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# Authorizing Tolkien: Control, Adaptation, and Dissemination of J.R.R. Tolkien's Works

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## **Authorizing Tolkien: Control, Adaptation, and Dissemination of J.R.R. Tolkien's Works**

Michael David Elam and Robin Anne Reid

### I. THE MEDIEVAL AND THE MONSTROUS

A. J. Minnis (1988) in his epilogue to *The Medieval Theory of Authorship*—a work on how authorship, including its variants of author and authority, was understood in the latter part of Middle Ages—suggests to me an incipient matter connected to Tolkien's authorship of, outside contribution to, and interaction with Middle Earth. Minnis' epilogue discusses the idea that an author can come under scrutiny even if his work is considered authoritative. His example of Petrarch being upset about Cicero's lack of living as exemplarily as his philosophy should have suggested shows early stages in which authors are viewed as being separated from their works. Even Boccaccio, according to Minnis, criticized Dante for personal faults while still upholding the virtue of his poetry. Certainly Minnis' study is only tangentially related to modern questions of how an author's work might be adapted, but it is helpful to see that as early as the Renaissance (perhaps much earlier), the author's work might be distinct from the author himself. But what happens when an author's work is adapted in ways that seem incongruous to the work's own virtue? What happens when the "virtuous" work is adapted into something seemingly "vulgar"?

In 2012, Raphaëlle Rérolle of *Le Monde*, a French newspaper, interviewed Christopher Tolkien, during which interview Christopher Tolkien described himself as turning his head from recent commercialization of his father's work: "Il ne me reste qu'une seule solution: tourner la tête [There is only one solution for me: to turn my head away]." Although the degree to which adaptations are "faithful" to their originals is a matter for perennial debate, one wonders if the effects of larger-scale commercial adaptations of Tolkien's works may suggest how widely it resonates with many. Perhaps, in some cases, societal appetites interested in their own self-indulgences have appropriated Tolkien's works with little concern for what they contain. Perhaps, in other cases, adapters find in them idioms for expressing their own concerns, even if the works did not awaken such interests. And perhaps in still other cases, adapters simply want to perpetuate Tolkien's work, participate in new iterations and wider dissemination of the raw material they find so engaging. But who gets to decide whether such work is used by certain people or in certain ways? The legal answer may be simple, but the practical answer is not.

Fans and critics alike hold strong opinions about the merits of various adaptations of Tolkien's works. One might think of the Rankin-Bass animated

versions of *The Hobbit* and *Return of the King*, Ralph Bakshi's partially-rotoscoped animated adaptation, a number of video games based on Tolkien's narratives, fan fiction, etc. One can hear both praise and disparagement for such works, and sometimes these assessments are pronounced so dogmatically that they leave little or no room for dissent. While no one can force in what ways Tolkien's works are reshaped and retold, no one would deny the impulse to judge such reshapings and retellings in terms of authenticity—whether they maintain fidelity to the originals. Who, then, defines and authorizes such fidelity? Is it possible even to authorize Tolkien at all? Perhaps, though, asking such questions assumes artistic merit similar to other English language works that repeatedly serve as sources for adaptation (*Beowulf*, *The Canterbury Tales*, the dramas of *Shakespeare*, etc.). That Tolkien's works are so widely and variously adapted by so many, and in many cases very passionately, suggests their intrinsic importance, so much so that one needn't be alarmed at adaptations which seem to run far afield from whatever the sources seem to contain or perform.

Much intrinsic merit in Tolkien's work is suggested by adaptation itself, an idea Tolkien seems to have assumed at some point in developing his legendarium. When considering Tolkien's idea that Middle Earth would be a world built up in large part by the contributions of the masses (see Tolkien's letter to Milton Waldman, 1951, for at least one of his thoughts on such a collaborative creative process),<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis's discussion of both literary diversion and innovation in *The Discarded Image* (1964) is instructive. There Lewis presents the concept of originality and innovation, and how medieval authors delighted in retelling and augmenting the already authoritative material they used.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in light of Lewis' account of rhetorical *morae*—ways a text might seem to delay and wander from its ostensible purpose—the sheer volume of adaptive enterprises carried out using Tolkien's works as source material may evince a kind of authority intrinsic to them, extending inevitably beyond them. I am not suggesting that such adaptation is precisely the same kind of adaptation Lewis proposes of the Middle Ages, namely, adaptation contained within a work. What I am suggesting, however, is that reactions one feels toward adaptations that rely on Tolkien's work as a source to one degree or another should see the act of such borrowing as one that has analogies—even if not perfect—in a long view of literary history. Good works lend themselves to adaptation.

