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Tolkien in the Twenty-First Century: The Meaning of Middle-Earth Today by Nick Groom

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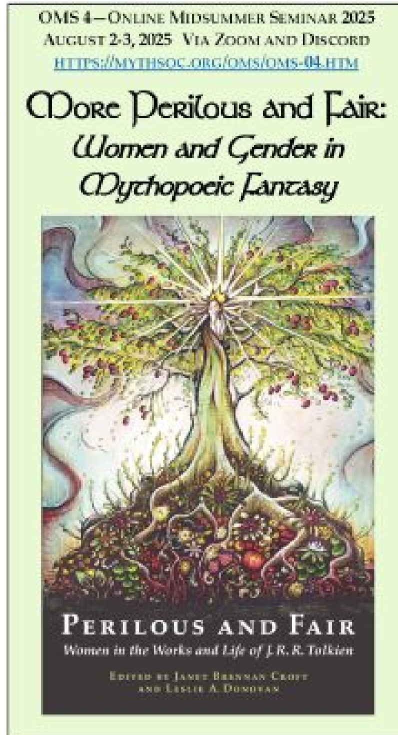

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TOLKIEN IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: THE MEANING OF MIDDLE-EARTH TODAY. Nick Groom, Pegasus, 2023. 480 p. ISBN 13 9781639365036. $32.00.

NICK GROOM'S *TOLKIEN IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: The Meaning of Middle-Earth*[1] *Today* is one of the most exciting recent publications in Tolkien scholarship. A finalist for the 2023 Tolkien Society Best Book Award, this study of Tolkien's writing is ambitious, thorough, and well worth reading. The opening to Groom's treatment of "Middle-Earth Today" announces that this "is a book unlike other books on Tolkien and his visionary creation of Middle-Earth"; it is not a straightforward introduction to Tolkien's world, Groom says, or solely an academic study, but an analysis of the Tolkien "phenomenon" that takes as its starting point the assumption that Tolkien scholarship cannot return to a purely literary Middle-earth, taken independently from the multi-media mix of art, music, radio, cinema, gaming, fandom, and popular culture that is an inescapable part now of Tolkien's world (xvii-xviii). Groom thus declares his intention to move Tolkien "away from the dusty antiquarian and highly specialized commentaries and towards more contemporary ways of understanding the extraordinary creative achievement of his work" (xx). For the most part Groom succeeds in his goal, though at nearly five hundred pages many readers who approach *Tolkien in the Twenty-First Century* may be daunted by what is, on occasion, still quite specialized commentary that will be more appealing to academics with an interest in Tolkien scholarship than casual fans and viewers of Peter Jackson's films or the Amazon TV series, in spite of Groom's stated intention to appeal to a broad audience.

Groom's first chapter, "Myriad Middle-Earths," offers an evocative take on the many shifting names and identities of Tolkien's characters; just as there are many Tolkiens, Groom says, there are many Frodos, Aragorns, and Gandalfs. And indeed, Gandalf "has so many names he even forgets the very name of Gandalf at one point: he is Olórin, Mithrandir, the Grey Wanderer, the Grey Pilgrim (and the Grey Fool to the sardonic Denethor), Tharkûn, Incánus, Greyhame, Stormcrow, Láthspell, and eventually the White Rider" (3). Rather than seeing this lack of linguistic stability as a feature of Tolkien's indebtedness to ancient mythtelling, as most critics would, Groom views it in light of a kind of modernist-inflected pluralism, in which Tolkien's characters are not stable selves but individuals who are constantly re-fashioning themselves and who undergo reinvention under the influence of external forces.

[1] Groom insists on *Middle-Earth* in spite of standard usage in the field and Tolkien's own preference (xv); I will retain his spelling in direct quotes from his book. –Ed.

