

Review of:

Reading The Lord of the Rings: New Writings on Tolkien's Classic, edited by Robert Eaglestone. London and New York: Continuum, 2005. 214 pp. £45/ \$75 (hb); £12.99/ \$24.95 (pb). ISBN (hb): 0-8264-8459-X; (pb): 0-8264-8460-3.

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My first impression of this book evoked uncomfortable memories of an earlier effort: *J.R.R. Tolkien: This Far Land*, edited by Robert Giddings (1984). This deeply eccentric if pioneering collection included papers which verged on parody, evoking images of earnest young academics, mostly in polytechnics, for whom Tolkien functioned mostly as grist for new critical mills. It is clear from the present volume, however, that things have moved on. Compared with two decades ago, there have been two signal improvements: Eaglestone and his contributors evince much greater theoretical sophistication, and they take Tolkien's work more seriously. In short, *Reading The Lord of the Rings* realizes its goal – “to reintegrate *The Lord of the Rings* into the broad sweep of current literary critical and theoretical interests” (2) – with impressive success.

Eaglestone's introduction offers a useful supplement to Shippey's analysis of *LotR* as a quintessentially twentieth-century work, including new insights into Tolkien's rhetoric. His own chapter, “Invisibility”, draws on Emmanuel Levinas and Alasdair MacIntyre to reveal the integral connection between evil and invisibility. This point is ably contextualized in terms of the modernist and especially Cartesian valorization and project of instituting a freedom which is radically non-participative – and, as such, ontologically inauthentic if not impossible.

Michael Drout's offering, “Towards a Better Tolkien Criticism”, offers some valuable pointers in that regard although, being confined to chapter-length, it is unavoidably more programmatic than substantive. Even so, it is highly refreshing to encounter Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Stanley Fish, all skilfully handled, in the context of Tolkien studies. And one can only agree that “Tolkien Studies” (by scholars) and “Middle-earth Studies” (by fans), instead of indulging in mutual hostility, should be mutually enriching.

Drout also criticizes some scholars as “over-invested in the truth of [Tolkien's] *Letters*” as “a transparent, unambiguous guide to the ‘real meaning’ of Tolkien's literature” (20). That would indeed be a mistake; however, is such a use of the *Letters* really that common? And surely it is defensible to use them as a guide to Tolkien's own conscious intentions, beliefs and values, and how those affected what he wrote. That, at any rate, is my practice (which, in addition, does not extend to equally naïve assertions of the *LotR*'s ‘real meaning’).

Certainly Barry Longford, in the following chapter on “Time”, has no hesitation in drawing on the *Letters* in order to break down the “narrative extension” of *LotR* into its linguistic, geographical and temporal components. He then uses this analysis to identify Jackson's films as “relentlessly present-tense and ruthlessly goal-oriented”, the effect of which is to close down the possibility “for critical reflection or ethical engagement” that is such a distinctive mark of the book (43, 46). Again, it is hard to disagree. One bad academic habit is in evidence here, however, if not egregiously so: if specialist jargon such as “lisible” and “scriptable” is going to be used – neither of which appear in the *Shorter OED* – then it should also be explained.

(True, one could infer their meaning; but with technical terms that is not always reliable.)

Sue Zlosnik's "Gothic Echoes" is one of the weaker papers in this collection. In distinctively modernist manner, she refers to "those who find solace in Tolkien's fake mythology" (58; a phrase repeated from p.50). Not only is this the sort of dismissively patronizing attitude we know too well from Greer and Waugh et al., it also betrays a curiously positivist attitude. What is "real" mythology, from which the contrast must draw its force? Even Homer and Herodotus were interpreters of myth. But in that case, what is "fake"? And her remark that *TlotR* encourages "a willing suspension of disbelief in its readers" (50) might carry more conviction if it showed some awareness at least of Tolkien's contrary point, in "On Fairy-Stories" (37), that if disbelief must be suspended by an act of will then the fantasy has already failed.

Zlosnik concludes by quoting, with implicit approval, Ken Gelder, who has attacked contemporary fantasy as a "literary form of fundamentalism that troubles secular ideals" and is "'terroristic' in its attack on the modern world" (58). This sort of unselfcritical literary modernism, with its crypto-religious secularism, was the reason why I once published an essay entitled "Tolkien and the Critics: A Critique" (1999). To judge by its reception, it filled a much-needed gap and now appears somewhat dated, not least in its over-enthusiastic embrace of postmodernism. But Gelder, and Zlosnik's endorsement of him, makes me think there might be a place for it still.

Adam Roberts, in "The One Ring", reveals a new dimension to Tolkien's choice and use of a ring as the central symbol of his narrative. The result is a fascinating study of the way Tolkien's Catholicism – specifically, the sacramental dimension of the One Ring – found literary expression which deepened that meaning for readers mostly quite unaware of its source.

In "Home", Simon Malpas makes a plausible and tantalizing connection between Martin Heidegger's and Tolkien's responses to what they both perceived (arguably with perspicacity) as the threat of runaway modernity and especially techno-science. This is potentially a rich vein but Malpas's exploration contains an uneasy lacuna. He relies in particular upon Martin Heidegger's lectures on Hölderlin. Does the fact that these were delivered in Germany in the summer of 1942 by a member of the Nazi Party signify nothing? Particularly when, to quote Roz Kaveney later in this collection, there are "attitudes in *TlotR* that are sufficiently cognate with racism to have appealed to neo-Nazis" (174)? I myself have defended *TlotR* against the charge of racism, but it is worryingly selective to pretend there is no issue here to be discussed.

