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Abstract

Master of Middle Earth: The Fiction of J. R. R. Tolkien. Paul H. Kocher. Reviewed by Nancy-Lou Patterson.

The Lord of the Rings, the Hobbit Notes. William Ready. Reviewed by Jim Allen.

Per Herr der Ringe. Written by Peter Steinbach, Directed by Bernd Lau, Narrated by Ernst Schröder.
Reviewed by Winton Covey.

Additional Keywords

Barbara Mann



REVIEWS

THE TREE OF TALES GROWS EVER GREEN

Master of Middle Earth: The Fiction of J. R. R. Tolkien, by Paul H. Kocher; Houghton Mifflin, 1972, 247 pp.

ONCE upon a time, nearly 20 years ago, an incorrigibly savage American professor published a review of The Lord of the Rings which he must have felt sure would bring about the speedy demise of Middle-earth and the end of its historian as a writer. Luckily for both Professor Tolkien and those of his many readers who recognize a great myth-maker when they see one, the man who poked misguided fun at orcs and hobbits has long since been proved wrong.

Now, a far more gracious and enlightened American Professor Emeritus (of Stanford University) has more than amply restored the balance. Paul H. Kocher's Master of Middle-earth is just the sort of study of Tolkien's ability as a master "sub-creator" which his admirers have often felt ought to be written and which many of them will probably wish they had had the good sense to write themselves.

Despite Tolkien's disclaimer of any profounder

significances in his work beyond the level of adventure tale set in "faery," we have all felt that many profounder statements were being made about the spirit of man and its position in this oddly multifarious and unexpected universe; otherwise, why should we be drawn to re-read "The Ring" and the other tales year after year--and why should children respond with such keen delight to The Hobbit if, in fact, it were simply yet another book devised for juveniles? These are the questions Professor Kocher sets out to answer, to his own satisfaction as much as to ours. The result is a thorough, brilliant, and warmly sympathetic exploration of the several "other worlds" of which Tolkien has become the master.

To appreciate just what he has done, it might not be a bad idea to examine his last chapter first, for in "Seven Leaves" Kocher leads us through Tolkien's minor excursions into fantasy to arrive at "the master image of all his work, the Tree of Tales, which is the symbol of Faery." There by implication in the essay "On Fairy-stories" and more overtly in the fable "Leaf by Niggle" (originally published together as "Tree and Leaf"), it receives its fullest embodiment, says Kocher, in the poem entitled "Imram," published in Time and Tide, December 3, 1955.

As Kocher's argument develops, we see that these so-called "minor excursions" reveal a great deal more about the mind that gave us Middle-earth than might be expected at first sight. Even the light-hearted parodies of his serious themes are founded on Tolkien's commitment to fantasy as "refreshment" and "renewal"; more important than that, those which do carry serious overtones remind us not only of their maker's high moral sensibility but also of the "limits to man's access to Faery haunts" which is one of his saddest and most insistent themes.

This, of course, is what makes all our encounters with the elven-folk so unutterably poignant when we meet them in the major works; for they are shadowed by the destiny laid on them to leave the world of man, as men are shadowed by the fate which will ultimately leave them alone on earth, last of the five "free peoples," divorced from hobbits, dwarves, and ents, as well as elves. All writers about other worlds or other peoples know of this essential return to human isolation; none has exploited it more forcibly or movingly than the man who wrote of the need for fantasy and who coined the word "eucatastrophe" for the "necessary happy ending" of a genuine fairy tale.

Here, Tolkien's intuition joins Joseph Campbell's apprehension, in "The Hero With A Thousand Faces," that "the happy ending of the fairy tale... is to be read, not as a contradiction, but as a transcendence of the universal tragedy of man." Tolkien also shares Campbell's profoundly moral view of the hero as a person of "self-achieved submission" to some goal or vision far greater than himself. Where they might disagree is on the nature of that submission (which Toynbee also sees as the height of spiritual achievement). For Tolkien, as Kocher points out, is a convinced Roman Catholic, whereas Campbell holds to the view that there are no gods which are not of man's creating.

Moral Tolkien's tales certainly are, as Kocher notably demonstrates in the marvelous chapter he

devotes to Strider-Aragorn, a character he claims has been "the least written about, the least valued, and most misunderstood" of all the major characters in the "Rings" trilogy. This, he points out, is partly Tolkien's fault, because when he embarked on the story of the Fellowship he had no clear idea who or what the man was and had "begun to despair of surviving to find out." However, as Strider develops into Aragorn, the High King who should come, he fulfills all Campbell's requirements of the hero as magnificently as Frodo fulfills the circular journey of the hero's quest.

