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Tolkien in Love: Pictures from Winter 1912-1913

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Abstract

Makes a case for examining Tolkien’s work as an amateur visual artist as key to understanding the important stresses and changes in his life over the winter months of 1912–1913, as he anticipated reuniting with Edith Bratt after their forced separation.

Additional Keywords

Neave, Jane; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Relation to Edith Bratt Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Relation to Jane Neave; Tolkien, J.R.R. Visual art,



TOLKIEN IN LOVE: PICTURES FROM WINTER 1912-1913

NANCY BUNTING

IN TOLKIEN'S DRAWINGS, COLLECTED IN AN ENVELOPE labeled *Earliest Ishnesses*, are a cluster of arresting images from December 1912 and early 1913 whose meanings have eluded clarification. They have been described and reproduced in Wayne Hammond and Christina Scull's *J.R.R. Tolkien: Artist and Illustrator [Artist]*. John Garth, in *Tolkien and the Great War*, notes that Vincent Trought, one of the original members of the T.C.B.S., the literary club that Tolkien helped organize at King Edward's School, died January 20, 1912 after becoming seriously ill in the fall of 1911. Garth attributes Tolkien's dark drawings, including *Before* and *Afterwards* as well as *Undertenishness*, *Grownupishness*, and *The End of the World*, to this loss and the many changes in his life (28-29). Garth believes that the date of these drawings is important. I agree, and I believe the date of December 1912 holds the key to understanding them.

In December 1912, Ronald Tolkien wrote a play, *The Bloodhound, the Chef, and the Suffragette*, in which he played a detective, i.e. "the bloodhound." In the play, a lost heiress has fallen in love with a penniless student living in the same lodging house. She will be free to marry on her twenty-first birthday if her father does not discover her first (Carpenter 59). This play clearly referred to Tolkien's relationship with Edith Bratt, whom he saw as an heiress and whom he met as a "penniless student" while they were sharing the same lodging house. Ronald Tolkien would be turning twenty-one on January 3, 1913, when he would be released from the guardianship of Father Francis Morgan, who had not allowed any contact between the two for at least two years. At the time of the composing of this play, Ronald Tolkien was planning to write Edith Bratt to propose, and he did so on his twenty-first birthday. After he came to visit her on January 8, 1913, she accepted. Becoming serious about his studies and their future life together, Tolkien promised Edith that he would work hard to gain a good degree to ensure their financial security. He then began a diary to record the number of hours he worked along with performance of his religious duties (Priestman 27).

His anticipation of this event is seen, not just in his play of December 1912, but also in his drawings. Specifically, *The End of the World*, *The Back of*

Beyond, and *Undertinishness* (with *Other People* on the verso) are all dated December 1912. Hammond and Scull comment on the attractiveness of *Undertinishness*:

[N]ot only because it is abundantly coloured like a flower garden in summer, but also because it is symmetrical, and symmetry always satisfies the human soul. [...] One is invited into the landscape, to walk between the trees and up the hill to see what lies beyond. [...] Tolkien has played a visual trick. The 'forest' is also a butterfly, the 'trees' in the distance its 'antennae' and 'eyes'. (*Artist 37*)

They question further whether the painting expresses "the freedom and vision of youth, when everything invites and colours seem more brilliant than they are in reality—yet with the butterfly standing for an ephemeral nature? Or is it an expression of the joy Tolkien lost just before his tenth year, when he moved from the countryside he loved [...]?" (38). Rather, surely this is an expression of the joy of a young man in love anticipating the long awaited reunion with his beloved.

In *The End of the World* "a tiny stick-figure blithely (or bravely?) steps into the abyss." They see this as pessimistic but add,

But what glories lie beyond the world's end: the Sun, the Moon, a star, all essential elements in Tolkien's mythology and frequent motifs in his art, here in a restless sky drawn as if by Van Gogh. On its verso is a complementary image, *The Back of Beyond*, in which a road leads from distant hills to a shuttered window in the foreground, through which a small man peers over the edge of the picture to whatever lies 'below'—peering, but in this case going no further. (*Artist 40*)

Surely, proposing to a beloved with whom he had had almost no contact for almost three years and making a commitment to marriage and family is enough to foster feelings that it was "The End of" one's blithe world of irresponsible student life. Further, he faced the disapproval of his family, but with the hoped-for compensations of love, a new family, and stability. The "restless sky" would reflect this clash of emotions. *The Back of the Beyond* expresses how Tolkien can only peer into an unknown future.¹

The drawing of *Xanadu* from early 1913 also seems to belong to this sequence. Hammond and Scull note that it was done quickly and roughly on the back of a tailor's bill. This drawing features the "stately pleasure dome" of Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* with a plunging river like the River Alph and its "chasm,

¹ "Back of Beyond' is any place ever so far off, very out of the way" (*Roverandom* 103n71).

with ceaseless turmoil seething.” Here the young Ronald Tolkien may be indulging in fleeting thoughts of the carnal pleasures attendant on having been united with his loved one in January 1913.

