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Tolkien and Alterity (2017) ed. by Christopher Vaccaro and Yvette Kisor

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Tolkien and Alterity, ed. by Christopher Vaccaro and Yvette Kisor. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. xii, 270 pp. \$99.99 (hardcover) ISBN 9783319610177. [Also available in ebook format.]

When I was reading out *The Lord of the Rings* to my daughter, one of the things she always commented on with great amusement was how everyone in Middle-earth seemed to regard everyone else as “queer folk.” Shire hobbits consider Breefolk, but also Bucklanders, queer, while in Bree, everyone to the west (and east) of them are queer. One of the most important things Frodo and the hobbits (and with them, my daughter) learned during the quest is how there is more to it than this, and that “queerness” has a lot of different meanings and shades. This is also what this volume presents: the numerous ways in which queerness becomes meaningful in Tolkien’s work. Cast as a volume celebrating the achievement of Jane Chance, one of the most important scholars to import theory into Tolkien Studies, *Tolkien and Alterity* is the best sort of “In Honor” volume there is: it collects essays that apply and carry on Chance’s concerns and central concepts, and thus offers not only a cross-section of what her work pioneered and enabled, but presents a collection that actively furthers those concerns, a valuable theoretical volume in its own right that shows very solidly how productive Chance’s approaches and her favored concepts can be in writing about Tolkien. It does this by providing a succinct overview of theoretical work done on gender and race differences in Tolkien, but then going on to very entertaining and interesting essays that also serve as a sample of what sort of readings these approaches produce from the texts—and in “the texts,” sometimes Peter Jackson’s films are also included, showing how what Brian Rosebury had called the “Tolkien phenomenon” has indeed grown into a vast corpus in popular culture, including visual, filmic, and also fan-produced (although this aspect is only touched upon in the volume) texts.

The concepts and approaches forming the basis of all this scholarship are expertly summarized in the volume’s “Introduction” (1-13) by the editors, Christopher Vaccaro and Yvette Kisor. The “alterity” of the volume’s title can be understood in a number of ways, including (but not restricted to) the one deriving from psychology, the work of Freud, Jung or Lacan. Lacan’s “big Other” and Kristeva’s “abject” naturally come first: alterity, in this sense, is seen as what is “not only radically and inaccessibly Other; [but also] a tantalizing and perpetual threat to the subject’s existence” (2-3). But “Othering” can happen in an Orientalising, (post-)colonial discourse too, and the editors cite Paul Zumthor, H. R. Jauss and C. S. Lewis to show that Tolkien’s beloved sources, medieval literary works, are also assigned an “essential alterity” (3) today: medieval literature is indeed seen as an “Other” to the modern, contemporary text (4), thus echoing the humanists who gave the Middle Ages its name—definitely not modern, but also not classical (which is perhaps “Other” in a different way). This terminological overview is useful because it outlines what kinds of alterity the reader can expect in the

essays, and the “Introduction” goes on to describe the structure of the book and its different themes.

Part I, “The State of the Scholarship,” is the book’s cross-section of work already done. The two essays contained here, (maybe) punningly embodying difference even in their titles, are Yvette Kisor’s “bibliographical” essay on “Tolkien and Alterity” (17-32) and Robin Anne Reid’s “bibliographic” essay on “Race in Tolkien Studies” (33-74). Kisor’s survey on “Queer Tolkien” emphasizes that queer need not be understood in terms of sexuality (although it can), but can also cover any kind of emphatic “difference.” The articles she includes provide various examples of these usages, but perhaps the most important point is the mention of Tison Pugh’s *Queering Medieval Genres* (26-7): Pugh’s contention that the queer has a “propensity . . . to subvert genre expectations” and “to destabilize narrative” (26) seem particularly applicable to Tolkien’s fictitious genres, which mix and interact with each other, thus not only “queering” the text by their “medievalness,” but even within that, by their use of difference to include in the fiction the interactions of those genres as themselves frustrating expectations. After all, what *do* we expect from an Elvish genre if not radical difference from any writing produced by mortals? Reid’s essay, with its copious notes, surveys the question of race, where she distinguishes “text-based” approaches and those that concern “interactions between the text and the primary world” (34). It is here that the question of Tolkien’s critical (or non- or even anti-critical) reception emerges as a field in its own right: the perception of Tolkien as a “racist” (quite recently I myself have spoken with an elderly academic who considered Tolkien as a “proto-fascist”) or even anti-Semite (45) definitely shows that his representation of race is often seen as problematic. In bringing critical whiteness studies to the mix of approaches (40) and discounting Tolkien’s avowed authorial intention (42), Reid eventually (and I think very rightly) calls for a reception theory that includes fan reaction: “choosing selected letters and invoking authorial intentionality to defend Tolkien has not been sufficient to stop either critical analyses about race or the need for critical analyses of Tolkien’s works which are widely perceived as significant cultural phenomena” (54). This would be a third methodology, suggested at the beginning of the paper: “inter- and multi-disciplinary foundation for discussing race in Tolkien studies” (34).

