

REVIEW: *TOLKIEN'S MODERN READING*

Annie Crawford on a Challenge to
Tolkien Scholarship

Long before the printing press, Solomon complained that “of the making of many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.”¹ What would Solomon say in the day of blogs and self-publishing? Yet despite the flood of Too Much Information, we at *An Unexpected Journal* still believe there are things worth saying, new wisdom yet to be written, and greater understanding worth seeking out on the printed page, and we are pleased to recommend Holly Ordway’s new groundbreaking *Tolkien’s Modern Reading* as just such a book. We are glad Cicero kept writing in his age of Too Many Books, and we are glad that scholars like Ordway work hard to cut through the noise of half-baked scholarship to offer something truly great. The fruit of ten years’ careful research, *Tolkien’s*

¹ Ecclesiastes 12:12

Modern Reading is worthy of serving as the flagship book for Word on Fire's new academic imprint.

Ordway's new academic masterpiece holds special significance for us at AUJ. The founders and editors at *An Unexpected Journal* are alumni from the Houston Baptist University Cultural Apologetics Program, which Holly Ordway largely built and developed during her time as Program Coordinator and Chair of the Department of Apologetics. While in the HBU program, all of us at AUJ were profoundly impacted by Professor Ordway's high standards of excellence, first-rate scholarship, gifted teaching, and active mentorship. It is no overstatement to say that Ordway's investment in her HBU students is a primary reason that *An Unexpected Journal* exists. For us, reading *Tolkien's Modern Reading* is very much like being in one of our favorite classes again. In this book, an expert scholar and teacher, with genuine love for her subject and reader, leads you through a literary world of characters, motifs, and themes, modeling how to think critically, showing you how to be diligent and thorough in your research, and helping you see how small details can have great significance. Ordway writes as she teaches — with a fierce Eowyn-like power and love. Ordway challenges her students because she loves

them, and in her new book, Ordway challenges Tolkien scholarship because she loves it.

Beyond its general excellence, *Tolkien's Modern Reading* marks an important turning point in Tolkien scholarship. To date, scholars and lay enthusiasts alike focused their analysis primarily on the obvious medieval influences for Middle-earth. Tolkien was a professor of Anglo-Saxon literature, and it doesn't take much expertise to see the influence that *Beowulf* and other medieval legends and romances had on *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of The Rings*. Indeed, it is so widely assumed that Middle-earth is *merely* rooted in the medieval world that some secondary schools place Tolkien's work in their medieval Great Text classes. Though written in the twentieth century, *The Lord of the Rings* is thus being studied *as* a medieval text.

Ordway started her research into Tolkien's influences by taking this general consensus as her own, yet the evidence itself led her to other conclusions. As she investigated the boundaries of Tolkien's reading habits, Ordway discovered to her surprise that they were very broad and significantly modern. The more she hunted down Tolkien's personal reading list and scoured his private bookshelves, the more she realized that Tolkien,

even more than his friend C.S. Lewis, was engaged with modern literary works and inspired by them.

In retrospect, this should not surprise us. *The Lord of the Rings* indeed deserves to be in the Great Text curriculum, but not as a medieval book, for the Great Books of western culture are great precisely because they both draw on the masterpieces that preceded them and speak universal truths with fresh wisdom to their own contemporary world. When Dante wrote *The Divine Comedy*, it was a very “contemporary” book, in the sense that it spoke with cutting-edge creativity and relevance to the culture in which it was birthed.

Likewise, *The Lord of the Rings* both draws from the great stories of the English past, such as *Beowulf*, and speaks universal truths with new creative form and insight that is distinctly modern. The most obvious example of Tolkien’s modernity is the literary form of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*: novels are distinctly modern. Medieval storytellers didn’t work in long pages of descriptive prose, they didn’t create such complex plots, nor did they spend much time on the psychological and relational development of their characters; these are the interests of the leisured modern man. Moreover, many of Tolkien’s themes have distinctly modern characters as well. Although medieval stories

almost always connected the virtue of the king to the health of his land, ancient and medieval men did not have the technological anxieties that Tolkien weaves into his portrayal of Isengard. No Anglo-Saxon author could have imagined or written *The Lord of the Rings*, illustrating how much both the modern and the medieval shaped the furniture of Tolkien's imagination.