On the reverse of *Undertenishness* is *Other People*. There is:

[A] tall, tunnel-like space with a small figure setting out to walk down a narrow path towards a lighted opening; but he is menaced at the sides by huge figures like chessmen. [...] [T]he implication is clear that others were preventing Tolkien from reaching his goal [...]. (*Artist* 40)

Hammond and Scull comment “which goal, we cannot say,” but given the date certainly it is his reunion with Edith Bratt as he kept his plans for his hoped-for engagement secret (Carpenter 61). Previously, it had been Father Morgan who had required Ronald Tolkien to break off contact with Edith Bratt. However, now opposition from his family was to be expected, as middle-class men were expected to be providers for their wife and children and tended to marry late (as did Ronald Tolkien’s father at the age of thirty-four to a twenty-one-year-old; further, his paternal grandfather’s second wife was twenty-seven years younger than he). This sentiment was expressed very well in a letter from Edith’s ‘Uncle Jessop’ to her guardian, Stephen Gately: “I have nothing to say against Tolkien, he is a cultured gentm. [sic], but his prospects are poor in the extreme, and when he will be in a position to marry I cannot imagine” (John and Priscilla Tolkien, *The Tolkien Family Album* [Album] 34).

This theme of disapproval is further treated in

Grownupishness, which may shed light in opposition. This strange amalgam of an elongated, tonsured head with blank eyes, shoes, circles, squares, exclamation and question marks, and two long-fingered hands, above the inscriptions ‘Sightless : Blind : Well-Wrapped-Up’ and ‘1913 (summer)’, is on the same thick, oblong paper as *Undertenishness*, which suggests that they were made about the same time and, like *Before* and *Afterwards*, thematically related. Could *Grownupishness* show, then, next to the colourful picture of youth, the black and white view of a particular grown-up, or adults in general—a narrow vision, an inward-looking attitude? (*Artist* 38)

Grownupishness is the companion to *Undertenishness* and a continuation of the anticipated response of “other people,” specifically, I would suggest, Tolkien’s Aunt Jane (*née* Suffield) Neave, a sister of Tolkien’s mother, Mabel Suffield Tolkien. The geometric forms of circles and squares could refer to her, as she successfully taught Tolkien geometry as a child in 1900 before he was accepted at King Edward’s School in June 1900 at the age of eight (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*

[*Letters* 377]. The tonsured head certainly recalls what would have been the then well-known picture of Jane Suffield in her graduation gown, looking quite sexless, that was used in the posters during her successful bid to be elected to the school board in Birmingham that same year, 1900 (Burns). In a letter to his Aunt Jane Neave in November 1961, Tolkien contests and disagrees with her certainty about what children like, e.g., her prejudice that *The Pied Piper* “never fails” to please children. He then explicitly uses the term saying: “It failed with me, even as a child, when I could not yet distinguish the shallow vulgarity of Browning from the general grown-uppishness of things that I was expected to like” (*Letters* 311).

Scull and Hammond state that Tolkien was “especially fond” of his Aunt Jane (Scull and Hammond 2:637). Morton and Hayes note that Tolkien’s address to her as “Dearest Aunt Jane” “tells us something about the relationship” between them (*Tolkien’s Gedling* [Gedling] 10). This is certainly the impression given when in late 1961 she asked him “if you wouldn’t get out a small book with Tom Bombadil at the heart of it, the sort of book that we old ‘uns can afford to buy for Christmas presents” (Carpenter 244). In response, Tolkien put together *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil and Other Verses from the Red Book* (1962). Further, Tolkien boasts of being “[b]lessed” with a “shrewd, sound-hearted maiden” aunt who is also a “professional aunt” (*Letters* 308). However, this occurred when Tolkien was seventy and a financially successful author and his aunt was ninety. The earlier relationship seems to have been marked by the objectionable “grownupishness” described above.

