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Representing Middle-Earth: Tolkien, Form, and Ideology, by Robert T. Tally, Jr

Norbert Schürer
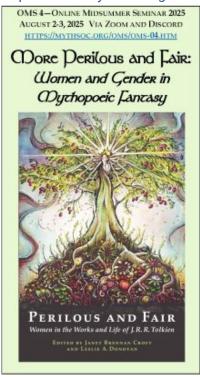*California State University, Long Beach*

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technology, engineering, and math (moving the acronym from STEM to STEAM) in order to create what she calls "disciplinary symbiosis" via a "a truly *trans*disciplinary mindset—to move beyond merely shaking hands across the boundaries towards a more holistic approach" (253-54). Considering the careful way she has dismantled the use of science for evil purposes throughout the book, her statement "Evil, like science, may be difficult to precisely define in the 21st century, but we should know it when we see it" captures very well what she set out to do in this ultimately rewarding work.

—Amber Lehning

The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings. Directed by Adam Badowski, CD Projekt Red, 2011. Microsoft Windows game.
The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt. Directed by Konrad Tomaszkiewicz, Mateusz Kanik, and Sebastian Stępień, CD Projekt Red, 2015. Microsoft Windows game.

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REPRESENTING MIDDLE-EARTH: TOLKIEN, FORM, AND IDEOLOGY. Robert T. Tally, Jr. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2024. viii + 190 p. ISBN 9780786470372. $39.95.

IN RECENT YEARS, TOLKIEN CRITICISM HAS TAKEN a bit of a theoretical turn, usually employing popular critical theory of the day. Most of the scholars in Janet Brennan Croft and Leslie Donovan's *Perilous and Fair* (2015) took feminist approaches, and Robin Anne Reid even offered an excellent "Feminist Bibliographical Essay" in that volume. The gender studies approach was extended into queer theory, with Yvette Kisor presenting a bibliographical essay on that topic in 2017. One of the earliest ecocritical studies was Matthew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans's *Ents, Elves, and Eriador* (2011), and one of the more recent contributions from that perspective was *Representations of Nature in Middle-Earth*, edited by Martin Simonson (2015). Dimitra Fimi used a critical race studies approach *avant le lettre* in her *Tolkien, Race, and Cultural History* (2008), while Robert Stuart used that theory more explicitly in *Tolkien, Race, and Racism in Middle-Earth* (2022).

To these theoretically informed discussions, Robert Tally now adds his *Representing Middle-Earth*, which uses a Marxist approach to interpret Tolkien's

legendarium. In contrast to feminism, gender studies, ecocriticism, or critical race theory, Marxism is not particularly popular in the academy today, so Tally faces an up-hill battle. In the end, however, his contribution is interesting and important for all readers and scholars of Tolkien and mythopoeic literature. I hasten to add that Tally does not employ what is often called 'vulgar Marxism,' which finds a representation of class conflict—particularly over means of production—in a work of literature and evaluates literature according to how much it supports the working class in that scenario. Instead, Tally uses much more sophisticated theories from Mikhail Bakhtin, Bertolt Brecht, Georg Lukács, and especially the recently deceased Fredric Jameson. These scholars examine how ideology expresses itself in form, e.g., how History is incarnated in literary works. To perform his Marxist interpretation, Tally investigates Tolkien's *legendarium* from three angles: He revisits critical assessments of various characters and races; compares Tolkien's books to Peter Jackson's movie versions of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*; and explores the intrusion of History into the political unconscious of the *legendarium*. (This is not the progression of the chapters in the book, but the argument makes more sense to me in this order.)

Tally is perhaps best known for his revisionist readings (he rightly rejects the phrase 'against the grain'): His article "Let Us Now Praise Famous Orcs" from *Mythlore* (2010), now with over 2,600 downloads, forms a chapter in *Representing Middle-Earth*. In this chapter, Tally demonstrates how Tolkien somewhat inadvertently portrays Orcs as more human than other races. For instance, Orcs are not a uniform race, but have varying cultures and languages; they take members of other races captive rather than simply executing them (as Elves and Men do to Orcs); and their values such as loyalty and a desire for life without anxiety are really not that different from those of other races. Tally doesn't go quite as far as calling Tolkien racist, but he does point out that Tolkien himself struggled with the question of whether we should see Orcs as victims of their creation and socialization, or as inherently and irredeemably evil. This argument sometimes seems like a preview since Tally repeatedly mentions that he will publish a book tentatively titled *Tolkien's Orcs: A Critical Reassessment* in 2025.

In the same vein, Tally offers revisionary interpretations of Sauron, Galadriel, and Saruman in "The Politics of Character: The Dark Lord, the Witch-Queen, and the White Wizard." Sauron starts the Second Age repenting for his actions in the First and wanting to help Middle-Earth back to rule and order as a popular leader and healer; he only becomes 'evil' when his authoritarian impulses prevail. Inversely, Galadriel begins wanting to dominate others by embracing imperialism, and even in *The Lord of the Rings* she does not hesitate to violate the Fellowship telepathically. She redeems herself by resisting the

temptation of the One Ring and by accepting her own decline. Saruman for his part (in the book more than the films) starts with wisdom and good intentions and even achieves some good. He only fails when he cannot let go of his desire for power, the ultimate evil in Tolkien. (These interpretations are particularly interesting considering the portrayals of these two characters in Amazon's *The Rings of Power*.) Tally doesn't entirely endorse his own interpretations, but offers them as part of a larger (and very welcome) argument that it is too simplistic to dismiss the moral map of the *legendarium* as no more than a binary of good and evil. Indeed, these chapters in *Representing Middle-Earth* make excellent contributions to the interpretation of the *legendarium* by drawing our attention to the moral ambiguity in various characters and races we tend to view only as good or evil. They are Marxist in that they question what seem to be self-evident racial, social, political, and moral hierarchies.