Ordway opens *Tolkien's Modern Reading* with a precisely crafted thesis: "Tolkien knew modern literature, and was oriented toward the modern world, to a greater degree than we have hitherto realized. Acknowledging this aspect of his creative process will enhance our ability to interpret and enjoy his work."² Ordway makes the limits of her claim clear: "I shall not be arguing that his modern reading is *more* important than his medieval reading . . . [it] is undoubtedly a relatively minor element in the total picture. But it is present and should not be overlooked."³ Ordway does not overstate her own position in order to counterweight portrayals of Tolkien as merely a stodgy medievalist; rather, she carefully leads us into a more fruitful, multi-

² Holly Ordway, *Tolkien's Modern Reading: Middle-earth Beyond the Middle Ages* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Academic, 2021), 9.

³ *Ibid.*

dimensional picture of Tolkien's personality and literary influences.

The first chapter of *Tolkien's Modern Reading* describes the backdrop of contemporary Tolkien scholarship which, under Humphrey Carpenter's influence, tends to reduce Tolkien to a fossilized medievalist. Ordway's research revealed claims made by Carpenter which were simply factually incorrect. Searching through various articles and interviews, Ordway learned that Carpenter didn't especially like Tolkien and felt free as a biographer to sketch the man in a reductive way that suited his own anti-religious, anti-medieval biases. In an article suspiciously titled "Learning about Ourselves: Biography as Autobiography," Carpenter admits to writing a "caricature of the Oxford academic" and that his biographical approach was focused on smashing idols.⁴ He believed that "around each figure there's an absurd cult of admirers, people who want the great person to remain untarnished. And it's a challenge to try and tarnish them."⁵ This was evidently the approach Carpenter took when writing Tolkien's biography,

⁴ Humphrey Carpenter, "Learning about Ourselves: Biography as Autobiography," in *The Art of Literary Biography*, ed. John Bachelard (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 270.

⁵ Carpenter, "Learning about Ourselves," 273, 275.

for Christopher Tolkien rejected Carpenter's first draft as offensively slapstick.⁶ However, Carpenter only took two weeks to revise the book, indicating that he simply removed some of the more directly offensive descriptions but did not fundamentally rewrite his portrait of Tolkien to be more sympathetic.⁷ Ordway outlines the primary misconceptions that Carpenter's tarnished portrait created and shows why now "the picture of Tolkien as fundamentally backward-looking, happily living in total rejection of the modern world, must be abandoned."⁸

In chapter two, Ordway meticulously lays out the precise scope of her thesis, explains her research methods, and details the focus and boundaries of the evidence she has collected. Ordway limits the sources she considers to the fiction, poetry, and drama written after 1850 that we are certain Tolkien read. She also limits herself to sources that had influence on the Middle-earth legendarium. Acknowledging that "source-hunting" can be a specious business which implies "that identifying the sources of a tale revealed everything worth

⁶ Ordway, *Tolkien's Modern Reading*, 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

knowing about it,”⁹ Ordway explains how her research into Tolkien's sources is “not seeking to crack riddles but to plumb the depths of imagination.”¹⁰ Following the best principles of literary analysis, Ordway does not reduce elements of Tolkien’s work to specific influences, but rather shows how an understanding of his influences can expand and enrich our understanding of Tolkien’s imagination, stories, and significance.

Ordway supports her thesis in subsequent chapters with a truly mountainous collection of evidence organized by either genre or author. Even with the limitations Ordway placed on her project to keep it manageable, the scope of her research and of Tolkien’s own reading is astounding, encompassing a total of over 200 titles and 148 different authors, including authors as diverse as Matthew Arnold, W.H. Auden, Hilaire Belloc, Wendall Berry, Mark Twain, Lewis Carroll, L. Frank Baum, Oscar Wilde, Agatha Christie, G.K. Chesterton, H. Rider Haggard, T.S. Eliot, E.R. Eddison, Kenneth Grahame, Andrew Lang, George MacDonald, Rudyard Kipling, P.G. Wodehouse, Arthur Ransome, Beatrix Potter, William Morris, A.A. Milne, and scores more.

⁹ Ordway, *Tolkien's Modern Reading*, 40.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

Although the 2019 *Tolkien's Library* covers much of the same ground as Ordway's book, it is not much more than an annotated bibliography. *Tolkien's Modern Reading* is a landmark volume in Tolkien scholarship because of the meaningful and persuasive analysis Ordway draws from Tolkien's modern reading list. For over a decade, Ordway dug into every available detail of Tolkien's life, collecting tiny pieces of literary evidence which she painstakingly pieced together into a complex mosaic of Tolkien's immense and fecund imagination.