It is in this spirit that one might find a tentative answer to the matter of authorization, although its ontological implications may be cause for at least one kind of discomfort (viz. that a work may have intrinsic merit apart from either

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<sup>1</sup>I believe the redemptive collaborative work of Niggle and Parish in *Leaf by Niggle* also suggests this spirit of creative collaboration that may seem initially oppositional.

<sup>2</sup> I recommend reading the entirety of "The Influence of the Model" in *The Discarded Image*, although the particularly relevant passage to this point is on pages 208-210.

from originator or reader) and its open-ended implications may be cause for another (viz. that works of intrinsic merit move people to adapt them in various ways without harm to the original). One adapts because the source's importance suggests itself. Granted, competence (or its lack) may commend (or detract from) an adaptation and so, too, may taste, but its authorization may be evinced in the act of adaptation itself.

To that end, this collection looks at the importance of Tolkien's work as a source for adaptation, and a number of issues surrounding both source and adaptation. The hope is that the various adaptations of Tolkien's work show it has an authority of its own and spur on further scholarship in the area.

## II. THE POSTMODERN AND THE FANS

When Michael Elam's proposal for a session on "Authorizing Tolkien" was submitted to the Tolkien Studies Area of the Popular Culture Studies Association, my first response, after accepting it immediately, was to write back to suggest that the scope and resonance of the proposal would certainly support more than a paper session, and that I hoped he would consider expanding it. We decided to collaborate on the project since despite our different disciplinary placement in medieval and postmodern areas of study we shared a strong interest in issues of authority and adaptation. The result is the essays in this issue that illustrate the scope of a multi-disciplinary Tolkien studies by scholars who are knowledgeable not only about Tolkien's *Legendarium* but also about the impact and reception of his work.

Tolkien's literature has gained a higher status in some areas of academia over the past fifty years, a status that is arguably due in part to the rise of popular cultural productions that have even less cultural status than genre fantasy novels, productions such as games and fanfiction. The scholarship on these cultural productions is recent, even more so than film studies which provides us with categories of adaptation that are useful when thinking about transformative and derivative works that have expanded Tolkien's original work into what Helen Young in her essay for this issue, "Digital Gaming and Tolkien, 1976-2015," rightly calls "a phenomenon is far bigger than J. R. R. Tolkien the author, or even J. R. R. Tolkien the author-and-*oeuvre*" (1). The conflict over the authority to interpret the Tolkien phenomenon has been debated from the start of Tolkien studies in literary criticism, and the essays in this section represent in more than one way the newer threads being woven into the tapestry of Tolkien studies.

In their 1968 anthology, the first academic collection on Tolkien's work, Neil Isaacs opens with the statement that it "is surely a bad time for Tolkien criticism" due to popular media magazines and "the feverish activity of the fanzines" which combine to discourage "serious criticism" while creating an

environment “eminently suitable for faddism and fannish, cultism and clubbism” (1). In the first British anthology, published in 1983, Robert Giddings contrasts the size of the popular cult for Tolkien’s work to the relatively little attention paid to it by British academics. The two anthologies, though different in time, national origin, and methodologies, share an assumption that whatever fans like (i.e. texts that are popular enough to have cult followings) must somehow be inherently inferior to the capital-L literature that academics prefer, work that is sophisticated, complex, and able to be appreciated only with the guidance of a relatively small cadre of highly trained specialists, assumptions about literary texts as cultural artifacts that is associated with Modernism whose practitioners and followers are never described as a cult.

Historically and to some extent currently, the discipline of English (meaning the study of “literature” as opposed to composition or linguistics, both historically and sometimes currently taught in English departments) has defined its role as identifying the best works of national literatures and conveying the expert knowledge of the canonical works to the culture at large, or at least those attending universities. Allowing the masses who make a work popular to challenge the authority of academic culture would be destroying the foundation of that role as the backlash against the results of the Waterstone poll in which Tolkien was declared the greatest author of the century proved (Pearce, Shippey).