This reading of Tolkien's legendarium as a kind of modernist text that can be seen alongside James Joyce's writing is expanded on in Groom's second chapter, titled "Uncertainty." Here, he emphasizes the unsteady textual state of nearly all of Tolkien's works and their resulting "unstable morality": in terms of the former, Groom does a good job showing how for Tolkien, both his published and unpublished writing was so defined by processes of transmission and change that "few of his texts exist in a single definitive version: they are defined by flux (44). However, as to the second claim here—that this recurrent flux also undermines the moral certainties of his books—the evidence Groom assembles to support this claim of moral ambiguity is less convincing. Groom goes to great lengths to argue that Middle-earth is an "insistently secular world, in which morality is vague and, at best, contingent: characters repeatedly mislead, deceive, lie, cheat, and steal. Hobbits are famously gluttonous, Elves and Dwarves are materialistic, Hobbits and Dwarves are lazy, Humans are wrathful and proud—most of the deadly sins are evident" (45). This reading of Tolkien's texts seems to assume that because the narrator does not intrude more clearly to morally censor characters' actions, the text itself is immoral. Groom argues that Bilbo "lies and steals with impunity" (45) and bends rules to suit himself, making him "one of the most amoral leading characters in children's literature" (66). This is one of the places in the book where Groom overstates his argument: while Bilbo *is* certainly flawed *in some respects*, his "burglary" is largely played for laughs. Like Huck Finn, Bilbo is treated very gently by the avuncular narrator of *The Hobbit*, and it's clear to most readers that while Bilbo, as the hero of the tale, is on a moral journey in the novel this journey is not framed in terms of puritan morality but as a dialectic between his Tookish nature and his inner Baggins: if the narrator does judge Bilbo, the vice he is most judged for is arguably his temptation to sloth. The spiritual danger for Bilbo is always that he might turn deeper into his Baggins side, and prioritize his own comfort higher than his social responsibility to his neighbor. In Tolkien's theological framing, which echoes Augustine's *ordo amoris* more than it evokes an ethical legalism, Bilbo's small lies and thefts are not nearly as morally serious as his inner desires, which reveal the status of his heart.

Bilbo clearly embodies virtues like courage, kindness, and mercy—these are the virtues that are upheld in Tolkien's moral universe, over vices like greed, cruelty, and vengeance which are nearly always embodied by the less noble characters. Groom, however, concludes his examination of *The Hobbit* by stating again that because the novel is a discordant text, it is also one that resists order and consequently offers no coherent ethical vision: it is a mash-up of disparate elements and there are no anchors among the chaos, "no reliable narrator, no moral certainty, no God" (79). Many readers will appreciate a reading of Tolkien that reassesses his literary contribution in a way that doesn't

reduce his books to a simplistic good-versus-evil moralism, so Groom gives a welcome corrective to some of these reductive critiques that see the legendarium in terms of simple black and white binaries. However, Groom sometimes pushes this too far: while he does well to show that good and evil sometimes waver and vacillate in Tolkien's imagination, it's again overstating the point to conclude that "in *The Hobbit*, they happily swap sides" (81). While good and evil are not simplistic in Tolkien's works, they are clear categories and the heroic vision of the legendarium is unambiguously on the side of virtue, not vice.

One of the most interesting aspects of *Tolkien in the Twenty First Century* is Groom's assessment of Tolkien as a writer of what he describes as experimental fiction. Tolkien does have modernist tendencies, particularly in his treatment of time and space: the strength of chapters four and five is Groom's argument that, as a writer primarily of the 1930s, it is appropriate to place *The Lord of the Rings* alongside Modernist works such as Virginia Woolf 's *The Waves* (1931), T.S. Eliot's poems, Samuel Beckett's *Murphy* (1938), and James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939), a novel that Tolkien read and seems to have resonated with, though he felt it did not go far enough with its linguistic gymnastics—Groom concludes that Tolkien's invented Elvish languages might be taken as a Modernist feat *par excellence* (107). As Holly Ordway has shown in *Tolkien's Modern Reading: Middle-earth Beyond the Middle Ages* (2021), Tolkien was a much more engaged participant in literary culture than scholars (often taking their cue from Humphrey Carpenter) have generally acknowledged. Groom adds to this important conversation, reading *The Lord of the Rings* in particular as an "open text" that can be categorized as metafiction: from the paratext to the appendixes, to the endless revisions and ever-expanding legendarium, Tolkien's world contains stories about stories, it plays with form, teems with unreliable narrators and multiple perspectives, offers fragmented texts, and persistently draws readers' attention to the fictive nature of the narrative.

As an "open text," *The Lord of the Rings* can also be treated in terms of its adaptations, and in his final chapters Groom also engages with these, considering radio adaptations, films, and music. He includes a fascinating overview of the rock counterculture in England, explaining that a centre of the London underground music scene was a club named Middle Earth, located at 43 King Street in Covent Garden (191). Groups like Pink Floyd performed at Middle Earth, and various bands, from Black Sabbath to Rush, wrote songs featuring references to elves and characters from Tolkien's writing (192). In Led Zeppelin's song "Ramble On" from their second album, one verse—somewhat bafflingly—features Robert Plant singing about being "cuckolded by Gollum in Morder" (194). These references to Tolkien's world continue on in Led Zeppelin's later work too, in songs like "Misty Mountain Hop" and "The Battle of Evermore," which features a battle between Elves and Ringwraiths. Groom

argues that this engagement with Tolkien's text culminates in their great hit "Stairway to Heaven," which he reads as "a song of Middle-Earth" (194). There is a lot here, in Groom's brief but absorbing overview of musical "adaptations" of some of the themes of Middle-earth, and this section will no doubt provide material for future scholarly work in this under-explored area.

