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## Some Observations on the Newspaper Reports on Tolkien's Andrew Lang lecture in 1939

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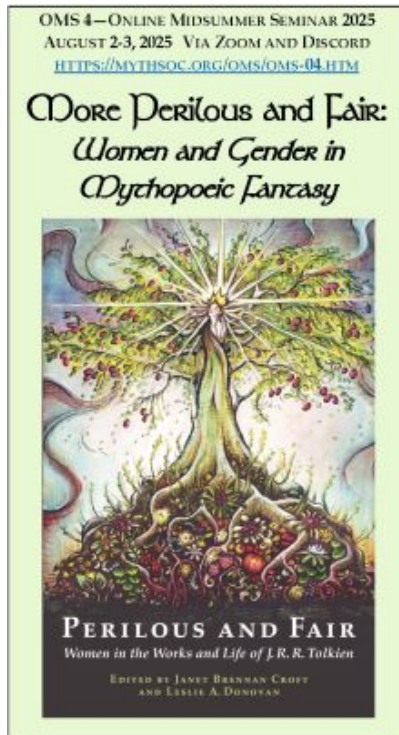
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## Some Observations on the Newspaper Reports on Tolkien's Andrew Lang lecture in 1939

### Abstract

Observations about how newspaper reports were written and filed in the late 1930s lead to a reassessment of the contents of the "On Fairy-stories" lecture and its differences from the published version.

### Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R. "On Fairy-stories"—Textual history

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## SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE NEWSPAPER REPORTS OF TOLKIEN'S ANDREW LANG LECTURE IN 1939

MATTHEW THOMPSON-HANDELL

IN THE 2008 CRITICAL EDITION OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S ESSAY "On Fairy-stories," the editors reproduce the text of two newspaper articles which reported on Tolkien's Andrew Lang lecture on 8 March 1939 at the University of St. Andrews, which formed the basis of the later essay. The two reports that are reproduced are from *The Scotsman* on 9 March and *The St. Andrews Citizen* on 11 March (*Tolkien On Fairy-stories* [OFS] 162-9). When placing these reports in the historical context of the essay, the editors state that the former "is clearly based on the much longer local reportage that would appear a few days later in *The St. Andrews Citizen*" (OFS 126). Subsequently, when introducing the texts themselves, they state that the report from *The Scotsman* (as well as one other

from *The St. Andrews Times*) is “obviously derived from the much longer account in *The Citizen*” (OFS 161).

However, given the circumstances, it is more likely that the report in *The Scotsman* was not only published first, but was written first, and thus it could not have been based on, nor derived from, the longer piece in *The St. Andrews Citizen*. Here one can note that, aside from some minor adjustments to the phrasing, the text of the former is identical to the concluding part of the latter.

It is highly likely that all of the newspaper reports of Tolkien’s lecture originate in the attendance of a single journalist, working for *The St. Andrews Citizen*.<sup>1</sup> It was a common practice for national daily newspapers (such as *The Scotsman*) to pay smaller, local weeklies for pieces contributed by their journalists—a useful source of income for these smaller operations. There is also ample reason to suppose that the journalist at *The St. Andrews Citizen* was compelled to write a shorter piece first for *The Scotsman*, appearing the very next morning (a Thursday), before writing a fuller account which would appear in his or her own paper on the Saturday. For one thing, by the time the lecture concluded (it took place in the evening) there may have been relatively little time to produce anything more than a brief account, before the deadline for *The Scotsman* going to press for the morning’s edition. Also, *The Scotsman* would often have too much material and would thus insist on a strict word limit.<sup>2</sup>

One might reasonably ask why all of this matters. If nothing else, the circumstances described above (if one is minded to accept them) at least indicate what the journalist chose to report on, initially, under pressure of time and space. What was chosen was Tolkien’s words on escape as a function of fairy-stories; and on the consolation of the happy ending. This might suggest that the journalist found these parts of the lecture the most moving, or interesting to his or her readers. On the other hand, since this appears to have been the concluding part of the lecture (going by the longer account in *The St. Andrews Citizen*), perhaps it was simply freshest in the memory. Flieger and Anderson suggest that the main thrust of the lecture was a defence of fairy-stories as a genre—from charges of escapism and the happy ending (OFS 130). The newspaper report in *The St. Andrews Citizen* could however be read without this emphasis. Much of that report was given over to what fairy-stories are; some discussion of fairies themselves; and the work of Andrew Lang, referring in particular to the tale of the Monkey’s Heart. Although the escapist function is then treated in some detail, and is introduced by reference to how dismissive of it people can

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Professor W. Hamish Fraser of the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, for his invaluable insights into the operation of Scottish newspapers at this time.

