

Review of ‘The Rings of Power’ Second Series (Amazon Prime Video)

Patrick Curry and Alf Seegert

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In an earlier issue of *Endòre*, one of us (Curry) reviewed the first season of the Amazon-TV series *The Rings of Power*. The much-anticipated second season, in eight episodes, premiered in August 2024. It continues with a prequel to *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* set in the Second Age, a very lengthy period – radically compressed in the series – whose details were barely sketched, in print, by Tolkien. Beyond trying (with uneven success) to accommodate the parameters of Tolkien’s *legendarium*, this fact has left the series’ writers a great deal of latitude which they have not failed to exploit.

The main strands of the series are as follows (in no particular order), with our comments, followed by a review of its overall problems.

Númenor and the Númenoreans

One strand of the story concerns Númenor during the ascendancy of Ar-Pharazôn, and the rightful Queen, Miriel, whose throne he usurped; and the Faithful, led by Elendil and his sons, who were obliged to flee and ended up in Middle-earth. This telling is arguably adequate, but it feels underdeveloped or rushed.

The High Elves, especially Galadriel and Celebrimbor

Elrond’s and Gil-Galad’s roles are circumscribed, and Círdan makes only a brief appearance, though happily with a rare if not unique display of an Elvish beard – while it lasts before he shaves it, anyway. The *TROP*’s Galadriel, played by Morfydd Clark, has had a hard act to follow in Cate Blanchett from *TLOT*’s films, but we feel she has succeeded in making the role her own with a fine show of sulky but stubborn resistance to evil. Her portrayal has apparently been criticized as angry, or at least petulant, but this take doesn’t hold water. Galadriel in *TROP* is youthful (as Elves go), and the wisdom of Galadriel at the end of the Third Age is mature and hard-won from long experience. Equally unfair is bemoaning her susceptibility to negative emotions (revenge, say) or lust (for Halbrand). Who isn’t when young? Or were such critics always perfect beings? In any case, Tolkien himself noted that “the Elves are not wholly good or in the right”.

Celebrimbor – played convincingly by veteran Shakespearean actor Charles Edwards – is one of the most fully and sympathetically imagined characters in the series. Again, most of the Elves in this series rather belie their reputation for wisdom, but Celebrimbor’s susceptibility to Sauron’s lies is not difficult to understand. His creative passion for ring-making, doubtless connected with being the heir of Fëanor, took him out of the sphere of enchantment and into that of magic – a distinction the importance of which Tolkien emphasized in all his work. Celebrimbor’s passion was therefore vulnerable to skilful exploitation by Sauron, the master magician. His death, including late realisation of what has happened and final defiance of Sauron, is genuinely moving.

Sauron

The role of Sauron – initially (in the series) Halbrand, then Annatar – is handled very well and skilfully portrayed by Charlie Vickers, without heavy-handedness or melodrama. This being a time before his temporary defeat by the Last Alliance of Men and Elves, when Sauron could still assume a fair human appearance, he is, so to say, the ultimate plausible rogue. And fairness notwithstanding, he emanates menace and hidden power. There is also a slight but satisfying developmental arc which raises tantalizing hints of the possibility of redemption – a road ultimately not taken, of course.

Adar and the Orcs

Adar, a fallen Elf who has become ‘Father’ to the Orcs, is a completely fabricated addition to the story. His character is complex and interesting, although in the end (his end), his mission, essentially to protect his charges, fails; but such things do happen.

How the series presents the Orcs is fascinating and instructive. It does so in a way that is completely unlike Tolkien’s own. For him, the status of the Orcs was a dilemma he arguably never managed to resolve: were they inherently evil, and therefore unredeemable, or were they only corrupt, fallen, and therefore, in principle, at least, amenable to salvation? Of course, this is a theological question and Tolkien was decidedly writing a story, not a tract; but it remained a problem for him.

