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On Ways of Studying Tolkien: Notes Toward a Better (Epic) Fantasy Criticism

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INTRODUCTION

We are currently living a golden age for Tolkien Studies. The field is booming: two peer-reviewed journals dedicated to J.R.R. Tolkien alone, at least four journals dedicated to the Inklings more generally, innumerable society newsletters and bulletins, and new books and edited collections every year. And this only encompasses the Tolkien work in *English*. In the last two decades, specifically since 2000, the search term “Tolkien” pulls up nearly 1,200 hits on the MLA International Bibliography. For comparison, C. S. Lewis places a distant second at fewer than 900 hits, but even this number outranks the *combined* hits on Ursula K. Le Guin, George R. R. Martin, Robert E. Howard, Terry Pratchett, and Stephen King. During this same time frame, the founder of modern horror, H. P. Lovecraft, also garners less than one-fifth of Tolkien’s total, which we might consider ironic given the title of a recent collection of essays, *The Age of Lovecraft* (2016). As such, few can legitimately deny Tolkien’s cultural and academic centrality. Yet, given this yearly wealth of new Tolkien scholarship, it seems natural to ask, “What do Tolkienists *do* when we study Tolkien—and how do we do it?” What techniques and strategies, in other words, does the field marshal when attempting to find insightful and original things to say? Even more importantly, where is Tolkien Studies going?

Following a recent clarion call by Helen Young for the field to engage critical race theory and other related methods so it might “maintain its legitimacy” and avoid “scholarly marginalization and cultural irrelevance” (“Review” 5), questions about methodology have assumed ever greater urgency. Yet it might be wondered if *theory*, especially critical theory as a manifestation of critique, remains the best—or even most appropriate—tool for addressing the issues raised by Young. Over the decades, contemporary theory has been developed to handle perspectives and concerns quite orthogonal to Tolkien’s fiction, not to mention epic fantasy, so I am offering an alternative, a new approach, that we might call “Straussian” or “neo-Straussian” after its German-born inspiration, the political philosopher Leo Strauss. Outside the odd fact that they died about six weeks apart, little connects Tolkien and Strauss in a biographical sense. Still, several themes from Strauss’s voluminous writings can shed light on politically salient aspects of Tolkien’s work that other critical methodologies miss or overlook. These Straussian themes are the dialectic between ancient and modern; the theologico-political dilemma; and *thymos*, an ancient Greek word translating roughly to “spiritedness.” My first section briefly outlines the current field of Tolkien Studies, describing the four main ways his work can be studied. The themes borrowed from Strauss form

the core of section II. Afterwards, I sketch what a Straussian approach might look like in practice; finally, my fourth section highlights the usefulness of a Straussian lens by laying out the tensions that arise when pairing contemporary theory with Tolkien—tensions all the more stark, I suggest, given the dominance of Marxist cultural theory on fantasy studies since the 1970s.

I. MAJOR APPROACHES WITHIN TOLKIEN STUDIES

The first step in establishing a Straussian lens is to contrast it with other common ways of studying Tolkien. We can divide these ways into four broad categories, none of them necessarily mutually exclusive: author-centric criticism, the discovery of a new object of study, applied critical theory, and devising a new theoretical lens. There are no pretensions to completeness here, and I would caution against viewing any one category as inherently superior to another. Each can—and has—produced valuable scholarship. Still, the goal of any heuristic is to help users grasp a phenomenon of incredible scope and variety, so I proffer these categories in that spirit.

A. AUTHOR-CENTRIC TOLKIEN CRITICISM

In this category, the principle of authorial intentionality—Tolkien’s own words, ideas, statements, texts, and contexts—comprises the prime focal point of criticism or scholarship. This umbrella category contains quite a few different methodologies: biography, textual editing, source studies, genetic criticism (or analyzing a text’s pre-publication history), reception studies, Tolkienian linguistics, an author’s own literary theory or practice, studies in immediate historical or cultural context affecting authorial intention, etc. Work by Tom Shippey, Verlyn Flieger, and Dimitra Fimi all fall into the author-centric camp. Shippey combines literary biography with philological analysis, for example, whereas Flieger often combines close study of *The History of Middle-earth* series with using Tolkien’s “On Fairy-stories” as an interpretative lens. Among the younger generation of Tolkienists, Fimi’s *Tolkien, Race, and Cultural History* comprises an exemplary author-centric “case study for comparative research between fiction and biography” (7). And source studies as a field remains alive, well, and incredibly prolific.

B. NEW OBJECTS OF STUDY

This category involves selecting some new general object of study (or a field of interest) applicable either to a single author or text or across a wide array of them. Although authorial intention *can* matter, it usually assumes a secondary level of

interest. Within 20th-century fantasy, three classic objects of study have been myth, folklore, and Jungian archetypes—strong ways, many have felt, to legitimize fantasy studies. As recently as 2014, in fact, Brian Attebery argues in *Stories about Stories* that mythopoesis—or how fantasists transform myth—remains a key feature of the fantasy genre, which continually redefines the fundamental “relationship between contemporary readers and mythic texts” (4). Also relevant to this category is the comparative study of themes in fantasy. According to Farah Mendlesohn, *thematic criticism* is a form of “archaeology that excavates the layers of a text and compares that text with those found in other excavations” (“Thematic” 125). Yet scholars also devise new objects of study all the time. Fan studies, for example, is growing rapidly, as are ecocriticism and Anthropocene studies. The subject of world-building has likewise exploded in popularity, and it has even spurred a strong new collection of essays on Tolkien’s own world-building, *Sub-creating Arda*, edited by Dimitra Fimi and Thomas Honegger.

C. CRITICAL THEORY

In this context, “theory” means something more specific than the standard trifecta of race, class, and gender. As a field, Tolkien Studies already covers these topics quite well. Instead, I use “theory” to denote a practice where academic literary critics, guided by the *ethos* and spirit of critique, adopt a social and political role as well as a literary one. Although critique’s origins arose during the Enlightenment, contemporary theory has absorbed the critical spirit largely through the Frankfurt School and post-1968 Parisian thought, and it is no exaggeration to say that critique has become the “dominant metalanguage” for literary studies in English Departments today, the main method in which graduate students are trained (Felski 5). The practice subscribes to what Paul Ricoeur has dubbed the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” which he attributes to paradigms of thinking first established by Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche. According to this critical perspective, all texts are suffused with various dominant ideologies or structures of power, the type of power depending on the type of theory, but critics should always be wary, always be perpetually and suspiciously on guard, in order to call out texts that display troubling features. Nouns like *interrogate*, *problematize*, and *complicate* (among others) are cornerstones of arguments driven by critique. Complicity is bad; subversion is good. Other favorite affective terms include *revolutionary* as well as *radical*. Overall, critique demystifies, destabilizes, and debunks. It denaturalizes. A sure sign of danger is whenever some troublesome X, anything perceived as pernicious, has become taken-for-granted or naturalized. In such cases, the critic must painfully explicate how X has actually been *constructed*, since anything constructed—unlike anything natural—can be resisted.