Malpas also urges upon us the unavoidability of accommodating technological change, arguing that "Tolkien is quite explicit...that nothing can simply resist or ignore change" (88). But Tolkien's reluctant embrace of change was principally metaphysical; and metaphysics – as we ought to know from the case of Heidegger – is an unreliable guide to political and social actions. In any case, Malpas may be right, but he is rather too quick to dismiss resistance, if only as a vital part of any eventual positive compromise. Elrond, for one, held a contrary view: "There is nothing you can do, other than to resist, with hope or without it."

Jennifer Neville, on "Women", shows convincingly that the relative marginality of women in Tolkien's fiction is, to a very significant extent, a function not of the literary texts he drew upon but of nineteenth and twentieth-century literary scholarship. This argument includes both considerable specific detail in *TlotR* and a

nuanced conclusion regarding the implications for the dimension of gender in Tolkien studies.

In “Masculinity”, Holly A. Crocker nearly succumbs to bad academic prose (the pernicious effects of one of her sources, Homi Bhabha on postcolonialism, seem evident), e.g.: “Functioning as an unlocated mode of becoming that subsumes all those who subscribe to its principles, this masculinity compels others to see it as invisible” (113). But this passage, like the paper itself, is far from meaningless; it is simply unnecessarily difficult to follow. And as a matter of fact, what Crocker reveals about masculinity as an organizing principle of, and in, *LotR* is acute and fruitful. My only caveats are that it surely also requires something to be said about the contrary pole, unexamined here, of femininity; and that the whole exercise would be greatly enriched by *adding* the political dimension – unremarked but unmistakably present – of hegemony. (That is, hegemonic gendering, and gendered hegemony.) The best guides here are undoubtedly the post-Marxists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their now-classic *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and subsequent work.

Esther Saxey, in “Homoeroticism”, asks whether Frodo and Sam can and should be considered a sexual/romantic couple. There is, of course, no good reason why this should not be a matter for discussion. Unfortunately, however, Saxey falls back on some questionable tactics in order to answer in the affirmative. One is to maintain that the resistance among Tolkien fans to the idea of Frodo and Sam as sexually involved “is a good reason...for me to insist on the sexual nature of their relationship” (131). But is that alone *sufficient* reason? Even the most hardened critical theorist would think twice before asserting so. Another problem is castigating objections as “attempts to avoid homosexuality” – a notorious rhetorical ploy to problematize any disagreement. Thus, “the use of Elven language as a token of love between Aragorn and Arwen adds a suggestive note to his exchanges with Legolas, at Helms’ Deep and elsewhere” (136). But if I reply, “Not necessarily; after all, Arwen and Legolas are both elves”, then I open myself to the charge of engaging in a “heterosexualizing” strategy (with the added possibility of doing so for dubious psychosexual motives of my own). This is no way to enable or conduct intellectual dialogue. It is also curious that Saxey makes no historical allowances for the difficulty, since the early twentieth century, of understanding the hitherto more common reality of socially hierarchical and emotionally intense but non-sexual relationships between men, often Englishmen – without stretching the meaning of “sexual” beyond what makes it useful and meaningful.

Scott Kleinman’s “Service” is a useful and original analysis of the confusing and confused intertwining of service (preferable to the more loaded and patronizing “servility”) and eroticism in the relationships between Éowyn and Aragorn and Sam and Frodo.

The subject of Barry Atkins’s chapter is “Games”: that is, “the games of the films of the books” (155). He concludes by suggesting the possibility that computer games might “finally satisfy that desire to enter a fictional world that Tolkien’s text has always provoked” (161). Against this, it is worth at least noting Tolkien’s own opinion that the desire for fantasy “is only cheated by counterfeits, whether the innocent but clumsy devices of the human dramatist, or the malevolent frauds of the magicians. In this world it is for men unsatisfiable, and so imperishable” (“On Fairy-Stories”, 50). When it is ever-increasingly difficult to distinguish between those two elements in the games, and the entire industry is predicated on enormous amounts of money changing hands – a sure sign, to use Tolkien’s terminology, of Magic rather than Enchantment – then I know which outcome I would back.

Roz Kaveney concludes the collection with “In the Tradition...” Kaveney once opined (in 1991) that Tolkien’s work deserves “intelligent reading but not passionate attention.” (I am indebted to her for this, since it was a major spur for my own writings, albeit in an attempt to prove her wrong.) Perhaps for that reason, she demonstrates a lack of the sure touch that one associates with Tolkien’s best critics. Is there, for example, really a “sense that all will, in the end, be well that pervades *TlotR*” (164)? Or is not *TlotR* pervaded by just the opposite: an unassuageable sense of loss, even in apparent victory? Perhaps both; but then a balanced assessment would address both. She also remarks that Tolkien’s success inaugurated fantasy as “a literature of comfort” (169). But is it not possible, borrowing from Geoffrey Grigson, to be comforted without being content? I persist in believing that the idea of “radical nostalgia”, which I discussed in *Defending Middle-Earth*, remains a more promising and under-valued one for understanding much of Tolkien’s appeal.

Regrettably, then, there is, in Kaveney’s contribution and elsewhere here, a lingering sense of elitist modernism about which Tolkien’s pointed remark about critics “confusing, not always by sincere error, the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter” (“On Fairy-Stories”, 56) remains the aptest comment. Yet I would myself be guilty of ideological one-sidedness if I did not recognize the quality of Kaveney’s discussion of post-Tolkienian fantasy, especially the work of Terry Brooks, Stephen Donaldson, Robert Jordan, Terry Goodkind and Tad Williams. She is particularly acute on Ursula LeGuin’s complex relationship with and debts, both positive and reactive, to Tolkien. And the same general point applies to the collection as a whole. In short, then, it is indisputably a good thing, and a sign of the rude new health of Tolkien studies.

Works Cited

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