The way the series’ writers have tried to resolve the issue – as well as how they, together with some of the actors, justify their revisionism – is to present the Orcs as an oppressed subaltern race with orcish rights. The problem that results is not just the implausibility of post-colonialism, rebranded as woke, in Middle-earth. Everyone making the show may get to feel good about themselves, but what has been sacrificed along the way is what makes the story this particular story and no other, embodying Tolkien’s own vision and values. These are a mixture of Christian, pagan and humanist, but in any case they are definitely non-modern. And when the story stands for something, it no longer stands for its unique self, to be loved (when it is) for its own sake. It now depends on something else imported into it: in this case, the ideal racial and sex/gender equality. But however admirable that message, real art such as Tolkien’s tale doesn’t “represent” anything whatsoever. Rather it *presents*; and what it presents, if allowed to, is itself.

Gandalf, Saruman, and Hobbits

Gandalf – as he gradually learns he is – is a very sympathetic character here, and not as irascible as he later became, it seems. The idea that Gandalf crash-landed in Middle-earth in the Second Age in almost complete ignorance of his identity and mission is curious, to say the least. But his acquisition of that knowledge, with the help of two Harfoots – and thus a nod to his continuing involvement with hobbits – and an implausible appearance of Tom Bombadil (on which more later), is intriguing. However, it is also ultimately silly. Also more absurd than offensive is the appearance of a comic-book Istari villain, ‘the Dark Wizard’ (Saruman? One of the two Blue Wizards?), already corrupt millennia before the Third Age. It is surprising this sort of meddling with the basic story-line was permitted. But more on this below.

Khazad-dûm and the Dwarves

Here we find a radical improvement from Jackson films. The Dwarves are treated as a masterful, dignified and considerable people, with their own unique abilities and issues,

including the complex relationship between them and the Elves. The charm of the relationship between Durin IV and Elrond is missing now, however, and the story's Dwarves are now at their best in Sophia Nomvete's Disa, Durin's wife, who is both powerful and charismatic. Her resonant singing to the mountain is a rare instance in which *TRoP* builds on the lore of Tolkien in a way that still feels Tolkienian.

We now turn to the main weaknesses of *Rings of Power*, Season 2, as we see it.

Unwieldy Narrative Structure

The show bites off much more than it can chew. Eight episodes just aren't enough to explore its many plotlines, which makes many characters – even Galadriel this time – or regions – especially Númenor – feel underdeveloped. Arondir and Isildur were especially thin and felt tokenized. The same goes for the duo of Harfoots, Poppy and Nori, who were both appealing and essential to the logic of Season One. This time they have almost nothing to do, and it shows. In fairness, the streaming medium itself makes for an unwieldy partner with fantasy, science fiction, and other big-budget genres – and *TRoP* is the most expensive television production yet made. Because of the extreme demands involved in making each episode, the total number of episodes is in turn reduced substantially – it's half of the 2018 season-length average of sixteen episodes per season of television – sacrificing character development in favor of spectacle.

Misplaced Fan-Service

Episode Two was particularly weak and feels like a series of poorly conceived fan-service episodes. We first get a misplaced or displaced Bombadil, admirably and vivaciously portrayed by Rory Kinnear, but oddly “activist” in feel. This depiction is not just a geographic departure from the book's Bombadil but undermines his essential function as someone not subject to the logic of power. We get a recapitulation of the absorption of the hobbits by Old Man Willow, only it's Old Man Ironwood devouring proto-Gandalf this time. But here it's the differences which matter: in *TLoTR*, Bombadil seemingly just happens on the entrapped younger hobbits and rescues them. In *TRoP*, Bombadil saves the Stranger after having just blown the Stranger's map onto a branch of that very tree. Old Man Ironwood becomes part of a series of tests initiated by Bombadil who has become, in effect, Yoda.

The episode's worst moment, however, is in its absurd depiction of the Barrow-Downs: no grassy downs to speak of, but trees everywhere, and no sense of deep lore about who has possessed those graves in the first place. Barrow-wights are the Witch-King's invading spirit-minions dating from a literal Age later, not the spirits of those actually buried in the barrows. (We, or the showrunners, should keep in mind that there is no Witch-King yet, for no human has yet claimed one of the Great Rings for himself.) Lore aside, all we get at the Barrow-Downs is a frenzied video-game fighting sequence, a Christopher Tolkien fever-dream. One of us (Seegert), teaches video game narratives and even he couldn't bear it.