Even when individual critical theories disagree vehemently with one another, such as in Marxist theory's well-known clashes with deconstruction and feminism, the conventions of critique still unite them. Criticism is political activism by other means, and this activism often assumes an aspect of medical diagnostics. According to Anker and Felski, a diagnosis implies the "presence of an *expert* (doctor, scientists, technician) who is engaged in the *scrutiny* of an object in order to decode certain *defects* or flaws that are not readily or automatically apparent to a nonspecialist person" (4, emphasis original). At the same time, this continual drive for deeper and ever more pervasive forms of critique leads to intense self-reflexivity. If you do not critique your own assumptions, after all, surely someone else will. A striking example of such self-reflexivity in Tolkien Studies comes from Jes Battis in *Modern Fiction Studies*, a major journal of mainstream literary studies. When discussing the colonized subjects in *The Lord of the Rings*, for example, Battis argues that "any critical 'naming' of Tolkien's work that [my] analysis may arrive at, if such a naming is indeed possible, will be double-voiced, traced with echoes, shadows, and split subjects" (911)—a classic deconstructive move by a postcolonial theorist who finds any apparently straightforward statement, even his own thesis, a source for worry and concern.

Historically, Tolkien Studies has studiously avoided critique of this kind. Writing in 2007, Brian Rosebury observes that critical theory has been "relatively unproductive so far as Tolkien is concerned" (654). He makes two exceptions for psychoanalytic and feminist theory, but even these exceptions deserve complication. Psychoanalytic approaches to fantasy have tended more toward Jung than Freud, and the extant feminist criticism typically centers on feminist *issues* rather than on feminist *critique*. In an important bibliographic essay on the topic, for instance, Robin Anne Reid defines her feminist inclusions broadly, not according to critical methodology but in terms of authors who "primarily focus on Tolkien's female characters" (13). In one way or another, feminist articles on Tolkien are generally interested in upholding the literary value of *The Lord of the Rings*, however partially, or defending its author (again however partially) from charges of sexism. Properly speaking, though, critique has little interest in an author's personal views. As per critique's diagnostic function, the "third-person perspective of the critic/analyst will always trump the self-understanding of the text/patient" (Anker and Felski 5). The author's explicit goals are just one more layering that obscure the text's political unconscious; at best, an author's views serve as an index to larger cultural ideologies. As a result, Tolkienists have tended to "tread lightly when it comes to a more critical approach" on their subject (Hassler-Forest 28), and Helen Young echoes this sentiment, noting that works that take a "measured critical eye ... are published in venues *not* dedicated to Tolkien scholarship" ("Review" 5, emphasis original). Among the few Tolkienists to tackle theory deeply, Gergely

Nagy works in semiotics, and Robin Anne Reid and Jane Chance both employ feminist as well as queer theory.

The question deserves to be asked: why hasn't theory made a deeper impression? Part of the reason, I suspect, is as much personal as historical. Few would deny that Tolkienists have a deep abiding love for their subject—but love, notably, is an affect notoriously at odds with the hermeneutics of suspicion. At the same time, the first few generations of Tolkien scholarship had to fight mainstream academia tooth-and-nail for respect, and even if explicit defenses of Tolkien are no longer common, the urge to defend Tolkien has never quite gone away. The critical spirit, however, is antithetical to defense—and the premises of theory itself, furthermore, seem poorly suited to Tolkien. Granted, when Michael D. C. Drout—probably out of frustration—calls Tolkien's work “kryptonite for weak literary theories” (19), he goes too far. Beyond the undeniable hyperbole, such a statement simply avoids theory rather than engaging it directly. Still, I am in greater sympathy with his further claim that *The Lord of the Rings* and Tolkien both “challenge many of the comfortable assumptions made by ‘theory’ and its practitioners” (Drout and Wynne 122). In other words, just as modernist aesthetics—irony, ambiguity, unreliable narration, stream of consciousness—were developed to handle writers with literary goals orthogonal to Tolkien's main literary concerns, so too has contemporary theory arisen to handle authors, texts, and situations quite different from Tolkien. All theoretical paradigms, after all, privilege some authors at the expense of others. Let me suggest, then, that nowhere is this more true than with epic fantasy and genre fantasy, the two areas where Tolkien has left his indelible mark. For a more in-depth discussion on how theory—including its handmaiden of critique—have affected the academic study of fantasy, see section IV.

D. A NEW THEORETICAL LENS

This fourth category views an author or text through a new theoretical lens. Unlike critique, which takes neither author nor text at face value, a new lens may or may not bear authorial intention some respect. Recently, both Lisa Coutras and Josh McIntosh have provided strong examples of new lenses—the former reads Tolkien in light of Hans Urs von Balthasar's theological aesthetics, the latter through St. Thomas Aquinas. Notably, each project is author-centric, justifying itself through how Tolkien might have absorbed formal theology indirectly through his faith. For myself, my own approach to Tolkien (whether described as neo-Straussian or Straussian) falls into this fourth category as well. Yet for me authorial intention, while not inconsequential, assumes a secondary level of interest. The more pressing concern from a Straussian viewpoint is the implicit theory of politics in Tolkien's work—which also includes, by extension, the implicit theory of political being conveyed by Tolkien into modern epic fantasy literature.

II. THE STRAUSSIAN PERSPECTIVE

Today, political science departments feel Strauss's impact more keenly than other disciplines touched by his work: literary studies, classics, rhetoric, hermeneutics. Despite Strauss's contentious reception history, however, a mixture of fierce advocacy and haughty academic dismissal, scholars who find Strauss useful typically subscribe to a certain set of threshold or methodological commitments. According to Zuckert and Zuckert, these commitments are as follows: (a) philosophy is important; (b) *political* philosophy as an enterprise is a viable one; (c) philosophical texts—and, by extension, literary texts—require careful reading and exegesis; and (d) the distinction between ancient and modern is a meaningful one, although Straussians remain divided on what that meaning ultimately is (67). Unfortunately, Strauss himself was a deeply enigmatic thinker. He rarely writes in his own voice, and his most suggestive ideas usually appear as commentaries or glosses on older thinkers.¹ Hence, since Strauss's exact position on any particular commitment is often a matter for heated debate, I sometimes prefer to dub my approach neo-Straussian to help distance myself from those debates. Instead, it seems better to highlight Straussian *themes* rather than clear-cut Straussian *positions*—and it is these themes that can motivate new and penetrating questions for literary interpretation.