Part II, “Women and the Feminine,” comprises two complementary essays in one being a study of a specific character, while the other examines larger conceptual frameworks in the ways they relate to (or determine) some characters in Tolkien. Amy Amendt-Raguege’s “Revising Lobelia” (77-93) takes a look at the character of Lobelia Sackville-Baggins as an example of Tolkien’s making a hero out of a “common *woman*” (79) by taking the common virtues of medieval and modern heroes, “courage, honor, loyalty, and resolve” (81). Lobelia consistently stood up for what she perceived as her right, even against Sharkey’s men; even though “her actions do not represent a *change* of character, [they do] a *growth* of character” (88). But growth is change; and while it is certainly true that Lobelia in her way exhibits these

traditional virtues, I think Amendt-Raguege fails to account for the element of *parody*. This is strange, since she even brings in Tolkien's own admission that Lobelia is "modeled on a real, live woman" (85), and the connection with *The Hobbit*, which points out how many of Lobelia's actions are in fact comic exaggerations of a Victorian (also hobbitish) type. She also credits E. V. Gordon with "coauthor[ing]" the translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (78), while Tolkien worked with Gordon only on their edition in Leeds, not the translation. All in all, the paper is a very entertaining and thought-provoking reading of a character frequently seen as most comically unheroic; but I think the parodic aspect, carried over from *The Hobbit*, is sorely missing from the picture. Kristine Larsen's "Medieval Organicism or Modern Feminist Science? Bombadil, Elves, and Mother Nature" (95-108) examines how the medieval conception of a "nurturing Mother Nature," derived from Plato as opposed to a more "scientific" Aristotelian conception (96), informs Tolkien's representation of the creatures' relation to the world. As Tolkien himself explained in letters, the Elves represent the "artistic, aesthetic, and purely scientific aspects of the Human nature . . . a desire to observe and understand [the world] for its own sake and as 'other'" (100). This is in sharp contrast to the "active experimentation" of technological development, a "domination over nature [which parallels] a dominion over women and female sexuality" (97). Larsen's examples, the Silmarils as "a work of subjugating nature" (98), the Entwines whose orchards stand for "applied technology" (101), and Bombadil, who "embodies the organicist understanding of alterity as being different from yet a part of nature" (102) are instructive and point out interesting questions: especially in the early versions, Tolkien often described the making of the Silmarils in explicitly "magical" terms (something he came to condemn and cut later), and kept referring to them as "holy," thus making them perhaps less "unnatural" but "sacrilegious"; and the Entwines are a fascinating point where technology is gendered female. The "feminist science/epistemology" that Larsen proposes at her conclusion (102), describing scientific observation in traditional creative metaphors, is a fine point of connection to another essay in the volume, on Lévinas's philosophy of respect for the Other.

The next Part of the book, "The Queer," figures Saruman and the heroes of Tolkien's shorter works as queer or queering. In "Cinema, Sexuality, Mechanical Reproduction" (111-22), Valerie Rohy writes about Peter Jackson's queering Tolkien's text on several counts. Despite its heavy load of theory and fast pace, the paper is a superb read, showing how the queer is shifted in Jackson's movie from the homoeroticism of Frodo and Sam (which critics love proving cannot exist, exactly "because it is overt, not covert, and literal, not ironic," 111) to perversity, the monstrous birth of Saruman's Uruk-hai, thus "imagin[ing] perversity as an indecent *form of reproduction*" (114), setting the hobbits' "sentimentalized, sublimated homosexuality" against "monstrous, queer reproduction" (115). Tolkien's reference to Saruman "in his decay" when writing about the pirated Ace paperback edition of *The Lord of*