The tone and language of the early works on Tolkien show scholars perceiving themselves to be involved in a struggle over who can claim authority over Tolkien’s work. Besides the Isaacs and Zimbardo and Giddings collection, a 1969 anthology, edited by Mark Hillegas, titled *Shadows of the Imagination; The Fantasies of C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams*, describes the same struggle though phrased in somewhat different terms. In the Introduction which goes into some detail about the 1966 Modern Language Association session on the works of Lewis and Tolkien, Hillegas notes that “the room was packed, with people standing at the back and overflowing into the hall. . . the response was so enthusiastic that it seemed worthwhile to carry the discussion over into a book” (xvi). The enthusiasm of academics attending a mid-1960s event on Lewis and Tolkien is worth noting, as is the fact that Hillegas is concerned with to distinguish them from a cult. However, this cult does not consist of those enthusiastic academics who read Tolkien (or Lewis, or Williams) nor are they the faddists, button-makers, hippies, and college students of the popular media coverage; instead, this cult consists of fans of August Derleth, *Weird Tales*, and pulp science fiction which is written primarily by and for those with technical educations a group, according to Hillegas, who ignore myth in favor of materialism.

Hillegas, like Isaacs and Zimbardo, works to separate Tolkien’s fantasy from other cultish works, identifying qualities that make this literature worthy of

academic attention. Hillegas praises the “high order of excellence in what Lewis, Tolkien, and Williams have written” as well as their “unique style and technique” (xiv) and concludes that the Inklings’ fantasy “appeals especially to the literary community—’serious’ novelists and poets, critics, professors of literature—whom one might call ‘literary intellectuals’” (xv), and, one would note, again, whom one would never call a cult. By the third Zimbardo and Isaacs anthology, published in 2004, Isaacs is content to consider that their original goal is “now satisfied by a commonly accepted recognition of *The Lord of the Rings* as a “masterwork” (10), a goal achieved not by the merits of the work itself but by the quality of academic scholarship written about it.

The single original essay in the third anthology is the only one written about Jackson’s film and was solicited from Tom Shippey for the collection. This essay, Isaacs claims, will “[explore] the process by which the screen version of the novel would lead to new generations of readers” (10). Isaacs’ comments are an example of the extent to which literary critics tend to reflect the adaptation paradigm that Karen Kline describes as translation: Kline, drawing on film studies theories, presents an argument about four paradigms that critics have about film adaptations. The translation paradigm is the oldest and most common approach and evaluates a film based on how faithful it is to the novel. This paradigm assumes that the book is privileged the original text and that the goal of the filmmaker should be to copy the original text faithfully.<sup>3</sup> This paradigm’s assumptions support the idea that a main purpose of a film is to create readers for the original novel. While many who saw Jackson’s films did read the novel, many did not, or found they did not enjoy the novels as much as they did the films. Additionally, cultural responses to Jackson’s films went far beyond bringing new readers to the books. Franchises were licensed to create a range of games based on the films, and the fandom grew as did the creation of transformative works (fiction and films) based on “Tolkien’s” world.

These early scholarly commentary on fans shows the extent to which the academic culture of the 1960s considered enthusiastic popular reception of a work of literature (or any other text) as proof that the work was inferior. Yet the fans

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<sup>3</sup> The pluralist model shifts the focus of faithfulness to the spirit of the original text, allowing for necessary changes due to the graphic rather than textual medium of film, but gives the film more of an independent status. This approach assumes the need for a balance between similarities and differences in the film is the primary criteria for a successful adaptation, as opposed to the fidelity/privileging of the translation paradigm. The transformation paradigm privileges the film above the novel, assuming that the two texts are separate types of art with completely different sign systems. So transformative adaptations are often privileged rather than the original text. The final and, according to Kline, most recent paradigm is materialist, an approach that was not heavily used when the essay was written (1996). This approach considers both texts in the socio-economic and historical contexts in which they were created and privileges historical context over the individual works.