Chapter five also includes a discussion of the various radio dramas that have adapted *The Lord of the Rings*, and a long summary of Boorman and Pallenberg's script of their live-action adaptation, which was never filmed; somewhat bravely, given the nearly universal dismay this film's proposed script has been met with by fans, Groom defends the imaginative depth of their treatment of Tolkien's text. Most of note here is that Groom argues "the aborted Boorman-Pallenberg script was a source on which Peter Jackson could—and surely did—build" (210). Groom then moves on to an analysis of Ralph Bakshi's *The Lord of the Rings* (1978), an animated (unfinished) version of the text for which Groom celebrates the voice work and script writing, though not the frequently poor visualization. Here too Groom sees Peter Jackson as being indebted to a previous film script: "Jackson's *Rings* can be seen not only as an homage to but almost a remake of Bakshi's *Lord of the Rings*" (217). In 1980, the Rankin-Bass animated television film was released under the title of *The Return of the King*. The major adaptation of Tolkien's story into film did not happen, of course, until Peter Jackson's release of *The Fellowship of the Ring* in 2001. While much of Groom's overview here will be familiar to Tolkien enthusiasts, he again does an excellent job emphasizing the contingent, experimental, and sometimes uneven qualities of Jackson's films—or a "chaos of abandoned creativity" that was only gradually, in the editing process, "harnessed into order" (243)—the same quality that Groom sees as defining Tolkien's narrative.

The sixth chapter moves from adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* to begin with an analysis of Jackson's three *Hobbit* films. Groom focuses on the compilation of sources that went into the script: information in the *Lord of the Rings* appendixes from "Durin's Folk" and "The Tale of Years," material from "The Quest of Erebor" (eventually published in *Unfinished Tales*), and scattered references throughout *The Lord of the Rings* itself, all of which were stitched together to make a tale that certainly grew in the telling. He notes that Jackson "had an almost wilful yet Tolkienesque instinct to explore, experiment, and extemporize the story as it was being told," even admitting to a reporter that "Some of the stuff you've seen today […] we're literally making it up as we go along" (255-256). Groom finds the first two *Hobbit* films (a road movie and a political film, respectively) to be "bold, cheeky, and playful—a spirited retelling" (256), and the third film (a war movie) to be psychologically dark with a grim realism to the battle scenes. While Groom is perhaps too kind to *The Battle of the Five Armies*, he is right to conclude that Jackson was able to tie the narrative

of *The Hobbit* together with *The Lord of the Rings* in a way that Tolkien himself was never able to. And indeed, the films "luxuriate in preposterously excessive spectacle" (261), something that is carried into some of the gaming culture that has emerged in Tolkien fandoms, as well as the merchandising coming out of Middle-earth Enterprises. Groom quotes critic Marek Oziewicz: "Jackson's films now overshadow the books 'whether or not one is familiar with the novel', and will 'inevitably overshadow one's past and future encounters with the literary texts'" (268). Groom takes this seriously, and while this discussion of the Tolkien adaptations sits somewhat uneasily alongside the more specialized and scholarly analyses of the literary texts, these chapters are likely to have a particular appeal to fans of the film and television treatments of Middle-earth, especially those who are unfamiliar with the history that led to the making of the Jackson films.

Given the increasing interest in Tolkien's writing from ecocriticism and the environmental humanities, Groom also offers a worthwhile discussion of the representation of the physical environment in *The Lord of the Rings*. Because Tolkien's love for trees, in particular, is so well-known, Groom rightly states that his environmental vision can often be treated simplistically. For instance, woods in *The Lord of the Rings* can be not just sentient, but sinister: there is a dark ecology to Tolkien's worlds, and as Verlyn Flieger has argued, Tolkien's attitude towards trees is both complicated and contradictory; we get the suggestion, in the portrayal of Fangorn Forest, Mirkwood, the Old Forest, Old Man Willow, and the Huorns, to name the most troubling examples, that the wildness of nature cannot coexist with cultivated or domesticated nature (287). Groom describes Jackson's evocation of Mirkwood in the *Hobbit* films, in a memorable phrase, as a "dendrophobic nightmare" that is anything but benevolent (288). Forests that are "dark and strange" in this way abound in Middle-earth, reminding us, Groom says, that as more and more contemporary environmentalists argue, we must recognize that parts of nature are wild and other, and cannot be understood in our own human terms (289). Groom transitions here to his culminating point: unlike the way he is so often imagined (particularly in his perceived fondness for pre-industrial rural England), Tolkien today is not defined by nostalgia, "but is now very much for the twenty-first century" (293). Middle-earth has gone global: for many Tolkien fans the Shire is no longer in the English countryside, he reminds us, but in New Zealand.