the Rings figures the pirate edition as queer (116); Jackson's "defus[ing] the problem of same-sex love" by the invention of Saruman's parthenogenic Uruk-hai highlight the queering Jackson's many revisions perform on the text (117). Rohy closes by showing how the actual filmic production of the Orcs by CGI, "no less than Saruman, mechanically and asexually manufacture[s] the semblance of living beings" (118)—ultimately, how the films' vision of even the idyllic pre-industrial imagery is dependent on such technology. The admirably concise closure, that "straight narrative is a function of queer magic" (118), connects right to Stephen Yandell's essay on Tolkien's minor (queer) heroes. But first we remain with Saruman: Christopher Vaccaro's "Saruman's Sodomitic Resonances: Alain de Lille's *De Planctu Naturae* and J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*" (123-47) brings a medieval text to comment on Saruman's "perversions." The Nature of Larsen's essay comes back in the form of Alain de Lille's Natura who represents a "neutralized Christianity," symbolizing "an accord between human behavior and God's law," but warns about "misguided *eros*" (126). Vaccaro surveys how the term "sodomy" in Alain is linked to sins of excess or *luxuria* (127-8), how greed and pride "produce the ideal moral conditions for lust to exist" (128), and goes on to find parallels in Saruman's "materiality" and pride (129) Although his desire for power and knowledge are never figured as "sexually perverse," it nevertheless "inserts into the text's moral landscape all that the Orc represents: an unspoken and repressed yet powerful sexuality" by his making of the Uruk-hai (132), and allows the ruffians to "figuratively sodomize" (133) the Shire. Saruman's "perversion of Nature is [also] linked to the colorful rhetoric" (138), and the paper concludes that all this is a warning: very much in line with Alain and his medieval tradition, Tolkien "sought to 'foster virtuous behavior' in their readers" (138). The comparison is very much relevant, but even Vaccaro admits that "the sole example of an overtly sexualized desire in the novel" (134) is Gríma's for Éowyn: Saruman's, the Orcs', even Frodo's and Sam's sexuality is always only symbolically assigned. Orcs' "barely containable sexuality" is merely a symbol too: we never see or even hear about Orcs raping women, we never see Orcish women, children, or indeed queer Orcs. What is stressed, however, in Saruman's case certainly, is his perversion of knowledge, which Vaccaro connects with desire, specifically the desire for domination. Gríma's "overt sexual desire" is seen as "depraved" (134) at least partly because of Gríma's character and his devious way of expressing that desire. Altogether, this paper is a fine complement to Rohy's conclusions about Saruman's "queering effect" in the Jackson movies. The third essay in this Part, Stephen Yandell's "Cruising Faery: Queer Desire in Giles, Niggle, and Smith" (149-79) argues that Giles, Niggle and Smith, heroes of Tolkien's shorter works, "embody a range of non-straight positions while negotiating their outsider status within society" (152). The themes of marginalized individuals, mainstream conformity, and hidden lives recur in these works; the autobiographical aspect of *Farmer Giles* and *Smith* also becomes relevant in that professionally Tolkien explored "the margins of his

already marginalized fields of medieval literature and language” (153), while the Middle-earth works were “a queer project, consistently challenging ‘segregation of the Other’” (154). Yandell points to the queering device of the manuscript in *Farmer Giles* and Giles’s “negotiat[ing of] a range of shifting boundaries” (157); how Niggle’s “queerness is brandished as a strength” (163) and the male companionship (reminiscent of the Inklings) that he needs for his creative work; Smith’s “closeted class of faeries” (166) and how “narrativizing the desires of Faery [is] ‘faerying’ the text” (a wonderful term; 164). All this, he argues, show these characters’ trips to their respective Otherworlds as a form of “cruising”: “pursu[ing] forms of pleasure tied to non-straight character traits, follow[ing] desires that grow from internal conflicts, and respond[ing] actively to the ways in which their desires place them at odds with mainstream society” (169). Yandell’s paper is another type of exploration in how the symbolically sexualized aspects of characters and narratives can be used to detect the queerness, the alterity of the fantastic, and is a very welcome addition to the corpus of works dealing with Tolkien’s shorter fiction.

