J.R.R. Tolkien, Culture Warrior: The Alt-Right's Crusade against the Tolkien Society's 2021 Summer Seminar on "Tolkien and Diversity"

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In July 2021, I was one of sixteen presenters at the Tolkien Society's virtual Summer Seminar on "Tolkien and Diversity" which not only attracted the largest audience at a Society event ever recorded, over 700 attendees, but which was met by an unprecedented online backlash.[1] My presentation on how queer atheist, agnostic, and animist fans read Tolkien's legendarium was one of four which focused on queer or transgender readings of Tolkien.[2] During the month before the Seminar, alt-right journalists and bloggers attacked the presenters, the Tolkien Society, progressive readers in general, the liberal media, and, finally, Amazon's *Rings of Power* which was still in production and did not premier until September 2022.

That backlash, only one among numerous attacks about popular media productions, inspired this project.[3] My analysis considers what happens when a non-profit organization, such as the Tolkien Society, described as an "educational charity and literary society," ("About"), attempts to engage with questions of diversity, equity, and colonialism (whether along the axes of race, gender, or sexuality, or all of the above) in Tolkien's legendarium, in the adaptations and transformative works, and in the global 21st century readership. While the alt-right backlash against the Seminar was a first for the Society, it is only one (and a rather small one in terms of scope and duration) of a growing number of global political, religious, and cultural conflicts raging against the presumed liberalism of popular media.

On June 9, 2021, the Tolkien Society posted the program for their virtual "Tolkien and Diversity" seminar. The posting included the original Call for Proposals (CFP), information about the theme of "diversity," the titles of the scheduled presentations, and the presenters' names. The attacks which followed were based solely on this information. Between June 10 and July 8, nineteen articles were published or linked to in alt-right periodicals, blogs, and discussion forums. The CFP referenced the Amazon Prime adaptation in a single sentence, in a standard rhetorical move, as part of the socio-intellectual context for the Seminar: "Spurred by recent interpretations of Tolkien's creations and the cast list of the upcoming Amazon show *The Lord of the Rings*, it is crucial we discuss the theme of diversity in relation to Tolkien." Comments attacking the theme, the Society, and the speakers appeared on the Tolkien Society's Facebook group and were promptly deleted. The immediate response was similar to the backlash against Society's 2018 Seminar Topic, "Tolkien the Pagan," but while that debate apparently remained within Tolkien Society spaces and fan communities, the 2021 backlash spread quickly into alt-right spaces.

Much of the current media coverage of this sort of backlash against media properties, including the later review bombings of *Rings of Power* which led Amazon to suspend reviews the day after the series premiered (Hibbard), describes the conflict as differences among fans with the patronizing tone the "mainstream" media has long taken about fandom. In contrast, Craig Franson argues that:

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[1] Recordings of fourteen of the sixteen presentations can be viewed on the Tolkien Society's YouTube Channel, and the conference proceedings (consisting of ten of the presentations) was released in May 2023 (Sherwood).

[2] In the interests of transparency, I state that I was invited to review proposals submitted for the "Tolkien and Diversity" seminar. However, I recused myself from evaluating my proposal and the ones I knew were submitted by contributors in an anthology on queer approaches to Tolkien that I was co-editing with Christopher Vaccaro and Stephen Yandell. Additionally, while I made recommendations, I was not part of the team who made the final decisions to accept or reject individual proposals.

[3] This presentation is substantially the same one I read at the Seminar, but I have integrated the tables into the text of the essay for readability and lightly edited sentences. At the presentation, I circulated a handout with all the tables and brief explanatory text so the audience who could follow along as I read.

We're not dealing with a fan phenomenon. There are fans involved, certainly, but fan behavior can't begin to explain the recurrent global hate mobs we've seen springing up over the past few decades with the launch of each new, supermassive, studio production. What we're witnessing is a new front opening up in a decades'-long, international, far-right, culture war. The people waging it aren't just fighting to keep Tolkien's imaginary world white and manly and straight. They're fighting to restore that white-supremacist system in the real world, too. And, as it turns out, lots of contemporary fascists also happen to love Tolkien. . . . Focusing on their fan status helps us to ignore the real common denominator in all of these spheres—and that is their fascism. Over the years, the international fascist community (and especially those who were keyed into the online sphere we used to call the "Alt-Right") has learned to punch above its demographic weight by harnessing a whole ecosystem of independent players. They've learned to trigger the spectacle-producing outrage of global fan groups, recruit prominent conservative sympathizers to their cause, enthrall the mass media with their antics, and leach promotional power from Hollywood's biggest studios (Franson, personal communication).[4]

