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**Holly Ordway. *Tolkien's Modern Reading: Middle Earth Beyond the Middle Ages*. Word on Fire Academic, 2021, 382 pp.**

**John Pennington**

**T**om Shippey writes in his provocatively titled *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (2002) that “the dominant literary mode of the twentieth century has been the fantastic. This may appear a surprising claim, which would not have seemed even remotely conceivable at the start of the century and which is bound to encounter fierce resistance even now” (vii). In an earlier study, Brian Attebery in *Strategies of Fantasy* examines the difficulty of defining such fantastic literature, calling it a “fuzzy set,” with the center of that set being J. R. R. Tolkien.

Both Shippey and Attebery reinforce the notion that Tolkien may, indeed, be the author of the 20th and 21st centuries.

So, it might come as a surprise to many Tolkien devotees that his reputation is not universally acclaimed. In a *New Yorker* profile on Philip Pullman, the author of *His Dark Materials* books, admits that “like everybody else in the sixties, I read ‘The Lord of the Rings’ and was temporarily impressed. . . .” To Pullman, Tolkien remains one-dimensional: “But, orcs and hobbits, they don’t tell you anything at all. It’s very, very thin stuff. No nourishment in it” (Schwartz). In another interview Pullman goes further: “Tolkien’s work has very little of interest in it to a reader of literature, in my opinion. When I think of literature—Dickens, George Eliot, Joseph Conrad—the great novelists found their subject matter in human nature, emotion, in the ways we relate to each other. If that’s what Tolkien’s up to, he’s left out half of it. The books are wholly male-oriented. The entire question of sexual relationships is omitted” (Waldman). Those are severe words about an author who may be the author of the century. One artificial—though telling—measure of the canonicity of a writer such as Tolkien (who writes in the marginalized genre of fantasy) is to examine whether he is being read in college classrooms alongside James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Bishop, and others. And the answer seems a clear, “No!” At least in more traditional literature courses required for English majors. For example, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Twentieth and Twenty-First*

*Centuries* (10th edition, 2018) does not include any excerpts from Tolkien or C. S. Lewis. It is as if Tolkien's and Lewis's use of the fantastic is of no real significance in the canon of so-called Literature (with a capital "L").

Much of Tolkien scholarship, consequently, has had to navigate this tension: on the one hand, Tolkien is lauded as a major writer that continues to be relevant to readers and literary critics; on the other hand, Tolkien is seen as marginalized. Consequently, much Tolkien scholarship becomes apologetic, an attempt to justify Tolkien as a major writer.

Holly Ordway's *Tolkien's Modern Reading: Middle-earth Beyond the Middle Ages* is a recent apologetic that takes pains to defend Tolkien's place in the canon of Literature. Her study focuses on the modern literary influences of Tolkien on his "legendarium," which "comprises *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and the extensive writings, unpublished in Tolkien's lifetime, which he thought of as 'the Silmarillion' and parts of which were brought out by his son, Christopher, as *The Silmarillion* (1977)" (29). Ordway defines Tolkien's "modern" reading as those works published after 1850 which, to Ordway, would be considered modern by the medievalist Tolkien. The fundamental purpose of Ordway's study is to counter "the picture of Tolkien as fundamentally backward-looking, happily living in total rejection of the modern world . . ." (24). She further claims that "it is the aim of this book to provide a fresh view, and to correct the critical imbalance that has affected Tolkien scholarship. His modern reading was both more far-reaching than people have realized, and more significant for his creative imagination than has been assumed. If we recognize this, our understanding of and appreciation for Middle-earth—and of Tolkien himself—will be enriched" (8). A primary goal of the study, too, is to counter many of the claims posited by Humphrey Carpenter in his authorized biography of Tolkien, *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography* (1977), which continues to be influential in Tolkien studies.

In the Appendix to her work, Ordway provides a useful chart that identifies the authors Tolkien would have encountered and how we can confirm such encounters: her checklist includes five measures—"from his writings," "from his letters," "from his interviews," "from five other facts," and "from reports." The first author listed in the appendix is Hans Christian Andersen, who fulfills all five categories. (Tolkien, we find out, did not like Andersen at all!) Ordway concludes that Tolkien's modern reading provides four key points: 1) simply, we can better understand Tolkien as a person, "and of his complex, subtle, often contrarian personality"; 2) we gain a more

accurate picture of the importance of modern influences on Tolkien, for “his willingness to draw on modern authors for source material, and to be influenced by them—subtly or overtly, by assimilation of by opposition—shows that he was actively engaged with contemporary literary culture”; 3) we can see how his reading fleshes out Tolkien as a person “and as a writer [his reading] gives us a deeper understanding of the workings of his imagination”; and 4) we now can have “a more nuanced analysis of the themes and ideas in his work . . . [that] will better enable us to answer the puzzling question of how it is that his work resonates so strongly with readers of his day and age” (288-89). Thus, the apologetic on Tolkien is complete.

By now you are probably wondering why *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies* is reviewing a critical study on Tolkien. Well, the answer is quite simple: Ordway gives MacDonald’s influence on Tolkien a complete chapter, the only other authors given such prominence being William Morris and H. Rider Haggard, who Tolkien quite admired. The focus of the rest of this review will be on Chapter 5: “George MacDonald: The Tarnished Key.”