A. ESOTERIC READING AND WRITING

Since Strauss is best known for his thesis on esoteric writing, it cannot avoid being mentioned, yet this idea has unfortunately little practical value for studying modern literature, epic fantasy, or even Tolkien. Essentially, Strauss argues that the fear of persecution has historically led heterodox writers in non-liberal societies to encode two types of meaning into their texts: a safe exoteric meaning and a deeper, more socially subversive esoteric meaning. Strauss sees esotericism as much more than a new interpretative model. Instead, he views it as a genuine discovery, a piece of knowledge once lost but now recovered. Soon after making this rediscovery, Strauss began to apply esoteric reading to the entire Western philosophical tradition, which had a great impact on his own thought. Intensely averse to Heidegger's and Nietzsche's versions of historicism, Strauss resisted the notion that the truths traditionally sought by philosophy are only "truths," the mere constructs of history, culture, language, or power. Tellingly, this resistance pits Strauss against much current critical theory, especially insofar as theory follows the legacy of Heidegger

¹ Oddly enough, Strauss's style of philosophy echoes Tolkien's style of philology. As Tom Shippey explains, Tolkien's philological writings came "very often in the form of glosses, comments on single words, and are not formed into connected arguments; but ... that is the way Tolkien's mind worked. Nor is the activity of the glossator to be despised" (iv).

and Nietzsche indirectly through poststructuralist French theory. The esoteric thesis on writing, though, opened for Strauss at least the possibility (though never the certainty) that genuine transhistorical truths might exist—or, rather, transhistorical *questions*, since Strauss believed all great philosophers write on the same fundamental human problems. The transhistorical nature of such questions, in addition, creates the possibility that classical philosophy remains relevant to our current political age. Modern thought has not simply superseded classical thought.

Still, whatever the historical merits of esotericism, the esoteric habit of reading—if expanded into a general principle of interpretation—commits us to an absurdly absolute theory of textual meaning. Allegedly, careless or poor readers will read only the surface of a text, picking up the safe and non-subversive “exoteric” meaning but missing its deeper truth. Skilled esoteric readers, however, will discover the “true,” carefully hidden meaning. Tolkien himself, incidentally, strongly equated textual meaning with authorial intent, albeit without Strauss’s esoteric trappings. Once, when asked about the graduate work being done on *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien responded that he did not care for the practice, not “while I am alive anyhow. I do not know why they should research without any reference to me; after all, *I hold the key*” (qtd. in Fimi 7, emphasis added). Sometimes, too, weaker versions of Straussian esotericism appear in the secondary literature on Tolkien. For example, Fleming Rutledge distinguishes between a surface narrative in *The Lord of the Rings*, addressed to “fainthearted” readers without any “theistic faith,” and a deeper theological narrative dedicated to the “self-identified Christian believer” (3)—in other words, one reading for the masses, another for a Christian elite. Still, as much as esotericism helped Strauss produce many individually brilliant readings of philosophical texts, today esotericism, unlike the Straussian theme that follows, simply closes off more lines of inquiry than it opens.

B. THE THEOLOGICO-POLITICAL PROBLEM

This unwieldy phrase comes from Spinoza, and the core problem is simple: does the ground of political authority rest on reason—or revelation? Overwhelmingly, the post-Enlightenment West has chosen reason, but Strauss attempts to reinvigorate both sides of this debate. Political philosophers, however, disagree vehemently over Strauss’s own position. Some Straussians argue that, since Strauss greatly admired Plato and Aristotle, he considered reason as higher. Others find evidence that Strauss privileged revelation, and still others—my own camp—think that Strauss considered the conflict between reason and revelation a permanent problem, at least on the political level. Either way, the theologico-political dilemma resonates deeply with a work such as *The Lord of the Rings*, wherein Tolkien combines his own Catholic faith alongside his philological rigor and respect for the natural sciences. The problem therefore offers a theoretical foundation for taking

seriously the theism in Tolkien's work without also necessarily sharing his piety, and it offers a gateway into diverse ways modern readers might engage his texts.

C. THE ANCIENT AND THE MODERN

The most fruitful theme for studying Tolkien, however, and by extension the epic fantasy that follows in his footsteps, is arguably the conflict between ancient and modern. This conflict echoes the 18th-century Battle of the Books but as applied to political theory rather than literature. In short, Strauss sees ancient political philosophy, best exemplified by Plato and Aristotle, as dedicated to issues of virtue and human excellence. Human beings reach their fullest potential through membership in political society. Modern political philosophy, in contrast, beginning with Machiavelli and extending through Hobbes, had argued for the inadequacy of the ancient project. For Machiavelli, the ancients' concern with virtue had not made practical politics any more successful, and Hobbes, the founder of modern liberalism, wished to construct a rigorous political science that, among other things, replaced a civil society dominated by aristocrats obsessed with honor and glory with a rationalistic middle-class driven by enlightened self-interest. Whereas classical political thought emphasized personal virtue, human excellence, and the regime, modern political thought since the Renaissance has emphasized issues of power and individual rights. It abstracts human beings out of civil society by separating society from nature even though ancient political philosophy had viewed civil society not only as "natural" but as also the only legitimate ground for fulfilling the highest in human potential. In one of Strauss's most memorable phrases, referring specifically to John Locke's liberalism, the moderns built on the "low but solid ground" of selfishness and private greed (*Natural* 247). From this conflict between ancient and modern, too, arises our next Straussian theme.

D. THE PROBLEM OF MODERNITY: OR, THE "CRISIS OF THE WEST"

Over the last few decades, although the academic rhetoric of "crisis" has grown wearisome through overuse, this fourth theme indicates why Strauss considers reviving the ancient/modern debate so essential for contemporary affairs. As he writes in *The City and Man*, "The crisis of the West consists in the West's having become uncertain of its purpose" (3). The philosophical project of modernity, according to Strauss, has grown self-defeating. Through the alliance forged between natural science and modern political theory, modernity attempted to emancipate the individual as well as political society from the limitations imposed by nature—limitations once accepted as permanent by classical thought. The Enlightenment's liberal philosophers considered two goals particularly desirable. First, they wished to separate humanity from the bonds of religious authority. Second, they sought to

resolve ethical and political problems through mathematical or instrumental reasoning. Yet what happened, Strauss argues, is that modernity eventually established modes of thought fundamentally hostile to reason *and* to nature, modern liberalism's two main bulwarks.