Part IV, “Language,” echoes Part II in containing a paper about the general outlook of Tolkien’s relationship to alterity, and a study of a specific kind of language in *The Lord of the Rings*: Orcish discourse. Deirdre Dawson’s “Language and Alterity in Tolkien and Lévinas” (183-203) introduces in detail Emmanuel Lévinas’s philosophical approach to alterity. Dawson notes that Tolkien himself endured “various forms of marginalization” (184), and goes on, in very long paragraphs, to explain Lévinas’s ideas about recognizing and respecting, taking responsibility for the “Other” as a necessary premise for the self, and the comprehension, knowledge and love of the “Other” which is conducted primarily in the language used to engage with it. Dawson points out how Tolkien in some way anticipated Lévinas’s ideas by “emphasiz[ing] the importance of language to the identity of both peoples and individuals” (187), and lines up examples from *The Lord of the Rings*: the Company’s exchange at Kibil-nâla (190; the name, incidentally, should be hyphenated), Legolas’s and Gimli’s taking responsibility for each other (although I’m not sure about Elves’ “abhorrence for underground caverns” (191)—Legolas’s father, after all, *lives* in an underground palace, as did many other illustrious Elvish kings in the First Age), or Treebeard’s for the hobbits (193); Tolkien’s mentor figures (194) and the cross-race lovers who “transgress cultural boundaries” (195), or Théoden’s and Aragorn’s respect for the Púkel-men, the “noble savages” (197; it is interesting to note that “wild and wary as beasts,” which is used for the hunted Púkel-men, is also used of the outlaw Túrin in *The Silmarillion*). The parallels are convincing in showing that Tolkien not only held views about the respect towards, engagement with, and taking responsibility for whatever is figured as “Other,” but also inscribed these views into his characters and narratives. However, one of the most interesting details for me is the Lévinas quote that “The metaphysical desire tends toward *something else entirely*, toward the *absolutely other*” (194)—a fascinating starting point for a queer metaphysics. In “The Orcs and the Others:

Familiarity as Estrangement in *The Lord of the Rings*” (205-22), Verlyn Flieger returns to Orcs to examine how an instance of “realism,” the Orcs’ “realistic” speech patterns, familiar from the real world, works to defamiliarize and queer them within Tolkien’s world. This “radical estrangement through the incongruity of unexpected familiarities” (205; Flieger later cites the trolls’ somewhat similar speech from *The Hobbit* too: 216) estranges Orcs “from their own identity as monsters . . . , illustrating the queerness of monstrosity” (207). Flieger suggests Tolkien used this register for his Orcs because he was professionally interested in slang and jargon (as uses of language), and because this was “the most jarring kind of language [he] had at his command” (211-12), but notes that this bit of realism can in fact be a “relief” sometimes for the reader amid Tolkien’s archaisms (215). The language of the Other, and the language we use to represent the Other, these two papers seem to suggest, are crucial aspects of our construction of exactly how it is different.

The book’s last part, Part V, engages with “Identities,” and sadly contains the only essay which is definitely problematic. Melissa Ruth Aurul’s “Silmarils and Obsession: The Undoing of Fëanor” (225-39) signals its own difference from the rest even by the faulty format of its block quotations. I find applying the psychoanalytic categories and processes to the interpretation of a fictional character, frankly, unsound methodology; Fëanor is not a person, but a stylized representation of one. I’m not sure what the phrase “psychological nature” (225) even means in the case of a fictional, non-realistic, non-human character. Aurul dutifully brings in Kristeva (the abject, the *chora*, the semiotic/symbolic modalities) and other theory (interpreting the Silmarils as fetish, 229) to trace Fëanor’s psychological development and its problems, leading to an obsessive love for the Silmarils; but the reader is reminded of an eager student who has just read Freud for the first time and gleefully discovers it in whatever he or she happens to be reading. But *The Silmarillion* is not a realist novel, its characters are not realist characters from whom we could expect our contemporary sense of psychological representation. Fëanor is also an Elf, and who knows how Elvish psychology differs from even fictional human psychology: to say that Míriel “most likely [...] was suffering from postpartum depression” (228) or that “Fëanor’s horror of castration and the loss of the maternal were projected into his obsessive love for the Silmarils” (230) is, I think, to miss the point altogether. In other cases, as with the statement “by the violent act of Kinslaying, [Fëanor] was able to survive in the symbolic without Míriel’s guidance in the semiotic” (232), I am not even sure the claim makes sense: is it suggested that the Kinslaying is a late literalizing of the Oedipus complex, whereby Fëanor can finally properly enter the symbolic? But then should the Silmarils not be seen as the result of Fëanor’s *literal* need of unadulterated, unmediated meaning instead of being read as fetishes and sublimations of the abject (229, 231)—not something sublimated, crafted, but grasped directly (clearly an impossibility)? Quite apart from this, the paper contains factual mistakes too: the Dwarves in Doriath did not “succumb to the lure of the Jewels” (231)