A recent monograph on the history of how popular media became a significant battle-field for the alt-right is Alexandra Minna Stern's *Proud Boys and the White Ethnostate: How the Alt-right is Warping the American Imagination*. Stern notes the difficulties with "alt-right" as a term but defines it for her purpose, a definition that I find apt and am using for this presentation. Stearn defines the alt-right as decentralized and marked by ongoing conflicts between different groups which share certain core values. The groups are: "disaffected libertarians, paleoconservatives, racialists of varying stripes (white separatists, supremacists, nationalist, and ethnonationalists), men's rights activists and misogynists (like MGTOW--Men Going Their Own Way), neo-reactionaries, anti-Semites and xenophobes with conspicuous animus against Latina/os and Muslims" (5). The alt-right's common values are: "the rejection of establishment conservatism and its antipathy toward feminism and multiculturalism" and the need to "cultivate a fresh image and shed the Nazi insignias and KKK white hoods associated with white supremacy (5).

My methodology for this presentation draws on corpus linguistics, an approach Franco Moretti describes as "distant reading," as opposed to the traditional close reading done in literary studies. I created an electronic database consisting of the text of the backlash articles and public comments in order to do quantitative analysis to identify shared rhetorical patterns in the texts.[5] One benefit of this method is that the articles are aggregated and anonymized in the corpus; as a result, I can avoid giving individual attention to the racism, misogyny, and homo- and transphobia of the authors while tracking rhetorical patterns across the corpus.

My Backlash Corpus is a small one, approximately 98,500 words, consisting of the text of the nineteen articles listed above, plus publicly available comments at the time I collected the data.

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[4] More information about this front can be found in the new podcast, *American Id*, by Dani Holz and Craig Franson.

[5] The process of creating a corpus involves first, copying and pasting the text and saving it as a plain text document (.txt). Next, I scrub the document in order to remove punctuation and standardize case, making it easier to generate quantitative data. Scrubbing also removes stop words (in this case, over 170 of them) such as pronouns, determiners, conjunctions, and prepositions. These function words are always the most numerous in any written text but are not particularly useful in my project. I used Michael Drout's "Lexos" for this step. Removing the stop words allows clear identification of the most frequently used nouns, verbs, and adjectives for analysis of the context of those key words. I uploaded the scrubbed documents into TextSTAT, a free text analysis program that generates Word Frequency lists and Concordances.

Some sites did not allow comments; others required an account to read the comments which I chose not to do. Table 1 identifies the publishing websites, dates, the number of public comments that were made, and the total number of words at each site (articles + comments). I did not create accounts on sites that required them to access comments, so those comments are not in the corpus. Some of the articles were reprinted on other websites (not always with attribution!), but the reprints are not included in my corpus. Authors and titles are listed in the citations in my Works Cited, but the links are to the archived copies I made rather than to the original sites. I archived the works to balance the academic ethic of identifying sources with the competing ethic of not giving the original sites further traffic which drives revenues and can attract new readers even if, as is the case with this presentation, the person citing them opposes the behaviors and ideologies.

Table 1

The Backlash June 10-July-8, 2021

DATE	SOURCE	# COMMENTS	WORDS
10-Jun	*American Conservative* [plus Blog Reprint]	240	16335
	Not the Bee	140	5737
11-Jun	*Bounding Into Comics* [first of two articles]	77	3711
12-Jun	Personal Blog	54	4528
16-Jun	*Daily Wire* [first of two articles]	185	7663
18-Jun	*The Federalist* [first of two articles]	Comments not allowed (CNA)	708
	Vigilant Citizen Forum [post which links to first Federalist article]	47	5983
	Bounding Into Comics [second of two articles]	54	1992
	Breitbart	213 (BB); FB 62	8125
23-Jun	*The Federalist* [second of two articles]	CNA	864
24-Jun	*National Review*	86	8668
	The Critic	CNA	1095
30-Jun	*The Daily Wire* [second of two articles]	150	5306
	PJ Media	164	6197
	Conservative Review	CNA	453
1-Jul	*Christian Headlines*	7	646
2-Jul	*Flag and Cross*	0	419
4-Jul	*Off Guardian*	200	19790
8-Jul	*Babylon Bee*	107	249

Tables 2-7 present the results of my analysis of the word frequency and concordances for selected words. A Word Frequency list identifies how many times a word appears in the corpus. After selecting significant key words (based on frequency) I did a Key Word in Context (KWIC) analysis by creating a concordance for each one. A concordance shows words next to or close to the key word (in this case, within twenty characters to the right and twenty to the left). My Word Frequency

Lists and Concordances are generated by TextSTAT, an open-access text analysis program available online. The concordances allowed me to identify collocations, the words or type of words that are often associated, or collocated, with my key words.