The details on how modernity developed this self-defeating character, which appear throughout Strauss's writings but particularly in *Natural Right and History* (1953), stem from the differences Strauss perceives between ancient and modern political theory. In general, ancient philosophers took their bearings from nature. They understood philosophy as a

quest for the eternal order or for the eternal cause or causes of all things. It presupposes then that there is an eternal and unchangeable order within which History takes place and which is not in any way affected by History. (*On Tyranny* 212)

Likewise, classical natural right had depended on a "teleological view of the universe" where all "natural beings have a natural end, a natural destiny, which determines what kind of operation is good for them" (*Natural* 7). Only through reason—understood as *substantive* reason—can we grasp these ends. As such, philosophy becomes an activity of the highest importance.

Hobbes, though, redefined reason as instrumental only—a mere tool for reaching predetermined ends rather than as a determinant *of* ends. John Locke continued this tradition, theorizing modern natural right as non-teleological, a set of theorems derived logically from certain premises. He concludes that the genuine rational ends for civil society—that is, the best explanation for why anyone would ever *leave* the state of nature—lie neither in acquiring virtue nor in achieving human perfection. Instead, they lie in preserving *private property*—and Thomas Jefferson, to list only one example, greatly admired Locke. Yet modernity's shift away from classical natural right, on Strauss's view, also creates a problem. People necessarily must have beliefs, but if nature can never serve as the ultimate ground of those beliefs, what does? The modern answer, developed by Nietzsche and especially Heidegger, is *history*, and thus "historicism" becomes Strauss's pejorative term for the "repudiation of the paradigm of a stable nature on behalf of the changing philosophical perspectives of human subjectivity" (Rosen 123). Unfortunately, if modern liberal democracy is a regime founded on instrumental reason and the state of nature, and if late modernity has jettisoned transhistorical concepts like reason and nature for History, then the intellectual grounds for our attachment to liberal democracy, not to mention natural right, are relatively weak. The fate of the Weimar Republic, as believed by Strauss, a German-born Jew who left his homeland in 1932, exemplifies the dangers of that weakness.

Today, the field of literary studies feels the historicist impact of Heidegger and Nietzsche from two main routes: poststructuralist French theory and the Frankfurt school. The seeds of Derridean deconstruction, for example, lay in Heidegger's concept of *Destruktion*, and Foucault has remarked that "my entire philosophical development was determined by my reading of Heidegger ... [and] Nietzsche" (250).² The Frankfurt School is relevant here, too, especially Horkheimer, who, like Strauss, held strong reservations about instrumental reason's modern ascendancy. Yet even though Horkheimer and Strauss were responding to the same cultural moment in Germany, they came to radically different conclusions. For Horkheimer, rather than suggesting the usefulness of re-evaluating classical philosophy, he saw instrumental reason as instead a bourgeois attempt to divorce reason from its material sociocultural manifestations. This Marxist critique eventually helped bolster two alternative directions in Western thought: an "analytical philosophical tradition that continues to appeal to the model of the natural sciences" and a second "continental tradition that, in the postmodern aftermath, has increasingly accepted the view that reason is inherently repressive" (Smulewicz-Zucker 204). Through these twin conduits of Marxist thought and post-1968 French theory, critical theory in the humanities now largely embraces this postmodern aftermath, although its progressive hopes lie in stark contrast to the right-wing politics for which Nietzsche and Heidegger developed their ideas.

III. STRAUSSIAN APPLICATIONS

Leaving aside esoteric reading and writing, then, these final three Straussian themes share the most immediate relevance for studying Tolkien. Now, when it first occurred to me to pair Strauss with Tolkien, I thought my approach would be entirely unprecedented—Strauss, after all, is relatively obscure among English-department academics, although slightly better known to rhetoricians. Alas, such are the perils of doing research. After wading through the secondary literature on Tolkien, I discovered not one, not two or even three, but *four* prior Straussian readings of Tolkien. Fortunately for me, although these discoveries are all highly suggestive and touch upon important Straussian themes, none truly captures the full potential of a Straussian lens. The major reason is probably disciplinary. These four articles all come from political scientists, not literary critics, and they apply their

² Jürgen Habermas, for one, has lain responsibility for the paths taken by Derrida, Deleuze, Baudrillard, Foucault, and Lacan at the feet of Nietzsche, and especially Nietzsche's reading of Kant. For Habermas, these figures are the "young conservatives"—they are *post*-modern in the sense of rejecting the "modern" Enlightenment project. Strauss is also mentioned in this same essay, whom Habermas calls an *old* conservative for turning to pre-modern philosophy. Given my own admiration for both Habermas and Strauss, however, I would suggest there exists more common ground between them than either would perhaps suppose.

Straussianism too rigidly, without sufficient nuance or the required qualifications, which leads to several highly questionable arguments. Similarly, their use of the secondary literature on Tolkien leaves much to be desired, and this applies equally to the only article (Herbert's) to appear in an academic journal. Oddly enough, too, no article mentions Strauss by name. Only through their distinctive Straussian phraseology and ideas are these works recognizable as Straussian at all. Yet a quick description of these articles, nonetheless, should provide a brief glimpse of what applying Strauss can look like.

From its length, our first example by Joseph V. Brogan appears to have been a keynote lecture for a Tolkien panel at the 2003 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association. This address is the most nakedly Straussian of the four. Using esotericism as a starting point, Brogan argues that the “political teaching” of *The Lord of the Rings* is revealed by reading the text as an unacknowledged rewriting of Plato's *Republic*—or, more specifically, Strauss's unique interpretation of the *Republic*. Much like Socrates's Athens, the Shire is an “unjust city” (3), a regime both myopic and non-philosophical, and it fails to incarnate the highest principles of justice known to us. Brogan also touches upon another classic Straussian theme: the conflict between philosophy and the city. Philosophers, or at least *true* philosophers, are always something of an intellectual avant-garde, and their philosophizing risks contravening the myths held sacred by the city—its religions, traditions, revered stories, ancestral conventions, et cetera. Unfortunately, though, Brogan significantly shortchanges Tolkien's medievalism, his Catholicism, and his positive feeling for the Shire. It also seems doubtful that Bilbo is a “philosopher” in the strict Straussian sense, which makes applying the Straussian conflict between philosopher and city problematic. In a different article, Gary B. Herbert echoes Brogan by reading *The Lord of the Rings* in light of Plato's *Republic*. Herbert, however, targets the relationship between rhetoric and justice. As he says, what renders injustice “invisible is not a magic ring but rather an art or craft of some sort” (156). In other words, injustice is a product of rhetoric, or the art of using language to obscure the distinction between *what is* and *what seems*. Amazingly, Herbert fails to draw the obvious parallel to Saruman, the key rhetorician in Tolkien's texts, although Herbert does suggestively connect his idea to Tom Bombadil, whose self-sufficiency makes him immune to the disjunction between seeming and being.