because they only ever saw one of them; the music in the “Ainlindalë” is never called the “Music of Ilúvatar” (233) since it is made by the Ainur; and in the bibliography, the publication date of the Ballantine edition, 1979 is given with Houghton Mifflin as a publisher (which is located in Boston, not in New York). Luckily, the volume’s last piece, “The Other as *Kolbíttr*: Tolkien’s Faramir and Éowyn as Alfred and Æthelflæd” (241-61), by John Holmes, compensates for this, and reading “queer” as someone who does not conform or fit into the heroic tradition, suggests two historical Anglo-Saxons as parallels to the queer Faramir and Éowyn. Holmes’s suggestion that Tolkien’s own identity as outsider could also be described by the character type of the *kolbíttr*, dull, domestic, inactive, “not truly masculine” (242, but admittedly a description of the Norse *kolbíttr*, not Tolkien himself) is in line with many of the volume’s contributors portraying Tolkien like this and drawing attention to his alterity, in various ways and contexts. Holmes proceeds by comparing Faramir and Éowyn to persons in the 9th-10th-century West Saxon royal dynasty: Alfred (later The Great) and Æthelflæd. Faramir’s and Alfred’s contrast to their brother(s) and their love of “scholarship” (247) supply common points; writing about Éowyn, the Valkyrie comparison and the medieval-Germanic sister’s-son motif is mentioned, and the analogue is with the “strong female leader” Æthelflæd (251). Holmes also explains how Tolkien uses the terms “lord” and “lady” in Rohan in their old Anglo-Saxon sense (strengthening the parallels), then concludes that the heroism of all four was “powered by the tension between an implicit heroic norm and a scorned deviation from that norm” (257).

As volumes of Palgrave’s *New Middle Ages* series, *Tolkien and Alterity* is also a handsome hardback with a very attractive black-and-white map image from *The Lord of the Rings* as its cover. It includes a short Index and the usual notes about the contributors. The book is meticulously edited with few typos, and thus gives a very pleasant impression in reading. This is only compromised by the fact that endnotes are placed at the end of the individual chapter, followed by individual bibliographies, instead of merging these into one bibliography for the entire book (since many of the contributors refer to some works, and all do to Tolkien’s texts, this would in fact have saved space and paper too, not to mention its practicality).

Perhaps the most important difference that this volume shows up from a variety of angles is that of Tolkien himself, because in these papers we often see not the Tolkien we have gotten used to, the staid, conservative, Catholic don who detests theory and Freud particularly, but another one who is explicitly interested in such matters. This latter is of course a metaphor, but a very useful and long overdue one: the volume gives the welcome impression that just as one does not have to apologize any more if one works on Tolkien, one also does not have to if one approaches Tolkien with theory. It says you do not have to deal with the foreseeable biographical objections that “Tolkien wouldn’t have liked this” or “Tolkien certainly didn’t mean this”; you do not need to produce excuses for “this approach” or “that approach,” hedging your

theoretical bets against a legendary figure who, as everyone knows, did not like theory, and therefore any theoretical approach to his work must be *wrong*. In fact, to go beyond such apologizing for theory, this approach or that approach, I would like to propose the concept of the *disapproach*, which, as the authors of this volume illustrate, center on the text and what it can mean in the context of our interpretive frameworks and conceptions of cultural practices, perhaps going directly against what we know about the biographical Tolkien's own preferences—displacing meaning from author to the text. Disapproaching Tolkien is what we need, and certainly does not mean that we are projecting our own interests and theoretical hobbyhorses onto him or his works. This is one way of reacting to another sense of alterity that has evolved around Tolkien: that of classicization. If, as the editors cite Zumthor, Jauss and Lewis in the "Introduction," medieval literature is already "other," "classic(al)" works are even more so. Tolkien's reception already shows signs of his works becoming "classics" of the field: few people, readers, writers or critics, question their significance, but there is a faint sense that you do not need to read them, because however significant they may be, they are not of "our time" any more. Tolkien's text, with its heavy reliance on genres and discourses, concepts and frameworks from the queer part of European literary history is within the contemporary fantastic slowly starting to get "dated," and disapproaching (not *disrespecting*) it is the critic's way of showing how those queer genres and discourses, concepts and frameworks are in fact only as queer as Bucklanders or Breefolk. This is, I think, the real significance of this volume, and the work of Jane Chance which it celebrates: the possibility of defamiliarizing (queering, if you will) an all-too-familiar Tolkien and all that he stands for, and discover what a lot more his work in fact stands for.

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