Tolkien's Modern Reading concludes with a summary of Ordway's argument, a final deconstruction of Humphrey Carpenter's most influential yet misleading claims, and a call for Tolkien scholars to leave behind the idea that Tolkien was an impervious medieval bandersnatch stuck in the irrelevant past and instead enter a new era of exploration into the life and work of this multifaceted, genius, and immeasurably important modern author.

Nearly a fourth of the book provides scholarly resources for further study. In the appendix, Ordway includes a chart that details a comprehensive list of everything we know Tolkien read, organized by where Ordway found the information — whether from writings, letters,

interviews, images of his bookshelf, books on a syllabus he taught, or first-hand reports from others. An extended photo gallery enriches this study with a visualization of the modern sources Tolkien read. The illustrations of scenes and characters like the Snergs, MacDonald's goblins, Fafnir the Dragon, the knight in *John Inglesant* allow us to see and not just read about the influences these modern creations had on the stories of Middle-earth. *Tolkien's Modern Reading* also includes a well-developed index and comprehensive bibliography, making this volume an essential and highly usable resource for fans and scholars alike. Throughout the book, Ordway provides extensive footnotes that include interesting anecdotes, connections, asides, nuances, and important sources for extended research. Each chapter ends with a wonderfully helpful summary of the primary points; for the lay reader, these ending summaries provide help from Professor Ordway who wants to make sure you caught the key points, and for the scholar who never has enough time to read everything they ought, the summaries offer an excellent time-saving resource. From cover to cover, *Tolkien's Modern Reading* embodies the rigorous academic standards we at AUJ would expect from a professor who constantly told us to verify our information, pay attention to

the quality of bibliographies, and follow the citation trail.

Although highly academic, Ordway's gifts as a storyteller and teacher make the entire book highly readable. Her prose is pristine and the well-paced dance between specific, lively details and generalized themes and conclusions keeps this work of research well-paced and engaging. Frankly, at times the unfolding drama of a great man misunderstood — complete with rogue biographies, professional intrigues, and scholarly confessions — reads almost like a novel. Ordway's research always stays rooted in the life of a real man with a meaningful story to tell.

As Ordway develops her argument, her teaching gifts shine through her analysis of the various texts, providing the reader with a bonus course in literary theory along with the Tolkien literary tour. From adventure stories to fables, from poetry to science fiction, from children's fantasy to sophisticated works like James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, Ordway guides her reader through important modern genres and authors. As she explains how different authors influenced the style, themes, setting, tone, and language of Tolkien's fiction, Ordway is teaching you how to read, what elements to look for in a story, how creative processes work, how stories

communicate meaning, and how to evaluate the quality of a story.

A few times Ordway's source hunting feels stretched, as though the habit of making connections leads her to see ghosts of influence that aren't clearly there. Some faulty speculation is inevitable, for as Tolkien himself explains, his stories grow "like a seed in the dark out of the leaf-mould of the mind: out of all that has been seen or thought or read, that has long ago been forgotten, descending into the deeps."¹¹ There in the depths of the imagination, elements from Tolkien's own reading are "incorporated not in a conscious or deliberate way, but as fully digested and assimilated material in Tolkien's own imagination."¹² Literal compost is so completely broken down that it is impossible to reconstruct its constituents so as to isolate and identify the specific plants from which one handful might come. Likewise, if the elements of Tolkien's reading are so deeply digested in the unconscious imagination, then the ability to draw direct and specific connections will be at times impossible and unhelpful.

¹¹ Quoted in Ordway, *Tolkien's Modern Reading*, 8.

¹² *Ibid.*, 86.

For example, when discussing *The Wind in the Willows*, Ordway speculates that Tolkien was “recalling Toad’s tasty stew, eaten on the run in a gipsy’s campsite, when Sam cooks his herbs and stewed rabbit.”¹³ This seems a stretch as the image of cooking during outdoor journeys is a common human experience and present in many stories. Tolkien need not read Graham Greene to imagine what it was like to cook dinner on a trek through remote and hostile country. All our stories bear common elements not simply because they have all directly influenced one another but primarily because they all bear witness to a common world. However, such strained influences are rare in the book and even if a fair number of Ordway’s tentative connections were not actually present in the workings of Tolkien’s imagination, she still has an ample amount of clear evidence to support her limited thesis.