So, on a lesser scale, does Bilbo Baggins in The Hobbit. One of the best services Kocher renders in his chapter on this book is to clear up the misapprehension that it must be read as a prelude to the trilogy. It is, in fact, a book designed for adults to read to children in such a way that both derive much pleasure and more than a little instruction from it. As Kocher puts it, the best way to appreciate this story is to think of Tolkien, or another adult, addressing a fireside circle of children eager to be entertained. This is how the book was first conceived--and it remains by far the best way to savor it, as any intelligent parent or teacher will testify. Admittedly, some ideas and episodes seem more suited to the adult mind than the child's. But what child has ever relished being talked down to--or grown up who has not had to reach for understanding of things beyond his years?

As Kocher's examination of Middle-earth develops, one rapidly senses his own delight both in the author of his choice and in the works he has elucidated with such loving care. One also becomes increasingly aware of the thoroughness with which Tolkien has constructed his imaginary realm, buttressed with maps and appendices and a whole lexicon of languages derived, like his principal myths, from his avocation as a philologist. One also learns to relinquish the personality of this quiet Oxford don who has so enriched both our literature and our lives in this age of shoddy writers and disastrous rejection of all that is not mechanical.

The world Tolkien stands heir to is Jung's world of the Archetypes--and to the Great Tree implanted at its center both he and Professor Kocher have succeeded in adding several leaves of inestimable value and beauty which are likely to remain there, imperishably green.

reviewed by Nancy-Lou Patterson

MORE TOLKIEN EXPLOITATION

Ready, William. The Lord of the Rings, the Hobbit Notes. Coles Publishing Co. Ltd. Toronto, Ont., Canada. 1971 130 pp. paperback

Coles Notes are a rather shoddy series of booklets produced in Canada with struggling high school students chiefly in mind. Those dealing with literary works devote the greater part of the available pages to summarizing the original, and whatever pages remain to pedestrian essays on the author, mood, style, and possible examination questions. Though often rather inaccurate, Coles Notes and a little luck may enable a student to avoid so much as opening the cover of the original work, much to the

dismay and disgust of teachers.

The popularity of Tolkien's work among young people combined with its obvious literary merit has made his books an ideal subject for high school and university courses, and in due course Coles has taken note of this. The result is yet another book by William Ready, one of even less worth than his The Tolkien Relation. For Ready's earlier work at least has the virtue of gathering together information about Tolkien not easily available otherwise to the general reader. However, as far as quality goes, Coles would have been better advised to use one of their regular hacks, though doubtless the Ready name will prove more economically profitable.

Even for Coles Notes this is an inferior production. There are two pages of introduction, a page and a half of information on Tolkien, six pages of "background" which turns out to be mainly interpretation of what Tolkien is accomplishing, five pages of essay questions, and three pages of bibliography. This leaves 113 pages devoted entirely to a synopsis of The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings, a synopsis that proceeds chapter by chapter with no interpretation, and which completely ignores the Appendices.

In his first paragraph Ready informs us that Tolkien posters have been largely psychedelic and that there is a Tolkien fanzine called The Palantir, the last presumably an error for the now extinct I Palantir. The rest of the booklet maintains this level of accuracy. On skimming the synopsis I put an X in the margin every time I found a statement that was in factual error or incomprehensible in light of Ready's source. The X's total 43, and I suspect that there are many errors I have missed. For example: Ready insists throughout that the events of LotR are taking place in the Second Age (pp. 37, 41, 121), he tells us that it was Merry that looked into the palantir (p. 39), that most of the hobbits "had become furtive, dirty, and shiftless" by the time the questers returned to deal with Saruman (p. 41), that Bilbo had become old and weak by the time of his 111st birthday (pp. 37, 43), that Sam Gamgee's father was also named Sam (p. 44), that Saruman had taken possession of three of the Dwarf-rings (p. 45), that the One Ring was lost in the pools of Gladden Fields (p. 45), that Radagast was seeking for the Shire in order to counsel Frodo on the threat of Mordor (p. 58), that Beregon was an old man (p. 98), and so forth.

Nor does he do any better when he tries to analyze Tolkien. He insists that Tolkien's books "are primarily religious" (p. 8) but brings forth no evidence for this surprising assertion. He pronounces ex cathedra of the books that "their only grave lack is a sense of humor," a staggering assertion. He suggests that Smaug is a symbol of the machine which has proved such a danger to our environment, a parallel which I find impossible to follow (p. 7).

His discussion is not absolutely without merit. He does show how Tolkien's love of nature puts him in sympathy with modern ecologists, and how he provides an idealized yet not unrealistic imaginary past for which one can find more sympathy than the real past from which our unstable institutions have sprung, --those institutions whose crumbling authority is so evident today. And an apparently real enthusiasm for Tolkien's creation does permeate this section.

But even in the few places where Ready does give us some sensible insight into Tolkien he is tripped up by his confused, wandering, and disjointed prose style. This is even more evident in the synopsis as Ready tortures language to avoid quoting. For example: "The mountains had names, stranger in the diverse tongues in which they were called." (Stranger than what?) Among them was Moria, where was the Black Pit, where dwarves had once worked, Caradhras, and Bundushathûr, where the Misty Mountains divide, and where was the Dimrill Dale that the Fellowship was seeking, through the Dimrill Stair, into the secret woods to the Great River, and then on into the unknown." (p. 59 f.) It's strange to see Moria the Black Pit turned into a mountain--replacing Celebdil/Zirak-zigil--containing the Black Pit!