<sup>2</sup> One could also reasonably surmise that *The Scotsman* would not have sent one of its own reporters all the way from Edinburgh to St. Andrews, for an evening assignment, only to provide such limited space for the ensuing article.

be, Tolkien does not say that this attitude is anything particular to fairy-stories: “he never could understand why [it] could be used as a term of abuse *in literature*” (my emphasis, OFS 167). Regarding the consolation of the happy ending, there is not even a defence of it—on the contrary, Tolkien at this point speaks of the consolation found in “they lived happily ever after” as little more than a narrative framing device, and one which “did not deceive anyone, not even children” (OFS 169).

At this point, one can note that this particular treatment of the happy ending, as reported in the newspaper, does not appear in either Manuscript A or Manuscript B, which are reproduced in Flieger and Anderson’s edition. While the two manuscripts are of course drafts, parts of B are very close in many respects to what is reported in *The St. Andrews Citizen*. At the same time, there is an indication in Manuscript B of the four-part scheme (Fantasy, Recovery, Escape, Consolation) that would appear in the later essay (OFS 237). This presents an interesting contrast between a recognition of consolation as a central function of fairy-stories, and the view that the happy ending was simply a narrative device.

Flieger and Anderson point out that the newspaper reports are interesting in terms of revealing what was absent from the lecture, compared with the later essay. They highlight eucatastrophe as a central theme that had not yet emerged (OFS 130). One other element which is worth noting (for its absence from the reports) is the treatment of Fantasy—more specifically, the role of man as sub-creator. It is of course possible that the term and the concept was covered, but simply not recorded. This seems unlikely, however. For one thing, such a distinctive term is likely to have caught the journalist’s ear. Perhaps more significant is that Manuscript A has a reference to man as sub-creator immediately following the description of Chesterton’s “Mooreeffocish” fantasy<sup>3</sup> (OFS 192), whereas in Manuscript B this reference to sub-creation has disappeared (OFS 237).

When considering Escape in the published essay, Tolkien quotes from *Progress and Religion* by Christopher Dawson: “The rawness and ugliness of modern European life [...] is the sign of a biological inferiority, of an insufficient or false reaction to environment.” He adds in a footnote a further quote from Dawson relating to the “grim Assyrian beauty” of “the full Victorian panoply of top-hat and frock coat,” going on to say that there is nothing wrong in seeking an escape from such dress (OFS 72). Tolkien clearly used this material in his lecture (the words of Dawson are reproduced almost exactly by the journalist)

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<sup>3</sup> The reference to sub-creation in Manuscript A follows the line “what is normal and has become trite seen suddenly from a new angle” but is absent from the same place in Manuscript B.

but what is interesting is that he included more of Dawson's words than were eventually included in the essay—along with his own insertion, as follows (my emphasis):

From *Progress and Religion*:

[A] mechanical, industrial civilisation will seek to eliminate all waste movements in work, so as to make the operative the perfect complement of his machine. (Dawson 68)

From the report in *The St. Andrews Citizen*:

Mechanised industrial civilisation would seek to eliminate all waste and movement in work and so make the operative the perfect complement, or *slave*, of the machine. (OFS 168)

One can see how Tolkien contemplated the addition of “slave” since this appears in his notes in Manuscript B (OFS 239); however, what is more interesting is his decision to remove this from the published essay. Might this indicate a softening in his attitude to mechanisation?

While on the topic of this treatment of Escape, it is worth noting that the newspaper reports refer to the afore-mentioned “Victorian panoply” as representing “something essential in the idyllic culture all over the world”—it seems that the journalist failed to capture what Tolkien said here, since the phrase used by Dawson is “something essential in the 19th century culture” (Dawson 68-9).

By way of a concluding remark, it appears likely that the phrase “Perilous Realm” is not one which Tolkien had developed at the time of the lecture. In the published essay he says “most good ‘fairy-stories’ are about the *aventures* of men in the Perilous Realm or upon its shadowy marches” (OFS 32), whereas in the newspaper report of the lecture the equivalent line is “most good fairy stories were about men, women and children in the presence of the marvellous” (OFS 166).

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