As the title suggests, *Tolkien's Modern Reading* also offers the reader not only an overview of Tolkien’s influences but also an overview of modern literature, much of which is commonly neglected in literary circles and literature classes today. If you are a teacher, homeschool educator, or avid reader

¹³ Ordway, *Tolkien's Modern Reading*, 86.

looking to update your syllabus or expand your bookshelf, Ordway's book will serve as a helpful guide. As we learn about the similarities between Éowyn and William Morris's heroine Hall-Sun, the inspiration for Hobbits found in Wyke-Smith's *Snergs*, Nesbit's influence on Tolkien's plotting, and the precursors of Mordor found in MacDonald's "The Golden Key," our love for Tolkien's Middle-earth becomes a portal into many more worthwhile stories. As we learn the modern sources for names and places like "Crack of Doom" and the "Dead Marshes" and the "root of the mountains," Ordway shows us how many of the themes in *The Lord of the Rings* come not from medieval stories but modern ones. For example, the way Tolkien develops what Ordway describes as "perhaps the key theme" of *The Lord of the Rings* — the power of compassion to serve as the climactic catalyst — appears to be inspired by J.H. Shorthouse's modern novel, *John Inglesant*.¹⁴ A discerning and trustworthy guide, Ordway read every source herself, and she helps the reader discern the wheat from the chaff, leading us to new treasures worth recovering from the early twentieth century dustbin — like the works of Wyke-Smiths, John Buchan, and Rider Haggard — and letting us

¹⁴ Ordway, *Tolkien's Modern Reading*, 247.

know which volumes are better left in it — like the racist works of Alexander MacDonald.

Through our tour of *Tolkien's Modern Reading*, we may be surprised to discover that there are many enjoyable stories to be found in the modern era. Much of what we read in our modern literature courses is filtered through a particular bias in favor of books with philosophical significance. Modern Literature syllabi usually cover authors like Joyce, Kafka, Woolf, Eliot, Faulkner, Hemingway, and Beckett to reveal the increasing nihilism of the post-war era. These authors are important, but limiting the syllabus in this way does little to inspire most students to read more modern literature, and it misrepresents the wealth of literary variety that existed from 1880-1960. Thus, *Tolkien's Modern Reading* not only sheds light on Middle-earth, it may be that Middle-earth sheds a redemptive light back onto the world of modern literature. Tolkien's own reading may offer an important guide for re-writing our syllabi to include more adventure, mystery, fantasy, and science fiction which can help students become better, happier readers as well as see that, in the words of Ordway's favorite poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, "though the last lights off the black west

went” still “morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs.”¹⁵

Holly Ordway’s *Tolkien’s Modern Reading* deserves a place on your overflowing bookshelf. It is an important corrective to the deconstructivist trends in Tolkien scholarship that began with Humphrey Carpenter’s self-centered attempt to caricature his Christian subject as a “tweedy, nostalgic medievalist who read little or nothing of modern literature.”¹⁶ The impulse to portray Tolkien as retrograde and locked in the dark ages of Christendom functionally diminishes his ability to speak to our modern world. If we can limit Tolkien’s imagination to an age that we may feel nostalgia for but have rejected as holding serious wisdom, then we can likewise treat the Christian themes of *The Lord of the Rings* as entertaining but ultimately irrelevant. We can enjoy Tolkien as escapist fantasy without worrying that he speaks with authority to our contemporary reality. The more I can see dragons as imaginary relics from an archaic, misguided past, the less I have to worry that Smaug

¹⁵ Cited from Holly Ordway and Daniel Seseske, eds., *Ignatian Collection* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire, 2020), 179.

¹⁶ Ordway, *Tolkien’s Modern Reading*, 249.

has something to say about the greed of my own heart.

In *Tolkien's Modern Reading*, Ordway proves that Tolkien was very much a man of the 20th century who could draw from the wisdom of the past to speak prophetically to our present. The proof is in the pudding: Tolkien made medieval motifs wildly popular to twentieth century people. He interpreted the medieval world for his modern readers in a way that resonated deeply, and “an interpreter must know both cultures, the old and the new.”¹⁷

Perhaps more than ever, the old holds the necessary keys to a new future. We need Tolkien. His voice is not fossilized or antiquated; his fiction draws from the wisdom of the past to embody for present age the living Logos that was and is and ever shall be.

¹⁷ Ordway, *Tolkien's Modern Reading*, 20.

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