

ORDWAY'S MYTH- BUSTING RESEARCH: TOLKIEN'S MODERN READING (A REVIEW)

Ryan Grube on a Paradigm Shift

In her monumental study, *Tolkien's Modern Reading: Middle-earth Beyond the Middle Ages* (TMR), Holly Ordway debunks the popular misconception that J.R.R. Tolkien was an anti-modern medievalist whose inspiration came from the Middle Ages and who avoided influences more recent than *Beowulf*. This error, planted by “rogue” biographers such as William Ready, Daniel Grota, and especially Humphrey Carpenter, has been at the root of what Ordway deems a “critical imbalance” in Tolkien scholarship, and correcting it is the first major accomplishment of her book.¹ This she achieves by

¹ Holly Ordway, *Tolkien's Modern Reading: Middle-Earth Beyond the Middle Ages* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire, 2021), 276-279. Notwithstanding Carpenter's official status as the only authorized

mustering evidence that Tolkien read and incorporated elements from works of more recent, particularly “modern” vintage. Ordway writes:

Where, then, do we turn for evidence of Tolkien’s modern reading? It comes from a range of sources: Tolkien’s own writings, published and unpublished; interviews with him; accounts by family, friends, colleagues, and students; biographical studies; and finally, material in Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond’s magisterial *J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide*.²

In the course of presenting these materials, Ordway evaluates their impact on the works related to *The Lord of The Rings* known collectively as the Legendarium.³ Her investigation of these data demonstrates both an impressive depth of research and a compelling engagement with Tolkien’s own imaginative source material, and it compares favorably to other recent studies, such as Oronzo

biographer of Tolkien, Ordway’s meticulous study proves that in his case the “rogue” epithet is quite well deserved.

² Ordway, *Tolkien's Modern Reading*, 30.

³ e.g. *The Silmarillion*, *Beren and Lúthien*, *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*, etc.

Cilli's *Tolkien's Library: An Annotated Checklist*.⁴ Cilli's *Library* was published two years prior to *TMR*; it is methodologically sound and presents an impressively comprehensive list; yet it is valuable primarily to researchers, as it is quite literally an annotated bibliography. *TMR*, on the other hand, is not simply a list of modern books owned by Tolkien, but a work of literary criticism which discusses the author's assimilation and creative adaptation of these materials. Ordway's purpose is therefore more involved:

it is not enough simply to identify a source or influence and stop there in foolish triumph. We must go further and be attentive to context, purpose, style, effect, and, above all, meaning; we must ask 'How does Tolkien use it? What insight do we gain from having discerned this connection? What does this tell us about his writings and even about him and his own creative processes?'⁵

Limiting herself to English language "works of fiction, poetry, and drama published after 1850 . . . that we know for certain Tolkien read, she

⁴ Oronzo Cilli, *Tolkien's Library: An Annotated Checklist* (Edinburgh: Luna Press Publishing, 2019).

⁵ Ordway, *Tolkien's Modern Reading*, 41.

concentrates on how such works might have played a role in the development of Tolkien's *Legendarium*, adopting the distinction made by C.S. Lewis between "sources" and "influences" as useful terms to guide the investigation.⁶ According to this understanding, a source is a work that contributes "content or substance, be it a character, a plot, a theme, an image," while an influence involves "manner or form, the style in which an author approaches his work or the shape he gives it."⁷ Ordway identifies one more process by which Tolkien's modern reading can be connected to his writing, labeling it "influence-by-opposition." As opposed to source and influence (matters of content and form, respectively), influence-by-opposition occurs by way of bad example, for instance something Tolkien read that he wished to avoid emulating, or which provoked him to improve upon when he tried it himself in his own writing.

Under these rubrics, Ordway exhibits skillful detective work in ferreting out likely origins for specific events, place names, dramatic technique, tone, atmosphere, etc., yet she is careful to avoid reducing her study to mere textual archaeology. She

⁶ Ordway, *Tolkien's Modern Reading*, 27.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

explains that “we aim rather continually to be moving both back and forth -- now backward to what Tolkien read, now forward to the effects that his reading may have had,” and her concern is discerning these effects not only on Tolkien's *Legendarium*, but also upon “our own understanding of the man and the workings of his imagination.”⁸

Given the amount of material she distills into three hundred pages, it is impressive how much Ordway accomplishes in so limited a space. Compositionally, *TMR* is divided into twelve chapters: the first two set the stage for and delimit the scope of Ordway's project; the final gives a summary and concluding remarks; and the intervening chapters provide accumulated data and commentary. These middle chapters, which comprise the bulk of *TMR*, proceed roughly along chronological lines. Chapters three and four begin with an inspection of Victorian and then “Post-Victorian” children's literature, respectively. Next, the works of George MacDonald are treated in chapter five before discussion turns to the thriller-adventure genre stories of S.R. Crockett, Alexander MacDonald, Herbert Hayens, John Buchan, and J.M.