who loved Tolkien's works in the 1950s and 1960s as well as those who came later are one reason the work stood the test of time, a phrase I remember hearing often in my literature courses in the 1970s as one requirement for canonization. A look back over the past half century shows that Tolkien's extraordinary popularity exists in a context of cultural developments that include political shifts, such as the environmental and anti-war movements of the counter-culture; as well as popular and literary ones, such as the creation of the new publishing category of high fantasy and the growth of commercialized games; and educational and academic shifts, including the New Left challenges to traditional curricula and scholarship which has seen the development of a number of classes on Tolkien documented in an anthology published by the Modern Language Association (Donovan). Changes in the academic culture, including the development and proliferation of film studies, game studies, and fan studies, are a result of those shifts. Arguably Tolkien's books may have gained a bit of cultural status in intervening decades, in part due to the more than fifty years of academic scholarship, which is why the necessity to expand Tolkien studies to include work on the adaptations and by scholars trained in a wider range of disciplines is important to note.

"Popular" is no longer a dirty word in academia due, in part, to organizations like the Popular Culture Association which was founded in 1971. The first paragraph on the organization's "History and Mission Page" states:

The Popular Culture Association was founded by scholars who believed the American Studies Association was too committed to the then existing canon of literary writers such as Melville, Hawthorne, and Whitman. They believed that the American Studies Association had lost its holistic approach to cultural studies; there was little room, as they saw it, for the study of material culture, popular music, movies, and comics.

The academic study of popular culture in was opposed to the idea that popular=bad, an idea originating in the elitism fostered by academic culture, an elitism which drove not only what was taught but who was allowed to attend and acquire "higher" education. That elitism has been challenged from within the culture in recent decades, in large part by the theories/methods grouped under cultural studies. As Dimitra Fimi argues in her chapter on the state of Tolkien scholarship in *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History: From Fairies to Hobbits* published in 2009:

though academics are elitist by nature, there has not been any better time for the inclusion of an author such as Tolkien in mainstream academic research. The boundary between 'high' literature and fiction that appeals

to mass audiences has become blurred, especially with the advent of ‘theory’ and cultural studies. ‘Classical’ texts are analyzed alongside comics, and popular fiction and films are discussed as ‘texts’ worth ‘reading.’ In this context, Tolkien can be rediscovered and re-analysed in a serious way—a process that has already started during the past few years (201).

The four articles in this edition are excellent examples of the new approaches that blur the boundaries between high and mass culture and bring new ideas to thinking about “Tolkien.” Maria Alberto analyzes aspects of fan film culture, filling a gap in fan studies and film studies, in the context of Tolkien’s theories of adaptation, expressed in his essay, “Translating Beowulf.” In Alberto’s “‘The Effort To Translate’: Fan Film Culture as Legendarium Translation,” she argues that the culture around fan films, one holding noncommercial values, provides an opportunity to consider questions of adaptation and canonicity in regard to commercial productions as well. She considers similarities and differences between films set in Tolkien’s Third Age (*Born of Hope* and *Hunt for Gollum*, both filling in gaps in Tolkien’s narrative, as well as the fan-edited version of *The Hobbit*), shorter films set in world of *The Silmarillion*, the epitextual and paratextual elements created to support the films, and a variety of other fan film productions (screenplays, fancasts, soundtracks, trailers), and other fans’ responses to the productions.

Dawn M. Walls-Thumma focuses on the Silmarillion fans who create fiction in the earlier historical periods of Tolkien’s Middle-earth in “Attainable Vistas: Historical Bias in Tolkien’s Legendarium as a Motive for Transformative Fanworks.” Contextualizing her analysis of the fiction communities in the complexities of Tolkien’s process of framing the Silmarillion narratives as historical documents created by named loremasters, a framing which was lost in Christopher Tolkien’s editing of the published *Silmarillion*, Walls-Thumma considers the extent to which historical bias in the canonical narrative is a possible motive for fan engagement. Her detailed analysis of characters fan chose to write about in Silmarillion fan fiction communities is accompanied by a survey of over 1000 fanfic writers about their reasons and pleasures for writing and reading the fiction.