Table 2 lists the sixty most frequently used significant words (after function words have been deleted) in the corpus in descending order of frequency.

Table 2

The Sixty Most Frequently Used Words

1	tolkien/s & tolkein/s[6]	1024
2	months	672
3	like	386
4	people	293
5	society	214
6	lord	207
7	rings	200
8	work/works	365
9	book/books	196
10	read	179
11	think	172
12	woke	159
13	variants of woke	40
14	good	144
15	open	143
16	options	128
17	world	125
18	time	124
19	diverse/diversity	118
20	man/men	115
21	orcs	108
22	evil	99
23	new	97
24	lotr	96
25	want	90
26	great	86
27	seminar	85
28	never	84

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[6] TextSTAT assumes any difference in spelling is a different word: for instance, "Tolkien," "Tolkiens," "Tolkein," and "Tolkeins" are all listed as separate words. I combined all variants for the tables as well as removing duplicates caused by online programs copying the comment that is replied to in "reply to comments." I also redacted individual user names from my data.

Table 2 continued

The Sixty Most Frequently Used Words

29	right	81
30	edited	80
31	queer	80
32	movies	78
33	white	78
34	first	73
35	story	73
36	hobbit	70
37	fantasy	69
38	might	67
39	gay	63
40	life	62
41	love	59
42	elves	58
43	old	56
44	saruman	56
45	middle	55
46	christian	54
47	earth	54
48	sex	54
49	characters	52
50	culture	52
51	different	51
52	literature	51
53	reading	51
54	author	50
55	better	50
56	history	50
57	human	50
58	identity	50
58	shakespeare	50
60	TRUE	50

The word *woke* (and variants of it) was one of the words most frequently used to attack the seminar and its participants: *woke* appeared 159 times, and variants, forty times (total: 199). Table 3 summarizes the way the word was used as a modifier 108 times.[7]

Table 3

Woke Used as a Modifier

FREQ	STRUCTURE	SELECTED EXAMPLES
34	Woke + insult/slur	barbarians, crazies woke, garbage, infiltrators
35	Woke + groups	tolkien society, americans, conference, elitists, fans, generation
24	Woke + ideologies or discourses	agenda, doctrines, ideology, interpretations, phenomenon, religion, theology
15	Woke + transformative works	casting, fantasy, franchises, reimaginings, remakes, rewrite, amazon tolkien show

Woke, which functions as a slur in the corpus, is often used in connection with additional insults or slurs (racist, misogynistic, homo- and transphobic, and ablest) and may be applied to individuals, specific groups, ideologies, discourses, and transformative works. However, the word originated in Black literature and communities with a very different meaning in 1962. It became more widely known in the context of the Black Lives Movement, and has recently been appropriated by the alt-right ("New Notes," Oxford English Dictionary):

> The original meaning of adjectival *woke* (and earlier *woke up*) was simply 'awake', but by the mid-20th century, *woke* had been extended figuratively to refer to being 'aware' or 'well informed' in a political or cultural sense. In the past decade, that meaning has been catapulted into mainstream use with a particular nuance of 'alert to racial or social discrimination and injustice',

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[7] Modifiers are words, phrases, or clauses which provide additional information about another word, usually a noun.

popularized through the lyrics of the 2008 song *Master Teacher* by Erykah Badu, in which the words 'I stay woke' serve as a refrain, and more recently through its association with the Black Lives Matter movement, especially on social media ("New Notes").

I chose three key words for collocation analysis for this presentation. They are *Tolkien* which includes a common misspelling (*Tolkein)*, and the plural forms of both; *Tolkien Society* as a separate key word, technically a key phrase, distinct from "Tolkien" the author or human being; and *diverse/diversity*.[8] Tables 5, 6 and 7 show the words that appear within twenty characters on either side of the chosen key words. I note the frequency although in many cases, a specific collocation may only appear once. However, my analysis groups collocations by register which is a sociolinguistic term meaning specific sub-categories of language defined by the context; the term applies to both spoken and written language. Registers are identified by similar word and grammatical choices made by speakers or writers which depend on the location, type of participants, and purposes of participants (Anderson & Corbett, Halliday).

The same word can have very different meanings and associations depending on context and can fit into different registers as is the case for *woke*. For example, when I use words such as *Black, diversity, queer, marxist theory, critical race theory, sexuality*, *LBGTQ+*, they are descriptive in function and often celebratory. However the same words, in alt-right registers, are strongly connected with concepts of perversity, irrationality, destruction, corruption, and evil. One of the comments in my corpus defines the word "queer" as meaning "odd, sexual, bent, horrifying" which is a complete rejection of contemporary activist reclamations and redefinition of the word.