⁸ Ordway, *Tolkien's Modern Reading*, 39.

Barrie, which comprise chapter six, “Boy’s Own Adventure.” After these, William Morris and Rider Haggard each receive full chapters of their own. Then the examination reverts to a more genre based approach centered around science fiction, “fine fabling,” and an assortment of authors Ordway collects under the term “Catholic.”^{9 10}

Since she attends to these works only insofar as they relate to Tolkien’s *Legendarium* or his creative process, not all books and authors wind up with an equal amount of discussion.¹¹ The *dispositio* thus initially produces a slight sense of lopsidedness or asymmetry. However, this is a very minor quibble, and indeed the impression does not last long, especially after one considers Tolkien did not arrange his personal reading for the convenience of literary critics and historians! Not everything

⁹ Ordway, *Tolkien’s Modern Reading*, 225. “stories that present the marvelous, the uncanny, the preternatural; high romance and Gothic tales; literature that embraces the mystical and numinous, that finds room for a sacramental view of reality. Here we find writers who, in many cases, do not fit comfortably into other categories, or who no longer suit our modern tastes as readers -- but who were important to their original readers.”

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 248. This enables Ordway to discuss specifically *Roman Catholic* literary figures, but she also means ‘catholic’ in its broad and inclusive sense, and uses it to round up “everybody” not yet mentioned.

¹¹ Most of these middle chapters come in under twenty pages, chapter 6 being the exception at 57 pages.

Tolkien read equally influenced his *Legendarium*. Not every author had the same type or degree of impact. Therefore the range of Ordway's commentary will necessarily follow suit: sometimes drilling down into minutiae, other times zooming out for more generalized observations, but always borne of a thorough analysis of the connections between Tolkien's creative inputs and his own creative output. From this point of view, Ordway has actually done her readers a service. Rather than impose some uniform interpretive grid to effect a false sense of evenness or proportionality, her approach leads us on a tour that wends and wanders across 200 titles from 148 authors, and does so in a sensical, compelling fashion.¹² The prose is lucid, the arguments cogent. Her familiarity with the *Legendarium* and careful inspection of source texts is compendious, and the work brims with wit and personality throughout.¹³

As a work of literary criticism, *TMR* bears not a few resemblances to Michael Ward's 2008 *Planet*

¹² Ordway, *Tolkien's Modern Reading*, 275; 295.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 14. See for example the clever headline "The mythical Tollewis"; also the footnote on p. 289 regarding Stephen Colbert and Chance the Rapper.

Narnia.¹⁴ Both projects dispel misconceptions about an Inklings, particularly ones concerning inspirational input and compositional choices. Both retrieve an old-school literary criticism, less intent on imposing politically charged ‘critical lenses’ and more interested in exploring questions of literary-historical value. Both Ward and Ordway deepen our appreciation of the fantasy worlds created by Lewis and Tolkien by their study of the material and formal causes at work in the creative processes of the two Inklings. Ward points us skyward and shows the link between the seven *Chronicles of Narnia* and the pre-Copernican cosmology of the seven heavens.¹⁵ Ordway uses the earth to illustrate the simple but oft-ignored fact that a fertile imagination such as Tolkien’s requires . . . well, *fertilizer*. “Many and varied leaves from the woods and forests of British and American literature,” she writes, became the “leaf-mould” and then the mulch which nourished Tolkien’s creativity and “provided him with the nutrients that he could draw up into

¹⁴ Michael Ward, *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in The Imagination of C.S. Lewis* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 223; 234-239. Lewis employed planetary imagery in fashioning a literary atmosphere which conveys an imaginative experience of the medieval worldview, thereby exposing the reader to important facets of the Divine nature.

