List of Tolkien’s Modern Reading” is my favorite ten pages of the book (pp. 295-305). Here, Ordway arranges her findings of “148 authors and more than 200 titles” in tabular format (295). Additionally, Ordway notes where each book was mentioned, i.e. in Tolkien’s non-fiction writings, his letters, interviews, or other reliable sources. This section is a boon to Tolkien researchers.

One of the book’s other strengths is Ordway’s self-imposed limit on including only those creative writings which were published in English after 1850, and that Tolkien is known to have read, owned, or mentioned. Such a tight focus is the opposite to Cilli’s attempt to document every possible Tolkien source from any time period. Thus, although Cilli, too, includes many of the same modern science fiction and fantasy authors as Ordway does (as well as some authors and titles Ordway does not include), the reader or scholar

¹ In a conference paper delivered after Ordway’s book was published, the significance of Smith’s influence on Tolkien’s development of Middle-earth is interrogated (Swank, “Poetry” 21).

particularly interested in Tolkien's contemporary influences will benefit from Ordway's more focused and meticulous criteria.

I only wish the book had been as meticulous in its fact-checking. Ordway's is a good concept, even if she is not the first to explore Tolkien's interest in contemporary novels, poems, and plays, and I would welcome a corrected edition of this book. As it stands, my recommendation is to use it only in conjunction with, and fact-checked against, other verified Tolkien reference material.

Holly Ordway is the Cardinal Francis George Fellow of Faith and Culture for the Word on Fire Institute, and also Visiting Professor of Apologetics at Houston Baptist University. Her previous works include *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination: An Integrated Approach to Defending the Faith* (Emmaus Road, 2017) and *Not God's Type: An Atheist Academic Lays Down Her Arms* (Ignatius Press, 2014). She has contributed Tolkien and Lewis scholarship to *The Story of the Cosmos: How the Heavens Declare the Glory of God*, edited by Paul Gould and Daniel Ray (Harvest House, 2019), *The Inklings and King Arthur: J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, C.S. Lewis, and Owen Barfield on the Matter of Britain*, edited by Sørina Higgins (Apocryphile Press, 2018), and *Women and C.S. Lewis*, edited by Carolyn Curtis and Mary Key (Lion Hudson, 2015).

—Kris Swank

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THE FLIGHT OF THE WILD GANDER: EXPLORATIONS IN THE MYTHOLOGICAL DIMENSION—SELECTED ESSAYS, 1944-1968 (The Collected Works of Joseph Campbell). Joseph Campbell. New World Library. 2018. 237p. 9781608685318. \$18.95.

The Flight of the Wild Gander: Explorations in the Mythological Dimension—Selected Essays, 1944-1968 is a 2018 addition to The Collected Works of Joseph Campbell series. This volume of essays begins with a history of the Grimm brothers and fairy tales, moves on to the author's ideas on the role of society to the development of mythologies, and ends with the secularization of the sacred. This book would go nicely with his *The Mythic Dimension: Selected Essays 1959-1987*, a 2017 reissue of the volume, also for The Collected Works of Joseph Campbell series. Both books develop similar themes about mythology using psychology and anthropology as a joint lens for his analysis. A word of warning to readers is that the scientific information from the psychological and anthropological literature of his time is necessarily dated because the essays were written between 1944 and 1968. This must be taken into account when evaluating Campbell's argument. Another word of warning is he is highly critical of contemporary Western religion, especially of Christianity.

In his Introduction Campbell states that "I have set forth my basic thesis—that myths are a function of nature as well as of culture, and as necessary to the balanced maturation of the human psyche as is nourishment to the body" (xi). His thesis is never far away in any of the essays in the volume. For instance, the first chapter *The Fairy Tale* provides a history of the work and significance of the Grimm brother's in collecting and publishing fairy tales. Campbell describes the scientific approach of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in accurately collecting the