Table 5 identifies the registers of words that collocate with Tolkien (spelled variously), all of which are descriptive or positive terms: the most frequent references are to his religion (which includes comparing him and C.S. Lewis), personal attributes, family, and a miscellaneous category.

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[8] Although I do not deal with it in this presentation, the concept of *diversity* collocates with other key words, such as *adaptation* or *Tolkien Society* (especially since the CFP specified the importance of the concept), but it also has its own standing as a key word which collocates with other shows, adaptations, and productions mentioned in the corpus, supporting what Franson notes is a pattern of "recurrent global hate mobs we've seen springing up over the past few decades with the launch of each new, supermassive, studio production."

Table 5

Significant Collocations for *Tolkien/s* & *Tolkein/s*

REGISTERS	FREQ
Religion	
Catholic	11
Christian	7
Christianity	1
Personal Attributes	
Genuis [unique]	4
Rolling or Spinning in Grave	4
Spinning in Grave	
Family	
daughter Priscilla	5
son Christopher	2
Misc	
Comparing to C.S. Lewis (often referencing religion)	10
racism, racist, racist hippies/orcs/woke	9[9]
Tolkien Estate [should: shut madness down; sue perverts)	5
white (positive)	5
fascism	1

As I've noted before, "Catholic" and "Christian" are often used interchangeably in Tolkien scholarship, a rhetorical choice which ignores the numerous historical differences, divisions, and conflicts between Christian denominations as well as profound areas of disagreement between current denominations (Reid 2022). *Catholic* and *Christian* are collocated with additional modifiers that further define Tolkien's religious beliefs as *deeply, devout, profoundly, trad*.

Another register contains attributes assigned Tolkien: his unique genius, and the claim that the Tolkien Society's seminar must have him spinning or rolling in his grave. These are related to two registers: the first is the way Tolkien is

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[9] While these words collocate with *Tolkien* in the corpus, the larger context shows the claims being made are that the *Tolkien Society* or the *woke presenters* are unjustly calling Tolkien a racist.

metaphorically canonized as part of the tradition of great Men/great Literature, and two, the authorial fallacy (readers knowing what Tolkien would say or do based on their interpretations of his legendarium, in this case extended to a metaphorical agency after his death). I suspect when I look at collocations for the titles of his work, there will be additional instances in this category, ranging from "classic" to "lore," all functioning to assign him, or his work, or both a high and unique status is the basic for the necessity to protect him, and them, from *perverts*.

A third register contains references to his family which are limited to the names of two of his children: Christopher is mentioned in the context of his death allowing the Amazon adaptation to be made, while Priscilla is identified as the honorary Vice President of the Tolkien Society (Tolkien, of course, being the permanent honorary President).

The final group is a miscellaneous one which involves comparisons between Tolkien and Lewis (often focusing on their religions); the claim that the Tolkien Estate should act in some way to stop the *madness* and *perverts* of the Seminar. I have noticed that how often critics of the series do not blame the Tolkien Estate, which actually put the rights for some type of adaptation up for bid, focusing the blame on, variously, Amazon, the Tolkien Society (which some appear to conflate with the Tolkien Estate), and wokeness in general. Terms like *racism, racist, hippies/orcs/woke* are collocated with *Tolkien* but in context the usage is in summaries of claims about what the *hippies/orcs/woke* are doing to Tolkien/his work (the two are indistinguishable for many). *White* is given a positive meaning and may be the subject of its own collocation analysis at a later date.

In contrast, as Table 6, "Significant Collocations with 'Tolkien Society' shows, there are over fifty instances of collocations that fit into the "insults/slurs" register. *Woke* appears ten times in various types of phrases, not only in connection with the *Tolkien Society* but with groups, ideologies, transformative works, and often with references to Tolkien's evil characters (*goblins, durin's bane, cave trolls, orcs*). Further work could be done to sort out sub-registers of insults (quotes from or allusions to Tolkien's legendarium; references to mental illness; critical theory; etc.), but that will have to wait for future work.