The general feeling, in this episode and others, is that thus-far unadapted passages from Tolkien's *TLoTR* are being deployed by the showrunners in order for them to get their (substantial) money's worth in purchasing rights to the book. The effect is a sequence of gratuitous occasions for generating in-group nods from lore-savvy viewers rather than representing Middle-earth as it really might have been in the Second Age. This is an odd value to have in a series which fundamentally departs from Tolkien's lore in so many other ways, and leads one to question who this series is really for.

Too Much In-filling of Lore

The season got somewhat better after Episode 2. Its main problem is that, like so many other prequels, it fills in too many of the gaps present in the original. Instead of leaving mysteries to our imagination, it spells them out. Tolkien advised precisely against such an approach in his letters, in particular about why he tried not to say too much about who Tom Bombadil might be.

Tolkien's critiques of performed drama are all the more felt here, for instead of suggestion, we are directly shown or told how and why, say, the world of the Elves in Middle-earth is fading. Where the *Star Wars* prequels invoked *midichlorians* to transform the Force into a quantifiable biological property, *mithril* in Middle-earth becomes a technological property of Khazad-Dum. Celebrimbor needs mithril in the same way Oppenheimer at Los Alamos needed uranium for the Manhattan Project. He becomes as much a technician as lore master, and the Elves become associated inextricably not with enchantment (the domain of wonder) but magic (sheer will). The ensuing squabblings for power feel more like George R.R. Martin-lite than Tolkien.

This leads us to a related concern...

Nostalgia-Baiting

Rings of Power not only spells out too much, but takes too much in. Its dependence on Jackson's films was already palpable in S1's sets, costumes, and cinematography. And not only that – lines which sounded like callbacks to Tolkien such as the Stranger's utterance "When in doubt, Elanor Brandyfoot, always follow your nose" at the end of S1 are in fact direct callbacks to Jackson's films: "If in doubt, Meriadoc, always follow your nose." This line, spoken by Gandalf in Moria, is only in Jackson, not in Tolkien.

This tendency only increases in S2, with its own acrobatic Elves, Ents and a culminating Rohirrim-like cavalry charge. Lines from both Tolkien and Jackson are repeated either as winking nods ("we're going around in circles" uttered by hobbits in *TLotR* and Harfoots here) or in scenes which turn moving moments from the Tolkien and Jackson into memes – "a far green country under a swift sunrise" is revealed to be a go-to Númenorean litany for the dead. And so on.

Vision

For all that one might complain about in Jackson's *TLotR* films (Curry is largely unimpressed; Seeger happily teaches them regularly in conjunction with the books), the stated motives of those making the films – especially Jackson, Boyens, and Walsh – were to honor Tolkien's own writing and vision. That's hard to do in a project like *TRoP*, for which so little of Tolkien's writing exists as its basis, and when the rights extend only to *The Lord of the Rings* and not *The Silmarillion*. Interviews with the cast and showrunners of *TRoP* suggest that the primary purpose of the show is less to honor Tolkien's vision and more to represent values and concerns of present-day society – to tell a story not just "in" our time but "for" our time. This is all the more clear in Season Two. We respect those values, but as a narrative guide, or as a guide to producing a Tolkienian work, they are not reliable. This is for the simple reason that it puts something other than Tolkien at the forefront, and thereby turns the show into precisely what he himself fastidiously avoided: a political allegory, limited, by definition, in its scope.

Conclusion

Both of us found Season One of *The Rings of Power* genuinely promising, warts and all. For the reasons stated above, Season Two does not live up to the promise of Season One. Nonetheless we are still hopeful – a hope, yes, “without guarantees” – that future seasons will build on the series’ strengths. As Gandalf would remind us, “Despair is only for those who see the end beyond all doubt. We do not.”