The last two Straussian pieces belong to Thomas W. Smith, a theist who views Strauss as highly privileging revelation over reason. In “Tolkien's Catholic Imagination,” for example, Smith marshals Tolkien's piety to view *The Lord of the Rings* as a critique on the limits of modernity (the “crisis of the West” problem). For Smith, although Tolkien was modern, he was also a Catholic, one who believed that knowledge was mediated through tradition. Modernity and the First World War, however, had torn asunder the old view on tradition's value, and thus Tolkien

uses stories like *The Lord of the Rings* to “get behind the modern age’s rejection of tradition by dramatizing a world in which tradition matters a great deal” (84). Perhaps understandably in a short article, Smith never tackles larger questions of reason or revelation in Middle-earth; he also shortchanges the modern elements in Tolkien. Smith’s other article, “The Folly of the Wise,” attempts to reconcile Gandalf’s wisdom with his apparent political foolhardiness, at least according to *realpolitik*. His solution, alas, is sadly allegorical: he sees the entire Quest as a metaphor for inner spiritual conflict. Yet he raises other typical Straussian concerns—the analysis of political society as theorized by (and after) the Enlightenment, the notion of “tragic wisdom,” and the subject of tyranny.³

However, mechanically asking how Tolkien “fits” a particular Straussian theme is less productive than asking what sort of questions those themes can generate. For example, Tolkien numbers Gandalf among the Wise, but his peculiar status touches upon the theologico-political problem. Whereas Socrates’s wisdom lay in proudly professing his own ignorance, Gandalf’s wisdom lies in his participation within an implicitly divine cosmic order. Gandalf is more prophet than philosopher, and this raises questions larger in scope than the nature of evil or the level of paganism in the legendarium. After all, what consequences arise from a text that grounds political authority on revelation rather than reason? One, apparently, is a distrust for purely secular efforts to change the world. Noting the existence of evils besides Sauron, Gandalf states that “it is not our part to master all the tides of the world.... What weather [those who come after us] shall have is not ours to rule” (V.9 861). The future as a realm of future projects, the target of radical progressive hopes, has arguably been made off-limits by Tolkien.

Yet, although Marxist critics often accuse *The Lord of the Rings* and fantasy literature of political regressiveness, their core theoretical paradigm seems constitutionally unable to grasp the most politically interesting aspects of Tolkien’s work. If *The Lord of the Rings* helps motivate intuitions on political authority compatible with revelation, those intuitions nevertheless *now* ring strange and alien to modern ears. Hence they are ignored, overlooked. But those intuitions never went away, not truly—not even within modern secular liberal democracy. Such intuitions, for example, although rarely articulated as such, help drive politically powerful coalitions in American politics such as American evangelicals. I am not suggesting

³ My research also uncovered two honorable mentions—two articles, though not particularly Straussian in their arguments, yet clearly written by political scientists knowledgeable on Strauss’s work. The first belongs to Mary M. Keyes, who presented a paper alongside Joseph V. Brogan at the same 2003 conference, which she later turned into a book chapter that includes a distinctively Straussian phrase: “the concept *one’s own*” (Keyes 216, emphasis original). Another honorable mention comes courtesy of Germaine Paulo Walsh, who writes on the conflict between poetry and philosophy, another fundamental theme for Strauss. Although Walsh’s argument does not reflect any obvious Straussian influence (nor is he cited), her essay does lean heavily on work by two prominent Straussians, Allan Bloom and Stanley Rosen.

anything so bland—or so false—as that Tolkien directly supports theocratic rule. Still, the alterity of his work can defamiliarize several basic assumptions which have become so foundational to current ways of thinking that their status *as* assumptions has become hard to see. The radical character of the Enlightenment project, for instance its successful attempt to revolutionize politics by founding political orders based on reason, has acquired an aura of conservatism in our postmodern aftermath. How sound is this view? If we see Tolkien’s world of Middle-earth as a legitimate alternative to modernity, a viable social order constructed intelligently along non-modern premises, then perhaps not so sound as some might think. Regardless of whether or not we share in Tolkien’s perspective, though, reading his work can be a profound act of intellectual defamiliarization. Yet the implications of this defamiliarization on our habits of thought have never been explored.

For studying Tolkien, though, the Straussian conflict between ancient and modern might be even more important. Thanks to epic fantasy’s strong pre-modern orientation, the genre seems especially well-suited for thinking “outside” modernity in areas other than the ultimate grounds of political authority. Although not all fantasists share Tolkien’s historical learning, their invented worlds are resplendent nonetheless in new social orders and new political regimes.⁴ Classical thought had viewed the regime, not in legalistic or institutional terms, but through the “aims actually pursued by the community or its authoritative part” (Strauss, *City* 193). A regime is ends-oriented; a common or dominant vision of the good unites it. Most literary texts employ regimes of one kind or another, and science fiction, especially, has a unique talent for creating radically new types of regimes never seen in human history. Epic fantasy, though, much like certain kinds of historical fiction, excels at portraying *historical* regimes—models of human political organization molded by social and material conditions no longer extant. Epic fantasy thus presents its readers with an opportunity to illuminate modernity by imagining what is *not* modern. We understand what *is* by thinking through what once was. As such, something like *The Lord of the Rings*—this strange mixture of monarchical feeling and theological totality—can help us recover the intuitions behind foundational concepts of modern political theory—concepts like rights, free speech, equality, popular sovereignty, separation of church and state, the nation-state. But because we often tend to assume automatically the truth of these things, or understand them *only* in light of contemporary concerns or situations, the intuitions behind older styles of thought, once immensely plausible, have now grown incomprehensible.

One powerful example is “spiritedness” or *thymos*, a term nearly absent from political theory since the Enlightenment. Conceptually, it is kin to *amour-propre* in Rousseau, the desire for glory in Machiavelli, recognition in Hegel, and

⁴ “Regime” is Strauss’s preferred translation for *politeia*, the factual arrangement of “human beings in regard to political power” (*City* 136).

the love of fame in Alexander Hamilton, yet it was Plato who first gave *thymos* philosophical expression, linking it to status and esteem, honor and anger. Self-aggrandizing and highly competitive, *thymos* is nonetheless a basis for social solidarity as well. It creates our deep emotional attachment to what comes “first” for people in their communities—the ancestral, the traditional, the what-is-said—and leads to the feeling, however problematic, that one’s in-group matters more than any out-group. In the *Republic*, Plato considers *thymos* the special virtue (also the vice) of the warrior class, whom he likens to guard dogs, fierce to enemies yet unquestionably loyal to friends. The poet Homer, too, treats of *thymos*. The urge for excellence leads Achilles to excel as a warrior, but this same urge also nearly ruins the Greeks after Agamemnon angers Achilles with a slight to his prestige. As might be imagined, *thymos* bears a special relation to ancient heroic societies, which tend to valorize fame above all else, and *thymos* recalls—with only slightly differing inflection—the chivalrous *ofermod* of Beorhtnoth and the *lofgeornost* of Beowulf. Because of Tolkien’s immersion in pre-modern literature and history, which includes his Christian sensitivity to *superbia* (in his view a sin), Tolkien’s work offers a unique gateway into the modern study of thymotics—a topic, incidentally, seeing a recent multidisciplinary resurgence from such scholars as Richard Ned Lebow, Francis Fukuyama, and Peter Sloterdijk.⁵ My own 2016 article in *The Journal of Tolkien Research*, “Harken Not to Wild Beasts,” is an example of another such effort for literary studies, seeing Saruman’s own disordered rage, his *ressentiment*, plus his disastrous quest for preeminence, as a reflection of modern rage politics.