Ordway begins Chapter 5 by justifying the ways of MacDonald to Tolkien and admits that MacDonald’s influence “was both significant and complex” (89). Ordway provides an excellent distillation of what critics have known about Tolkien’s view of MacDonald for some time. She immediately tells us that Tolkien disliked *Phantastes* but had a more sympathetic reading of *Lilith*, reinforcing the chapter’s subtitle that MacDonald was a “tarnished,” not “golden” key to Tolkien. Her first focus is on the Princess books. Ordway takes pains to argue for some direct influences of MacDonald on Tolkien: the goblins from *The Princess and the Goblin* are mirrored in *The Hobbit*, particularly “the significance of Tolkien’s goblins being so clearly subterranean: he is following MacDonald, choosing his version as the classic goblin model” (91). In addition, Ordway argues that the songs MacDonald inserts in *Goblin* are directly reflected in the many songs from Bilbo’s story. As for *Curdie*, which does not involve goblins, Ordway suggests that a major theme of greed, depicted by the end of MacDonald’s fairy tale, directly influences the dwarf’s desire to reclaim their treasure from the dragon, which leads to Thorin’s downfall. Ordway’s argument is certainly plausible but remain primarily speculation.

Next she turns to MacDonald’s full-length works, a blend of fantasy and realism. “Another possible influence may be found in *At the Back of the North Wind*” (93). This influence is centered on MacDonald’s retelling of the

“Hey, diddle, diddle” nursery rhyme and Tolkien’s song in *The Fellowship of the Ring* that tells of a dog “that is mighty fond of jokes” (94). Ordway’s argument here seems forced—her close reading comparison of MacDonald and Tolkien seems strained.

She next focuses on *Phantastes*, where she is on much surer ground: she quotes Tolkien: Lewis ““was evidently born loving (moral) allegory and I was born with an instinctive distaste for it. “Phantastes” wakened him, and afflicted me with profound dislike”” (95). Ordway argues that Tolkien may have been put off by the dreamlike structure of the fantasy, one that had little narrative cohesion (she does not mention Novalis and the opening quote by him and, thus, neglects to discuss Tolkien’s attitude toward the German Romantics): Tolkien, who had a “preference for a consistent, well-defined secondary world,” would find that “the structure of *Phantastes* would have gone against the grain. *Phantastes* has worlds within worlds, connected in a way that is psychologically resonant but not logically coherent” (95). Tolkien’s desire for consistent secondary world building would not be reflected in *Phantastes*. A final (odd?) argument Ordway makes is that Tolkien was probably aghast at MacDonald’s depiction of trees in *Phantastes*. Tolkien, she argues, was obsessed with trees, more specifically obsessed with depicting them realistically in terms of their tree species. She quotes Tolkien and the possible influence on the Ents: ““Perhaps some remote influence from George MacDonald’s *Phantastes* (a work which I do not actually much like)”” (96). To Ordway, this comment suggests that Tolkien was influenced by MacDonald “largely” by “influence-by-opposition” (96), a tenuous argument to be sure.

The rest of the chapter on MacDonald’s influence on Tolkien focuses on *Lilith* and the shorter tales. *Lilith*’s fixation on death appealed to Tolkien, claims Ordway, quoting Tolkien’s famous comment on MacDonald and death from “On Fairy-Stories.” Ordway’s traces Tolkien’s interest in this death theme to his experience in WWI, particularly “the horrors of the Somme” (99), an insight, ironically, at the heart of Humphrey Carpenter’s biography of Tolkien. Ordway concludes: “In the powerful, plangent, yet not utterly hopeless depictions of dismemberment and death that fill the pages of *Lilith*, MacDonald strikes a note that resonated with Tolkien at a deep personal level. Here we can see probably the chief reason why MacDonald’s work moved him to such a life-long interest and also perhaps what helped him to conceive and develop similar themes in his own writings” (99). The operative works here are *probably* and *perhaps*.

When she moves to the shorter fairy tales by MacDonald, Ordway again emphasizes “the power of influence-by-opposition” (99), which leads Ordway, for example, to argue that Tolkien’s profound dislike for “The Golden Key” probably influenced Tolkien’s vivid “visual imagination” (100), with the valley of shadows from the tale as a possible influence on the landscape of Middle-earth.

The final section in the chapter, called “Devaluation: MacDonald as influence-by-opposition,” continues to push this idea. Later in life Tolkien admitted that his early admiration of MacDonald was misguided: “I now find that I can’t stand George MacDonald’s books at any price at all” (102). That is quite a critique, a damning one. Yet Ordway tries to rehabilitate such a comment by suggesting, again, the influence-by-opposition. She quotes Humphrey Carpenter and Clyde Kilby to conclude that Tolkien was “prickly” (102).

Chapter 5 in *Tolkien’s Modern Reading* has a kind of contradictory quality to it: Ordway devotes its entirety to MacDonald’s influence on Tolkien, while admitting that there is ample evidence that Tolkien did not much care for MacDonald. I was expecting—or should I say hoping—that Ordway would theorize about this notion of influence-by-opposition by evoking the influential study by Harold Bloom: *The Anxiety of Influence*. A compelling case could have been made that Tolkien is battling his fatherly fantasy influence, MacDonald, and needed to “kill” that influence so that Tolkien could be free to pursue his brand of secondary-world building in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

My hesitation over Ordway’s chapter on MacDonald mirrors the hesitation I have over such studies that attempt to cement influences—we can never be certain of the intent of an author and the influences that he or she may have had. It is interesting speculation but speculation at that. Having said that, I do find *Tolkien’s Modern Reading: Middle-earth Beyond the Middle Ages* thought-provoking, entertaining, though, at times, forced. Yet if we are to consider Tolkien as an author of the century, we continue to need such apologetics.

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