Adam Brown and Deb Waterhouse-Watson apply narrative theory, specifically Henry Jenkins’ theory of transmedia storytelling, to tabletop games which have grown in popularity in recent years. In their essay, “Playing with the History of Middle-Earth: Transmedia Storytelling in Board Game Adaptations of Tolkien’s Writings,” they compare two well-known games, *Lord of the Rings* and *War of the Ring*, showing how their structural elements connect to key narrative elements of Tolkien’s work, with one game focusing more on the interpersonal



aspects of the Fellowship and the other focusing more on military strategies in the broader political world of Middle-earth. While both games offers players the chance to create their own narratives, one game offers a more collaborative structure and the other a more competitive one.

Helen Young presents a history of the digital games, licensed and unlicensed, based on Tolkien's work, showing what has changed over time in "Building Middle-earth Brick by Brick: Lego and *The Lord of the Rings* Franchise." Young considers the variety of elements that have contributed to the growing variety of digital games, including legal, technological, and fan activities, and concludes that while a game such as *Lego Dimensions* would undoubtedly horrify Michael Tolkien, the scope of "audience pleasures and playfulness" including fans who created games for fun as well as commercial franchises have all added to the narratives around Middle-earth associated with the phenomenon of "Tolkien." even the monstrous ones.

### **Contributors' Notes:**

Maria Alberto is an adjunct instructor at Cleveland State University, where she also recently completed her M.A. in English. Her research interests include narrative, canonicity, and the evolution of the epic.

Dr. Adam Brown is a Senior Lecturer in Digital Media at Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia. He is the author of *Judging 'Privileged' Jews: Holocaust Ethics, Representation and the 'Grey Zone'* (Berghahn, 2013) and co-author of *Communication, Digital Media and Everyday Life* (Oxford UP, 2015). Adam's interdisciplinary research has spanned Holocaust representation across various genres, women in film, surveillance cinema, mediations of rape, digital children's television, social media and nonhuman animal ethics, transmedia storytelling, and gaming cultures. Adam's current research and teaching interests center on digital media and gamification.

Michael David Elam, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Communication Arts at Regent University in Virginia Beach. Although primarily a medievalist, he presents regularly on Tolkien and Lewis, and has published work exploring the philosophical/theological foundations for beauty in Tolkien's *Ainulindalë*. He has a number of publications on topics such as manuscript emendation, Anselm's devotional theology, and great-books courses. He is also very interested in affective approaches to pedagogy.

Robin Anne Reid, Ph.D., is a Professor in the Department of Literature and Languages at Texas A&M University-Commerce. She was the co-director of two N. E. H Tolkien Institutes for School Teachers on Teaching Tolkien (2004, 2009) with Dr. Judy Ann Ford, History, A&M-Commerce. Her most recent Tolkien publications are an essay on female bodies and femininities in *The Lord*

of the Rings in *The Body in Tolkien's Legendarium*, edited by Christopher Vaccaro, and a bibliographic essay on the history of scholarship on female characters in Tolkien's work in *Perilous and Fair*, edited by Janet Brennan Croft and Leslie Donovan.

Dr. Deb Waterhouse-Watson is a postdoctoral research fellow at Macquarie University, Sydney, investigating the process of court reporting on criminal sexual assault trials involving Australian footballers. Her research interests include narrative theory, sex and gender in tabletop games and digital media. Web: <https://mq.academia.edu/DebWaterhouseWatson>. Twitter: @DebWaterhouseW

Dawn Walls-Thumma is the founder of the Silmarillion Writers' Guild and has presented and published articles on Tolkien's cosmogony, historical bias in the legendarium, and the Tolkien fan fiction community. As a fan fiction writer herself, she is an unrepentant defender of the Fëanorians and the idea that at least half of the population of Middle-earth was in fact female. Dawn is a teacher who has sacrificed more than one copy of *The Silmarillion* to the cause of getting her students interested in Tolkien.

Helen Young is a Lecturer in English at La Trobe University, Australia. She holds a PhD from The University of Sydney, and a Bachelor of Arts/Creative Arts (Hons I) from the University of Wollongong. Her research interests include fantasy, medievalism, and critical whiteness studies. Her recent publications include *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (Routledge, 2016), and two edited collections from Cambria Press: *Fantasy and Science Fiction Medievalisms: From Isaac Asimov to A Game of Thrones*, and *The Middle Ages in Popular Culture: Medievalism and Genre*.

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