For example, in 1939 at the age of thirty-seven, Tolkien wrote in Manuscript B for his lecture “On Fairy-Stories”: “I can vividly remember, re-feel, the vexation (such emotions bite deep and live long) caused me in early childhood by the assertions of instructive relations (in their gift-books) that e.g. snowflakes were (or were more beautiful than) fairy jewels, or that the marvels of the ocean depths were more wonderful than the strangest creatures of Fairyland. [...] I was not going to be quibbled into science nor cheated out of Faerie” (*On Fairy-Stories* 233-4). Tolkien goes on to state that his reading and hearing of fairy-stories stopped by the time he was eight, i.e. by 1900. One of those “instructive relations,” who knew him “in early childhood,” would have been his Aunt Jane, who obtained a college degree in botany and geology by 1895 by correspondence course from the University of London (Burns). As a practicing school teacher she certainly would have been likely to send him ‘scientific books.’ Moreover, she also knew her sister, who called herself and was addressed as ‘Mab’ as in Mab, queen of the fairies (Carpenter 29). Mabel Tolkien also was eager to see her life in terms of fairies as seen in her description of the infant Ronald: “Baby does look such a fairy when he’s *very* much dressed up in white frills and white shoes. [...]”

When he's very much *undressed*, I think he looks more of an elf still" (Carpenter 14).

The interpersonal distance suggested here by this memory of intense vexation seems to have been shared by Tolkien's bother, Hilary. Hilary, during his deployment in World War I, chose Tolkien's wife, Edith, as his "next-of kin" to be notified in case of injury or death, despite the fact that he had been working for and living on the farm owned by his Aunt Jane just prior to the war (*Album* 39).

While maintaining proper social contact, Tolkien clearly did not inform her of more personally meaningful interests like his writing. This can be seen in Aunt Jane's letter of October 1, 1937, where she has heard about the publication of *The Hobbit* and writes:

This sounds so exciting: —what is it? —A fairy story? A novel? What? that I hasten to do all but *demand* instant enlightenment . . . I *think* unless I become altogether importunate and aggressive I may never hear more of it! (italics in original; Priestman 50)

One can notice an abundance of question marks and exclamation points that must have been Aunt Jane's signature when writing, consistent with the picture, *Grownupishness*. Also, there is a markedly demanding tone.

Aunt Jane is also a candidate for some of the attributes of Lobelia from *The Hobbit*, as Tolkien states in a letter of December 1955, when his aunt would be in her eighties, that "One elderly lady—in part the model for 'Lobelia' indeed, though she does not suspect it" would have retaliated against his critics (*Letters* 229). The independent, competent, assertive, and self-assured Jane Neave, as repeatedly characterized by Morton and Hayes, would certainly have responded. Tolkien was very knowledgeable about plants and was known for his careful choice of names; pointedly, lobelia is also known as puke-weed. *The Hobbit* was written between the summer of 1930 and December 1932 or January 1933 close to the time of 1939 manuscript for "On Fairy-Stories." The strong feeling of 'vexation' may have determined the choice of name, as puke-weed would certainly seem to fit Tolkien's clear distaste, if not revulsion, for his aunt's "grownupishness."

Despite the seeming endearment of Tolkien's salutation of "Dearest Aunt," this may have been the address that she expected as opposed to one that Tolkien spontaneously chose. This can be seen in the fact that she signed herself "M/A" standing for "mother/aunt" to May and Colin Brookes-Smith, the children of her partners in the ownership of Phoenix and Manor Farms (*Gedling* 10). Her wish to be addressed in this way seemingly ignores that fact that these two children both had two available parents. This would be a good example of her being quite opinionated and 'blind' to other views. Her expectation of being in

charge as a teacher, as a warden at St. Andrew's University from 1909 to 1911, and her managing a farm seems to have given her an "imposing personality" (*Gedling* 23). However, this would not have fit well with Tolkien, who was "temperamentally resistant to any form of military discipline—'bossing about' as he put it" (*Gedling* 51). This resistance was noticeably seen in his long history of procrastination when needing to finish papers for publication. Aunt Jane's letter of 1937 certainly has a peremptory tone and in her letter of July 1962 she continues to tell Tolkien what to do when she wanted to return a gift of a check of one hundred pounds, suggesting "that the money could be spent on buying a wheelchair for Tolkien's wife Edith, who was suffering from arthritis" (*Letters* 315; *Gedling* 25). At seventy and financially secure, Tolkien could afford to overlook her demanding behavior.