IV. CRITICAL THEORY AND THE STUDY OF EPIC FANTASY

Yet why Straussianism? Why now? Since any new theoretical lens must establish its special usefulness, some might wonder why we should prefer it to critical theory, arguably the next major direction for Tolkien Studies. My methodological intervention might be viewed, too, as an untimely one. With the rising interest in feminist, queer, and critical race approaches for studying Tolkien, the field has finally (and thankfully) begun applying the kinds of critical analysis necessary to maintain intellectual currency. The work produced by academics like Robin Anne Reid and Jane Chance fills a significant gap, and I find it hard to disagree with their scholarly goals insofar as we share, I suspect, similar views on social justice. Likewise, no one can fault Helen Young for arguing that Tolkienists must critically engage those aspects of Tolkien’s legendarium that white supremacist forums find

⁵ Fukuyama, tellingly enough, studied with Allan Bloom, one of Strauss’s students. Sloterdijk, although mainly influenced by Nietzsche, also explicitly credits his own work in thymotics to the example set by Fukuyama and Strauss.

praiseworthy (“Review” 5). Still, ’twixt the cup and the lip there is many a slip, and it seems an open question whether the tools of critique—its assumptions, premises, and basic orientation—fit an author like Tolkien who, in so many ways, seems out of step with modernity and postmodernity alike. Is critical theory a solution—or a problem? What tensions arise when we pair Tolkien with critical tools developed (let us be honest) to engage vastly different authors with vastly different concerns? Do they capture the alterity that permeates *The Lord of the Rings*, and how much do we lose compared to what we hope to gain?

In the following excursion, at most necessarily an outline, I wish to articulate my hesitations in applying critical theory as it currently stands by making two claims. First, Tolkien is ill-suited to contemporary theory. Second, his work is particularly ill-suited to critique as a practice driven *by* theory. As Sedgwick and Frank have observed, theory has become “almost simply coextensive with the claim (you can’t say it often enough), *it’s not natural*” (16, emphasis original). It relies overwhelmingly on strong forms of social constructionism and the radical contingency of cultural phenomena. If something has been constructed, it can be *re*-constructed. Tolkien, however, is a writer of nature. This claim speaks to the heart of his fiction. Even beyond Tolkien’s classist attitudes, his apparent skepticism toward secular-left activism, his non-egalitarian views as well as his evident belief in cultural growth and decay (shown especially by Gondor), Tolkien is an essentialist. He views the cosmic order as intelligible and meaningful. The legacy bequeathed to modern fantasy by Tolkien is one of totality in its world-building, and although few fantasists share Tolkien’s specific Catholic sensibility, their worlds are generally fully intelligible as well. The quest structures that drive these fictional narratives are authorized by a stable and coherent cosmic order. That aura of meaningful totality helps Tolkien, for example, deny cultural relativism, as when Aragorn tells Éomer, “Good and ill have not changed since yesteryear; nor are they one thing among Elves and Dwarves and another among Men” (III.2 428). It also motivates Tolkien’s aversion to secular messianic hopes. The full realization of radical progressive change is mitigated by the Fall; the limitations of human nature can never be fully overcome. Nothing can fully replace divine mercy or grace.

Some Tolkienists, no doubt, will wish to push back against some of these characterizations of Tolkien. Their resistance, though, speaks to a significant gap between Tolkienists and other fantasy scholars. So many general fantasy scholars—Colin Manlove, Brian Attebery, Christine Brooke-Rose, Rosemary Jackson—have approached Tolkien with great ambivalence, if not outright dislike, and their attitudes have infiltrated our most authoritative academic texts for understanding epic fantasy. In the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, for example, John Grant argues that genre fantasy—which includes post-Tolkien epic fantasy—is essentially *not* “fantasy at all, but a comforting revisitation of cozy venues.” Real or full fantasy, in contrast, according to Grant, sparks the reader’s imagination to ever new vistas.

Likewise, Farah Mendlesohn's ground-breaking *Rhetorics of Fantasy* classifies *The Lord of the Rings* and its successors as portal-quest fantasies, and her disapproval is evident when she states that, unlike science fiction, portal-quest fantasy "relies on a moral universe: it is less an argument with the universe than a sermon on the way things should be" (5). Finally, Mark Bould and Sheryl Vint in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* observe that the "social order [in fantasy] is natural and given rather than historical and contingent" (106). This results in negative political consequences since fantasy functions like any "cultural text to reproduce dominant ideology—and, for portal-quests, those ideologies are usually seen as conservative" (102).

This aversion to Tolkien's brand of fantasy partly explains the observable gap between Tolkienists and other academic scholars of fantasy. This aversion, though, does not occur in a vacuum: it centers around academia's prevailing *zeitgeist* (fiercely authorized by theory and critique) against nature. In general, these fantasy scholars have taken their cues not from mainstream literary studies but from SF scholarship. Arguably, this makes sense—fantasy and SF fandoms have overlapped throughout their histories. Nonetheless, SF *scholars* have historically—and notoriously—viewed fantasy with extreme hostility. Few sibling rivalries have been so bitter. Fantasy literature has endured such various descriptions as immature, reactionary, regressive, conservative, nostalgic, anti-political, and anti-historical. In championing SF as a genre that exemplifies rationality and cognitive estrangement, for example, Darko Suvin labels fantasy an *anti-cognitive* "subliterature of mystification" (8–9). Fredric Jameson, for his part, has spent the better part of four decades denigrating fantasy, arguing that the "absence of any sense of history ... most sharply differentiates fantasy from Science Fiction" (*Archaeologies* 61). According to this view, fantasy naturalizes a world in drastic need of revolutionary change. Under a sweeping ontology of Good and Evil, historical contradictions simply disappear, and the fantasy genre remains lamentably "wedded to nature and to the organism" at a time when, finally, technology has raised posthuman and transhuman possibilities (Jameson 64). Under this view, fantasy's twin recourses to magic and essentialism dooms it, alas, to intellectual irrelevance and political impotence.