Similar hierarchies are explored in two further chapters (plus some notes on Saruman), where Tally takes on a comparison of Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* and Peter Jackson's two movie trilogies. First, in "Three Rings for the Elven Kings: Trilogizing Tolkien in Print and Film," he contrasts the book and film versions of *The Lord of the Rings*. While Tolkien's text was conceived as one novel (or romance) and suffered from the division into three volumes and six books, Jackson's films were envisioned as a trilogy from the start, which meant that each part had to be intelligible on its own while there also had to be an overarching story. In contrast, the *Hobbit* movies were turned into a trilogy *after* their conception, which explains why they have bad pacing, an overly extensive exposition, and flimsy content, and why they seem more like fan fiction.

In "The Geopolitical Aesthetic of Middle-Earth: Space, Cinema and the World System in *The Lord of the Rings*," Tally starts by elaborating on the significance of maps and cartography in Tolkien's main novel—ground also covered by Tom Shippey. This cartography "produces a cognizable otherworld in its seeming totality as a means of making sense of the fragmentary, uneven, and largely unrepresentable world system of the early-to-mid-twentieth century" (84)—again, a claim building on Shippey's idea of Tolkien as an author of his century. At the same time, the pedestrian itineraries resist surveillance and totalization and suggest that perfect social organization is unattainable. Once more, this is Marxist in resisting hegemonic discourse. In contrast, the films use space for spectacle, e.g., the strange device of Sauron's Eye. With various scopic features—such as views from fortresses and watchtowers, various watchers, birds, Galadriel's mirror, and the *palantíri*—and an overarching conspiracy of the One Ring (which even gets its own voice), the films project a simplistic, static, and stable vision that excludes the possibility of political and cultural change. These are certainly sophisticated, theoretically informed, and insightful

interpretations, but I am not sure to what extent they help us understand Tolkien better, or just Jackson.

But Tally's greatest contribution to Tolkien studies is clearly bringing sophisticated Marxist theory to bear on the *legendarium*. At the most abstract level, this means uncovering a political unconscious in Tolkien (through what Fredric Jameson calls 'cognitive mapping' and Tally names 'literary cartography'), offering revisionist readings from below (including the previous described re-readings of major characters), and investigating the intersection between myth and history. With this approach, Tally might ruffle feathers on the left (who will claim that Tolkien is an unrepentant reactionary) and on the right (who will complain that Tolkien explicitly declared himself *not* a Marxist). In contrast to both, Tally demonstrates that Tolkien was very much engaged with modernity.

As Tally argues in his chapter "'Almost It Seemed That the Words Took Shape': Narrative, History, and the Desire Called Marx," *The Lord of the Rings* puts the creation of History front and center, i.e., many characters situate themselves in and against longer mythical and political narratives. For Tally, "Tolkien's project ultimately coincides with certain aims of Marxist criticism, inasmuch as the goal is to disclose the operations of history itself, which in turn is prerequisite to a certain conception of class consciousness" (28). This can be seen, for instance, in Sam's reflections on history, Frodo's experience in the Hall of Fire at Rivendell, and various tales told along the journeys in *The Lord of the Rings*, not to mention the prologue and appendices.

In the following chapter, "Formulae of Power: Generic Discontinuities in the Saga of the Jewels and the Rings," Tally examines how Tolkien employs various literary genres. He argues that "Tolkien's writings establish a hybrid form that can function as a palimpsest, whereby differing layers of mythic, epic, romantic, realist, and modernist forms coexist and infuse one another" (41). In Tally's analysis, each genre employs certain rules and conventions as formulae of power to impose a certain interpretation on the world. The most interesting genre is the modern epic, which uses an ancient formula to give structure and meaning to the contemporary world. (Tally might have expanded his explanations of other genres.) In a particularly interesting observation, Tally notes that *The Silmarillion* imposes a unity and coherence on the *legendarium*, while *The History of Middle Earth* maintains an incompleteness and incoherence. Reprising his The Hobbit*: Realizing History through Fantasy* (2022), Tally shows that *The Hobbit* is a historical novel in that it documents the intrusion of History into a mythical world. In all of Tolkien's works, various distancing mechanisms (such as the device of the Red Book of Westmarch) highlight the artificiality of the *legendarium*, but also give it depth and breadth—and make it historical.

Overall, *Representing Middle-Earth* sometimes suffers from the fact that it is mostly comprised of previously published material: very similar arguments, often based on the very same quotations, crop up in different chapters. On the other hand, that makes *Representing Middle-Earth* very user-friendly since it allows dipping in and out of the book without missing too much framing and context. In my assessment, the chapters where Tally most explicitly discusses and applies Marxist theory to Tolkien's *legendarium* are particularly brilliant and insightful. I'm not sure Tally even wants to convert readers to his interpretations, but he certainly wants to encourage us to question our implicit assumptions about *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*, and in that he definitely succeeds. We may or may not end up Marxist readers of Tolkien ourselves, but we definitely gain a new and different understanding of Tolkien's work, which to me is a sign that *Representing Middle-earth* is an excellent work of scholarship.

—Norbert Schürer

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NORBERT SCHÜRER is a professor in the English department at California State University, Long Beach. He has presented papers on J.R.R. Tolkien at various conferences and has published "The Shape of Water in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*" in *Mythlore* (2021) and "Second Age, Middle Age" in the *Journal of Tolkien Research* (2023). He is currently working on an essay on covers of *The Fellowship of the Rings*, *The Two Towers*, and *The Return of the King* between 1965 and 2007.