In Chapter Seven, textual contradictions and obscurities are again discussed; *The Silmarillion* is a "broken text" (304), one that Groom points out Christopher Tolkien regretted publishing. He notes the pervasive imagery of failure and brokenness in the story; for instance, Aragorn carries a broken sword, and the tree of Gondor is dead. Groom perhaps overemphasizes the weight of these "failures" in the narrative. There is no doubt that Tolkien was

drawn to evocations of diminishment and decline; all of the Inklings were Golden Age thinkers, who saw humanity as having once lived in a garden in Eden, or a kingdom in Atlantis or the Hesperides, but who lost that world and now dream of its recovery—what Northrop Frye would call the dominant archetype in all Western literature, because it is the literary imagination that tries to lead us back to it (*Educated Imagination* 53). Groom does not seem to consider that Tolkien's representations of decline often carry within themselves their own redemption: by attending so carefully and deliberately to moments of failure and brokenness, Tolkien invests them with significance. The storyteller can make these moments mean something, and the effect of *The Lord of the Rings* on countless readers suggests that he succeeds in this attempt. In this sense Tolkien's text functions like the hobbit's Mathom-house; by gathering together broken and lost objects, stories, fragments and characters he thereby re-enlivens them, restoring to them meaning and intentionality. Some of these fragments include dreams of his own, which as many biographers and critics have noted Tolkien gives to his characters, making the story once again feel metafictional. Groom lists all the many instances in *The Lord of the Rings* when characters dream, commenting that when they are written out, the sheer amount of dreaming is remarkable. Groom argues that the presence of these dreams results in an atmosphere of unreality and insecurity; however, it is just as likely that the many moments of dreaming in the text in fact stabilize the narrative, which is consistent with the high view of his own dream life that Tolkien had. For instance, when Frodo dreams of Gandalf atop Orthanc, the implication is that Frodo is being gifted a true vision: Middle-earth is not the abode of philosophical materialists, but of sentient beings who share in an ecology more akin to panpsychist conceptions of reality. Dreaming in the text is one way for Tolkien to suggest the presence of the Valar—Irmo, or Lórien after the place in which he dwelt, gives to the Elves dreams and visions to guide them. Frodo has intuitions and a kind of sensitivity that associates him with Elven life, so it makes sense that he is receptive to the guidance of these higher powers. Groom insists that *The Lord of the Rings* is a secular text, but if it is indeed an "open text," contiguous with Tolkien's other writings of Middle-earth, there is clearly a kind of transcendence or divine agency at work in Middle-earth.

While the presence of the divine is not often apparent in the final published text of *The Lord of the Rings*, it is everywhere assumed in the background, and more than hinted at when Frodo and Sam's journey to Mount Doom culminates in their encounter with Gollum and the final failure of Frodo to destroy the ring, a failure that is only redeemed by Bilbo's long-ago act of pity, a moment of moral weight that resonates far into the future. Groom writes that by the end of *The Return of the King*, not only has Frodo failed to destroy the Ring himself, but Frodo cannot complete his tale or construct an identity and, in

passing it to Sam, "the story fails" (312). While Frodo is the primary chronicler of the story, though, he is not the narrator, which may lead readers to wonder whether Groom's conclusion is accurate: Frodo's part in the story is over, but Tolkien seems to want to underscore that the narrative spell he is weaving is still happening: we are under his enchantment until the final words. We have been so conditioned over the last few hundred years, since the emergence of the novel form, to have certain expectations about narrative that are foreign to the pre-modern world. Groom's analysis of *The Lord of the Rings* might be fair, if *The Lord of The Rings* is indeed a novel. But while Tolkien did borrow elements of the novel form, he also seems to have felt that "novel" was not a wholly satisfactory genre for his story. Readers, too, sense this, leading some to prefer tale, or romance, or epic, or as some critics would have it, a work of mythopoeia.

Groom ends by thinking about the COVID pandemic, and about the uncanny world of the twenty-first century; like the hobbits' journey through the Old Forest, our own journey through this uncanny world can also be navigated through song, through the creative imagination that remains our best resource (336). In the Afterword, Groom addresses the recent Amazon TV series that seeks to tell a new and certainly creative version of the Second Age of Middle-earth, and states that "the critical reception eventually proved overwhelmingly positive" of the first two episodes (338). While Groom's optimistic prediction of continued success is likely to be seen now, by many fans, as unmerited, it is certainly true that Middle-earth shows no signs of diminishing anytime soon. As the world Tolkien imagined into being continues to grow, Groom's book will be a valuable resource for scholars, readers, and lovers of *The Lord of the Rings*, with much in it to help guide our journey to Middle-earth and back again.

—Laura N. Van Dyke

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