Nor are these opinions the reactionary avowals of scholars devoted to literary realism. No less than fantasy, SF belongs to *fantastika* and romance. Still, when the formal academic study of SF began developing back in the 1970s, its dominant paradigm was one of the original hermeneutics of suspicion: Marxism. Most of the early figures associated with *Science Fiction Studies*, for example, including Suvin, Jameson, Carl Freedman, and Tom Moylan, were all Marxist critics; and, rather than promoting an orthodox Marxism that emphasized partisan literature, as did Lenin and Sartre, these SF critics drew their main inspiration from the critical tradition established by the Frankfurt School (Burns 269). And Marxist

claims to primacy in SF continue to this day. As Istvan Csicsery-Ronay writes, the “most sophisticated studies of sf have been either explicitly Marxist in orientation or influenced by Marxist concepts adopted by feminism, race-criticism, queer theory and cultural studies” (113)—a remarkable imperialistic assertion, though still largely true. The allegorical method of Fredric Jameson has also been highly influential in spreading the hermeneutics of suspicion. For Jameson, the depths of the text—its political unconscious—must always be plumbed, and critics must restore to the “surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history [of class struggle]” (*Political* 20). Texts never just mean *only* what they purport to mean because, after all, if “everything were transparent, then no ideology would be possible, and no domination either” (61). Criticism therefore becomes a matter of questioning, interrogating, unmasking, debunking. Jamesonian Marxists take nothing at face value, “nature” least of all, since claims appealing to nature are claims that deny the power of history. Under this model of thought, needless to say, SF comes off rather well—less so fantasy. Yet these essential Marxist distinctions have profoundly affected the development of academic fantasy criticism.⁶

Unsurprisingly, when Marxist critics have trained their sights on Tolkien, the results have been brutal.⁷ By and large, however, except for Tolkienists, fantasy scholars have mostly adopted—with varying degrees of explicitness—a Marxist perspective. According to James Gifford in his exhaustive, landmark *A Modernist Fantasy*, the “focus of critical studies of fantasy after the 1970s has been materialist and dialectical in nature, predominantly through Jameson, and perhaps most especially so when its critical method is not explicit” (29). Despite this light thrown on Marxist approaches to fantasy, though, Gifford’s support of radical anarchist theory means that he is as dismissive of Tolkien and his legacy as the Marxists. The fantasists whom Gifford champions are all libertarians and fellow anarchists: Mervyn Peake, Henry Treece, John Cowper Powys, Ursula K. Le Guin, Samuel R. Delany, Poul Anderson. Tolkien and the Inklings remain responsible for the fantasy genre’s “reactionary class consciousness and hegemonic operations of race and

⁶ One organization example: the IAFA partly owes its existence to the SFRA’s refusal, back during the 1980s, to add “fantasy” as a word describing what their organization researches.

⁷ One unusually temperate Marxist reading of *The Lord of the Rings* comes from Stephen Kelly, but even this mild account contains all the major features of critique and the hermeneutics of suspicion. For Kelly, since “ideology is typically hidden from both author and reader,” the critic must delve deeply into the text and discover how “Tolkien’s economic world-building process reproduces certain aspects of capitalistic economic structures [i.e. capitalist ideology]” (114). Since the verdict given on any text is never “innocent,” however, a deeper look unsurprisingly reveals that Tolkien, despite the pre-modern character of Middle-earth, reproduces the “economic unawareness endemic in modern society” (128).

gender” (Gifford 70).⁸ Other recent theory-driven approaches to fantasy studies likewise partake of the critical attitude—its determination to unmask, to debunk, to denaturalize. Critical race theorists Helen Young and Mark C. Jerng, for example, each find popular fantasy deeply problematic. For Young, constructions of “whiteness” lie at the core of popular fantasy, and she attaches particular blame to Tolkien and Robert E. Howard, whose writings have mutually served to “channel centuries-old constructs into contemporary popular culture” (17). Jerng targets Howard as well for introducing a legacy of “racial world-building” into sword-and-sorcery fiction.

Under such models, Tolkien and his legacy to epic fantasy have become the preferred whipping boys against which “good” fantasy is defined—much like how, a generation earlier, SF critics had used fantasy to elevate their preferred genre. At this point, it might be worthwhile to mention Samuel R. Delany, the fantasist most often praised by critical paradigms, whose *Nevèryon* tetralogy appeared from 1979 through 1987. Delany earns high marks from James Gifford as well as Mark C. Jerng, who sees Delany as a healthier alternative to Howard. Another person who praises Delany highly (and at Tolkien’s expense) is Marxist critic Carl Freedman. Like Darko Suvin, Freedman disparages fantasy as non-cognitive, and he considers Tolkien someone whose “prodigious invention and awesome architectonic skill” hides his “intellectual impoverishment” (264). But Delany is Freedman’s exception that proves the rule. Delany is a deconstructionist and a Marxist both, and his fiction reflects that poststructuralist orientation. There is nothing “natural” in Delany. Everything is a construct, a product of history, and his fantasy lives and breathes the critical *ethos*. Tolkien, however, is sadly non-critical in comparison (or so the thinking might continue). He is the genre’s doddering old grandfather, influential yet “problematic,” a figure with embarrassingly outdated opinions on nature, history, meaning, language, class, and metaphysics. Perhaps Tolkien’s longevity and popularity deserve some formal respect, but “serious” critics need not take him seriously.⁹

⁸ Gifford seems unaware of Letter 52 where Tolkien states his preference for “Anarchy (philosophically understood, meaning abolition of control not whiskered men with bombs)” (63), although I suspect this revelation would grant Tolkien little positive standing in Gifford’s judgment. As with John Grant and others, Tolkien’s brand of epic fantasy serves as too useful a foil for the fantasy Gifford prefers.

⁹ Lest anyone suspect me of exaggeration, let me turn once again more specifically to Freedman, who, driven by his academic faith in Marxist critique, blasts Tolkien Studies *as a field* for its hordes of “weak-minded sub-Tolkienian ephebes to whom evasion of stubborn historical difficulty and complexity is immediately congenial” (264). Who is the lone example cited by Freedman? *Tom Shippey*, of all people (264, n. 6). Yet we cannot simply dismiss Freedman as a crank. He is a scholar with a long history of significant contributions to SF scholarship. If we are to illuminate the virtues Tolkien’s work, the field must go beyond nitpicking Freedman’s misunderstandings and tackle the deeper theoretical paradigms that authorize those misunderstandings in the first place.