new stories.”¹⁶ Her research is tightly focused on “the more modern trees that we know [Tolkien] to have surveyed,” and it is on account of this specificity that Ordway succeeds in establishing a new paradigm in Tolkien studies.¹⁷

To be sure, this paradigm shift has been a long time in coming. Comparisons between Tolkien and some of his modernist contemporaries were not unprecedented in the years before the “rogue biographers” myth took root but have only gradually gained traction since. Ordway notes that already in 1974, Colin Wilson had compared Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* with Proust and T.S. Eliot, and “on the basis of Tolkien’s writings alone, placed him firmly in the wider literary context of the twentieth century.”¹⁸ More recently, scholars such as Anna Vaninskaya and Patchen Mortimer have attempted to put Tolkien in conversation with movements and figures of his own era, but as Vaninskaya observes, this has been an uphill task. She writes, “Nobody needs convincing of the presence of Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse elements in *The Lord of the Rings*, but an assertion of a similar

¹⁶ Ordway, *Tolkien's Modern Reading*, 26.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 278.

kind with regard to the twentieth century still meets with suspicion.”¹⁹ Mortimer argues that Tolkien’s “work reveals modernist attributes — and even ambitions of modernist scope — that deserve to be explored” but laments the prevailing “tendency to consider Tolkien’s works escapist and romantic, the work of a man removed from his own time.”²⁰ In a post-Carpenter, pre-*TMR* landscape, critics were handicapped by this myopic view, the “image of Tolkien as irredeemably anti-modern” which according to Ordway’s diagnosis stems from a “too-frequent disregard of context and chronology.”²¹ Her remedy is as simple and effective as it is elegantly carried out: identify sources, influences, and influences-by-opposition from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and establish their connection with the *Legendarium*. Thus Ordway not only busts the myth regarding Tolkien as an anti-modern medievalist, she also resets the context

¹⁹ Anna Vaninskaya, “Tolkien: A Man of His Time?” in *Tolkien and Modernity 1*, ed. Frank Weinreich and Thomas Honegger (Zollikofen, Switzerland: Walking Tree, 2006), 3.

²⁰ Patchen Mortimer, “Tolkien and Modernism”, in *Tolkien Studies*, Volume 2, (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2005), 113. In Mortimer’s view, the *Legendarium* is a project “as grand and avant-garde as those of Wagner or the Futurists . . . as suffused with the spirit of the age as any by Eliot, Joyce, or Hemingway.”

²¹ Ordway, *Tolkien’s Modern Reading*, 15.

for any future appraisal of Tolkien. If myth-busting is her first major accomplishment, then that is her second achievement, for *TMR* demonstrates convincingly that such a reappraisal is warranted, and scholars can now proceed unfettered by the distorting influence of Carpenter, et al.

As a more complete picture of Tolkien emerges, we begin to understand the man in terms of his time and place, as someone informed not only by his interest in all things medieval, but also by the era in which he lived. After all, no author works in a vacuum, and *TMR* shows us Tolkien's creative inputs included modern works by modern authors. This validates the comparisons Wilson, Vaninskaya, Mortimer, and others have made between Tolkien's literary output and that of other moderns. It also broadens the horizon for further inquiry. For example, Tolkien's work on the *Legendarium* extended well beyond the second world war; therefore it is not inconceivable that critics will begin to approach him as a post-modern.²² Certainly there are aspects of Tolkien's work that anticipate much of what we now classify under that term. Kyoko Yuasa has already made inroads in that

²² Mortimer, "Tolkien and Modernism," 128. He hints as much in his fourth footnote.

direction with her innovative analysis of C.S. Lewis as a “Christian Postmodernist.”²³ Her work might serve as a template for exploring why Tolkien’s influence has extended so far into our own era as to spawn myriad derivative works across a variety of media. Seen in this light, Ordway’s modest claim that her study of Tolkien’s modern reading only amounts to “a relatively minor element in the total picture” when compared with “his medieval reading . . . his study of languages, his personal friendships . . . and other formative experiences” may in hindsight come to be regarded as a vast understatement.²⁴

²³ Kyoko Yuasa, *C.S. Lewis and Christian Postmodernism: Word, Image, and Beyond*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016) See especially chapters 1 and 2 and pp. 174-179.

²⁴ Ordway, *Tolkien’s Modern Reading*, 9.

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