Table 6

Significant Collocations for *Tolkien Society*

1. abandon/abandoned [reason] [3]
2. affront namesake
3. anti intellectual lineup
4. black speech
5. complete insanity

Table 6 continued

Significant Collocations for *Tolkien Society*

6. critical analysis ruination
7. defeat sexual obsessions
8. devolve [wokeness]
9. diversity
10. damage
11. false
12. forced square holes own ideology
13. gay cabelle
14. goblins durins bane
15. goes woke [5]
16. grasping straws
17. hijacked [devout Catholic's work]
18. hobbiton perverted
19. horseshit seminar
20. ideas expressed confusedly
21. inspired marxist critical race theory
22. joke
23. left diversity inclusivity sexuality
24. lgbtq seminar
25. lord rings racism
26. lying
27. misguided
28. modern woke theology
29. nonsense
30. obscure lit
31. passed cave trolls orcs running
32. possibility transgender lgbt characters
33. queering [tolkien]
34. queerness sense lgbt pride disgusting
35. radical infiltrator masquerading
36. renegade
37. sad look
38. saruman queer tolkiens lord rings
39. shaming membership
40. sick puppies

Table 6 continued

Significant Collocations for *Tolkien Society*

41. simply woke outrageous jargon
42. snorting [parmesan cheese]
43. social dystopian future
44. throwing [tantrums]
45. tolkien cult woke westfold fallen
46. traditional
47. twist
48. waited [for christopher tolkien's] death
49. weirdos
50. whackos
51. woke [2]
52. woke arglebargle
53. woke condone
54. woke ring/s [2]
55. word [queer] mean odd sexual bent horrifying

I had to search to find the meaning of #42, *snorting parmesan cheese*. The entry on Snopes explains that it alludes to a phrase used by Hunter Biden to describe his actions while addicted to cocaine although, as the Snopes entry shows, it has also been twisted to imply he specifically sought out the cheese!

Table 7 shows forty-four significant collocations with "diverse" and "diversity" which fall into the same patterns as *woke* and the *Tolkien Society* with the exception of an occasional instance where *diverse/diversity* is used in a claim that Tolkien's work is in fact already diverse (and thus, presumably, not needing any interference from academics or the Tolkien Society). Specific evidence for this occasional claim is the existence of multiple fantasy species; the Haradrim, or, in one case, because Tolkien created *deciduous ents and coniferous ents*.

But these few instances are relatively insignificant besides the majority of negative terms, including *witch hunt, scam, sexual deviance, mentally ill, obsessed, ultra woke, ruining, blasphemy*. another term I had to look up is *anhedonia* (used in #38, *wacky pediaphile anhedonia*). I assume the second term is a misspelling of "pedophile," a common slur in the alt-right register, but the third is a psychological term defined as the inability to feel pleasure, and associated with depression). In a psychological register, it is a diagnostic term; in the alt-right corpus, it's another ablest slur.

Table 7

Significant Collocations for *diverse* and *diversity*

1. accusations racism
2. anonymous rootless mass destroys true
3. asshats
4. bad concepts
5. biggest scam pulled western world
6. black gay people
7. blacks
8. bunch mentally ill weirdos
9. cancer genocide europeans
10. colonialism postcolonialism
11. comicsgate
12. elves dwarfs humans magicians orcs
13. ents deciduous ents coniferous ents
14. ethnicities fighting hold lands
15. fairy tales legends china middle east
16. focus skin color gender sexual
17. foreign intrusion sexual deviance
18. holy lack imagination
19. joke swear holy lack imagination
20. mentally ill
21. multiculturalism
22. obsessed
23. orcs aint afro americans
24. orcs blacks haradrim arabs
25. outright lie people happier
26. parody
27. postcolonialism adaptations [4]
28. presenters disappoint
29. pressing concerns modern woke left
30. ruining classic
31. sad left doesnt value
32. society tolkien announced ultra woke
33. sucked history suck
34. tears country apart
35. thanks ruining

Table 7 continued

Significant Collocations for "diverse and "diversity

36. transgender
37. various races intelligent
38. wacky pediaphile anhedonia
39. witch hunt
40. woke [3]
41. woke employing outrage
42. woke left
43. woke trans species pure blasphemy
44. wrong

I will be continuing to work on this project. Beyond arguing that Tolkien scholars can no longer afford the privilege of ignoring the extent to which alt-right groups manipulate fans, the media, establishment conservatives, and in some cases liberal academics and fans. In addition, I am heartened by the fact that, despite the backlash, the Seminar took place as planned; the recorded presentations are available via the Society's YouTube, and as I was preparing this presentation for submission, *Tolkien and Diversity: Proceedings of The Tolkien Society Summer Seminar* was published and features ten of the original presentations (Sherwood). I am in touch with some but not all of my fellow presenters, and none of them have been harassed as far as I know. I can also say that the quality of the presentations was outstanding as is the courage of my fellow presenters, and I hope to see the Tolkien Society continue with their efforts to change and challenge the discourse!

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