Intuiting some of these issues, a few of the more theory-savvy Tolkienists have chosen to fight fire with fire—and, in the process, indirectly demonstrate the problems caused by pairing Tolkien with critical theory. When confronted by a cherished yet problematic text, observes Rita Felski, critics wedded to critique are often forced to “tie themselves into knots in order to prove that a text harbors signs of dissonance and dissent—as if there were no other conceivable way of justifying its merits” (17). Something of the same happens to Jane Chance in *Tolkien, Self, and Other*. Although Chance, perhaps more than any other Tolkienist, has pioneered queer, feminist, and postcolonial strategies for studying Tolkien’s fiction, two seemingly incompatible goals complicate her book’s achievement. First, Chance seeks to defend Tolkien *personally* (and by extension his texts) from detractors, since Tolkien, she claims, is “much more forward-thinking than has previously been considered” (xi). Second, Chance also wishes to frame her defense through queer theory, which emphasizes marginalization and difference. On a rhetorical level, this framework cleverly positions Tolkien—a writer too often seen as reactionary—within a progressive theoretical discourse highly esteemed by current academic critics. Based on intentions alone, *Tolkien, Self, and Other* is an ambitious and remarkable book, and the field of Tolkien Studies is stronger for it.

Still, the first tension between Chance’s two goals, personal defense through employing queer theory, lies in her overly pious biographical approach to Tolkien. Overall, critical theorists tend to discount authorial intention. Even if we ignore Barthes’s “death of the author” thesis, which some theories of textual meaning require, the critic is still supposedly a clinician, someone who diagnoses a text’s ills with expert knowledge unavailable to the text’s hapless author—in fact, much like a psychologist overseeing treatment for an inadequately self-aware patient. This is why critique so often leads to arguments with the following structure: “Although the text or the author purports to do X, it is actually (and often inadvertently) doing the opposite of X.” As a member of Tolkien’s academic *comitatus*, however, Chance simply turns a blind eye to this tripping point. She avoids critique and concentrates only on defense. Actually, Chance’s biographical treatment does try to form a bridge between her two goals. Because of Tolkien’s experiences as someone “queer,” a person from the margins—a medievalist, an orphan, born in South Africa, a religious minority in Protestant England—Tolkien had acquired great “sympathy for and toleration of those who are different, unimportant, or marginalized,” including “medieval and modern women” (Chance xi, 180). Thus do biography and queer theory come together, albeit somewhat uneasily. Yet a second tension arises through how Chance must abandon critique’s intense self-reflexivity. Otherwise, this requirement might have forced Chance to confront the many *non-queer* aspects to Tolkien’s biography: his education and class, his status as a white cisgender Christian male, his Oxford professorship. These, too, are part of *The Lord of the Rings*—and Tolkien’s detractors, whether Marxist or

not, have harped upon them for decades. But Chance, despite using the terminology of theory, refuses to embrace its tell-tale suspicion. She rebuts weaker individual criticisms against Tolkien while studiously avoiding the deeper challenges critical theory was designed to produce—the more totalizing critique of ideology. As a result, *Tolkien, Self, and Other* is defending Tolkien from an anti-Tolkienism light.

Even more problematically, Chance never interrogates what it *means* to apply something like queer theory to Tolkien or his work. Early in the book, Chance enthusiastically cites Wendy Moffat, a queer biographer who states that queer theory began, not “just as a totalizing vision—but rather as a totally *anti-essentialist* one. The goal was to illustrate how constructed, how *unnatural* essentialist assumptions about identity were” (qtd. in 5, emphases added). Unfortunately, Tolkien *is* an essentialist. He *does* believe in nature, arguably never raises identity as an issue, and he furthermore creates a theologically tinted secondary world—mythically ordered and fully intelligible—replete with semantic certainties and cosmic givens. In truth, *Tolkien, Self, and Other* is probably best considered a translation. *Here* is queer theory, *there* is Tolkien; let us read the latter according to the former. Yet something is always lost in a translation. What vanishes under Chance? Tolkien’s religion, for one thing—an astounding exclusion for such a biographical book. But, as Marxists have long recognized, the Inklings’ understanding of good and evil is simply impossible under critical theory. The language of sin and guilt, salvation and redemption, grounds its meaning in a universe centered by divine authority, God’s or Ilúvatar’s, but any critical paradigm—anti-foundationalist to their core—must reject such thinking. The revelation of morals recedes before a genealogy of morals. Yet these terminological shifts, their implications, do not concern Chance. She confidently reinterprets the failures of pride and honor in *The Lord of the Rings* as failures of “masculinity” (chapter 8), but they are far from the same thing. Likewise, although queer theory shares Tolkien’s undeniable concern for the marginalized, Tolkien would have found intellectual and emotional authorization for his empathy, *not* via strong social constructionism, but from the Sermon on the Mount. The language of the meek, the humble, the poor, the long-suffering: this is what suffuses *The Lord of the Rings*, yet this language requires assumptions about the world that are undermined—consciously and deliberately—by the theory paradigm promoted by Chance.

From these remarks, do not suppose that I specifically endorse or accept Tolkien’s worldview—far from it, actually. Still, it seems telling that Chance feels compelled to translate that worldview out of existence in *Tolkien, Self, and Other*. In a book about alterity, we are ironically told that Tolkien is just like us; his otherness is really sameness. He is forward-thinking, just like us, and his fiction, truly and honestly, supports our most progressive concepts from modern theory. At least critic Dirk Wiemann takes Tolkien’s alterity more seriously. For him, we cannot simply play ostrich with the “rigid binarisms” at the center of *The Lord of*

the Rings—a sin he attributes to the various “well-meant misreadings” proposed by “queer, feminist or otherwise politically informed readings of Tolkien” (195). Wiemann’s solution, though, continues to double-down on theory: he purposely misreads Tolkien’s essentialism as a form of *strategic* essentialism. As I have been suggesting, however, this type of strategy is a mistake. It is an opportunity lost. Perhaps, when reading authors whose main ideas diverge sharply from my own, I treat their differing worldviews too sanguinely. Still, the strangeness and alterity of *The Lord of the Rings* strikes me as its deepest intellectual attraction. By presenting us with the non-modern, or only partially modern, Tolkien can lead readers into re-examining our basic assumptions. This is why a neo-Straussian approach seems so especially useful. As a political philosopher, Strauss has a keen sensitivity for what modernity typically takes for granted, and his interest in the political links him to similar interests by modern academics. Overall, though, much like the editors of a recent anthology on postcritique, I am less concerned with hammering home “a ‘critique of critique’ than with testing out new possibilities and intellectual alternatives” (Anker and Felski 2). Although Strauss’s work offers one such alternative, others can surely be imagined. In any event, new modes of theorizing—new sets of concepts—seem necessary if the study of Tolkien, which includes the epic fantasy tradition *founded* by Tolkien, is to keep pace with mainstream genre and literary studies.

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