There may also be another possible connection with his aunt's displeasure depicted in the picture *Grownupishness*. Tolkien resigned from King Edward's Horse in February 1913. His discharge certificate, dated Feb 28, 1913, certifies he enlisted on Nov 28, 1911 and was discharged "of his own request and that his claims have been properly settled" (Scull and Hammond, 1.37). Jane Neave's husband, Edwin Neave, a manager of an insurance company, died May 8, 1909. In the probated will he left 730 pounds 16 shillings and 4 pence to his surviving wife (*Gedling* 15). However, the will would not have reported any life insurance policies that Edwin might have had. Aunt Jane Neave saw both her sister-in-law, Beatrice Suffield, and her sister, Mabel Tolkien, reduced to poverty level by the deaths of their husbands. When Jane Neave finally made what at that time was a woman's most important financial investment, namely marriage, she almost certainly guaranteed herself a lucrative widowhood in the form of the best life insurance policy available on her husband, a manager of an insurance company. She was married to him for only four years and always referred to him as "the man I married" rather than "my husband," a rather cool form of address (*Gedling* 15).²

She clearly came into substantial money because in March 1911 a real estate agent bought Phoenix Farm (then Church Farm) on her behalf (*Gedling* 18). Although she was employed between July 1909 and June 1911 as Warden of University Hall at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, giving her mother's illness as grounds for resignation, the income from that position certainly would

² Aunt Jane's cool references to her dead husband, who left her in such a secure and generous financial situation, were probably difficult for Tolkien. Tolkien would have had very fond memories of Edwin Neave, a popular, amateur entertainer on the banjo, who had young Ronald Tolkien come and live with him in Hove during the terrible spring of 1904 when his mother was in the hospital due to diabetes and his Suffield grandparents were caring for his younger brother, Hilary (*Gedling* 14; Carpenter 29). Tolkien would not have forgotten Edwin giving him time and attention during his time of anxious waiting.

not have funded the major purchase of Phoenix Farm (*Gedling* 16). She then took her nephews, Ronald and Hilary Tolkien, with her on a walking tour in Switzerland in August and September 1911. This tour group included, among others, the family of the other owners of the farm, the Brookes-Smiths. Having come into money as indicated by her land purchase and a vacation in Switzerland, she certainly could have financed Ronald Tolkien being in a cavalry unit as participants were required to pay for the upkeep of their mount and Tolkien would not have had the money for that. The November 1911 date when Tolkien joined would have coincided with his aunt's financial generosity, and she certainly would have been pleased and willing to indulge the first person in either the Tolkien or Suffield families to "go up" to university as she was only able to obtain her degree by correspondence due to her being a woman (Burns). This generosity would have been in keeping with her later financial help to Tolkien's younger brother, Hilary, with buying his farm at Blackminster near Evesham in 1923 when she bought her farm at Dormston, known as Bag End (Morton and Hayes, *Tolkien's Bag End* 30; Burns). At that time she had the available finances as she had sold the Gedling farms in 1922 and also had been paid by Brookes-Smith for managing the farms.

Her opposition to Tolkien's engagement may have been based not only on his obvious lack of financial stability with which to support a family, but also on her view that her nephew, Ronald, was repeating his mother's impetuous pattern of falling in love at eighteen and then planning to get married at twenty-one. Her anticipated displeasure with the announcement of Tolkien's engagement could have led him to resign as he could no longer afford the fees indicated by "his claims have been properly settled." The timing is certainly suggestive, though not definitive.

Consequently, the mounting anticipation that young Ronald Tolkien experienced in December 1912 was expressed not only in his writing a play but also in the whole series of drawings from December 1912 and early 1913. His excitement and happiness, combined with anxiety about how to handle his guardian's and his family's disapproval, were elaborated and expressed in these drawings. These pictures also shed light on his long, complicated, and changing relationship with his mother's sister, Aunt Jane. These drawings have not been used before as complementary and validating points for understanding Tolkien's life and writings except by Hammond and Scull in their *Artist and Illustrator*.

However, there seem to be more connections as some of his earlier pictures, *Before*, *Afterwards*, *Wickedness*, and *Thought* are likely to belong thematically to the influence of *The Black Douglas* (Bunting). Further exploration of these drawings may open up more insights into Tolkien's work and life.

IN MEMORY OF MAGGIE BURNS

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