Then there is this sentence: "Advisors of Elrond were there also, Glorfindel chief among them, and Bilbo, but, most of all, there was Frodo." (p. 57)

Perhaps the prize for the worst single sentence would go to: "He pulled out of a trunk, in a burrow-room to which he had returned invisible, never to be seen by a hobbit in Hobbiton again, the old cloak and hood that he had worn in his adventure fifty" (actually sixty!) "years before." (p. 42 f.)

Compleatists will want this book, but I find it hard to imagine anyone else who will, outside of illiterate high school students who would be very poorly advised to put any trust in it. As Ready himself says, "He (Tolkien) has been bedeviled by journalists and others since the astonishing success of his books about a hobbit and a ring. He has been misrepresented by the press and pirated by publishers. Careless and inexcusable errors have marred the work of critics and reviewers." (p. 1) Ready's own work almost single-handedly justifies every one of the above charges.

reviewed by Jim Allen

Der Herr der Ringe, aus dem Englischen übersetzt von Margaret Carroux/Gedichtübertragungen von E.-M. von Freymann. Ernst Klett, Stuttgart, 1969 & 1970.

Hobbits "liked to have books filled with things that they already knew, set down fair and square with no contradictions." For some purposes, so do I: most of all, for reading in a language I am trying to learn. The theory is that the reader should read a lot of material that he knows and reads gladly, keeping entirely in the language in front of him, and reading aloud at least part of the time. I have a report on my experience with the German edition of The Lord of the Rings.

I should declare first my previous experience with German, and language study in general, and with the Tolkien books, so that readers may judge how my experience may apply to them. My first struggles with any foreign language were two years of German, as a college student in 1956-57. Later, I took standard courses of one year each in Spanish, French, and Russian. I have no linguistic gift--in particular, I have slow and stupid ears--but I value the study of languages, and I try. For some years, I read scientific articles in German and French (meteorology and soil science) and I passed the graduate reading exams in those languages without difficulty. For the past year and a half, I have semi-formally resumed my study of Spanish in the college where I teach.

I have been a reader of Tolkien for three years, and have read The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings through at least twice, in addition to much reading at whim in the Ballantine volumes that are always handy.

I find that Der Herr der Ringe suits me perfectly, both as a Tolkien fan and as a learner of German. It is excellent for a long sitting of a few chapters, giving a freshness to a familiar story that I could not get from the original English without a longer lapse of time between readings. This is a close translation, and no-wise merely a retelling in German. The characters all ring true, once I get settled into reading the language.

As a learner of German, I find that this gives me my best long workouts. A 'passive' exercise, if you insist, at least compared to general conversation or to translation, but a useful exercise that has the great advantage of being fun.

The books show few traces of having come from the English. The obvious comments and changes occur in the rendering of Tolkien's appended note 'On Translation.' Otherwise, there are few footnotes by the translator. One, on the meaning of Frodo's calling his party in honor of Bilbo's eleventy-second birthday a "Hundredweight Feast," would have been as informative to American readers as to German.

It is a challenge to try to spot false renderings in the German. Nearly always, the translator is right, and I have misremembered, or read carelessly. But, if my trace of German blood entitles me to show a little pedantry, I will point out two places (in the prose part) where the meaning of the English has not been exactly given.

Elrond speaks to his council in the words: "That is the purpose for which you are called hither. Called, I say, though I have not called you to me, strangers from distant lands." The German has it: "Zu diesem Zweck habe ich Euch hierher gerufen. Gerufen, sage ich, obwohl ic Euch, Fremde aus ferner Ländern, nicht zu mir gerufen habe." In the English, Elrond merely uses the passive form "you are called hither." He does not, as in the German, first say that he (Elrond) did the calling, and then correct himself.

Then, in the English, the last two lines of the chapter "The White Rider" are:

"I see a great smoke," said Legolas. "What may that be?"

'Battle and war!' said Gandalf. 'Ride on!'" The German has the last command as "'Reitet zu!'" Now, I'm straining my knowledge of German, but it seems to me Gandalf really said "Reitet fort!" or "Reitet weiter!" The battle and war are away to the West; the White Rider and his companions continue toward the Golden Hall, and do not immediately ride to war.

Overall, however, I get the feeling that the book is as Tolkien would have written it, had he been writing in German.

The books are expensive. They certainly make me appreciate my Ballantines more. The printing and binding by Ernst Klett are neatly and perfectly done, as far as I can tell, and I expect that my copies will outlast me. Be that as it may, I will have many pleasant hours reading Der Herr der Ringe.

reviewed by Winton Covey