

## Academic Writings

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Published in Stuart Lee (ed.). 2014. *A Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 27-40.

During most of his lifetime, J.R.R. Tolkien was primarily known as an Oxford professor and philologist specialising in Old and Middle English language and literature. This fact has to be stressed since the gap between the appreciation or mere knowledge of his works of fiction, most prominently *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, and of his non-fiction publications, notably his academic essays and editions, has greatly increased over the decades. Tolkien may have started out as an Oxford don writing a book or two for children, but by now he is perceived mostly and often uniquely as an author of fantasy who also published a few academic essays. These are read, if at all, only in order to gain insight into the way his literary creative process developed so that we have an at first implicit subdivision into, on the one hand, essays considered of “general interest” and, on the other, papers thought to be too specialised to appeal to anyone but a few philologists. Such a categorisation has (unwittingly) received support from the publication of *The Monsters and the Critics*, edited by Christopher Tolkien in 1983. Christopher’s main criteria for the inclusion of a text in this volume seem to have been its general appeal and understandability for a lay audience. Not surprisingly the seven papers that constitute *The Monster and the Critics* have by now achieved ‘canonical’ status among Tolkien scholars, whereas most of the other academic essays have sunk into oblivion. The current status of an essay need therefore not reflect its original importance and impact. “*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics” has been recognised as a landmark in *Beowulf* criticism ever since its publication in 1937, but “On Fairy-stories” (delivered in 1939, and first published 1947 – see Tolkien 2008), by contrast, seems to have had little impact whatsoever before it was re-published in *Tree and Leaf* in 1964 and discovered as a possible authorial commentary on the poetic principles behind Tolkien’s works of fiction. It is very difficult to assess objectively the influence of Tolkien’s academic publications on the field, and Tom Shippey’s (2007b) and Michael D.C. Drout’s (2007b) studies remain the sole attempts so far.

The published academic lectures and essays, which are the focus of this chapter, represent only a fraction of Tolkien’s academic writings. The Department of Special Collections & Western Manuscripts at the Bodleian library holds – among other documents – thousands of pages of Tolkien’s lecture and research notes and drafts (see also ch. 4). These include polished, much-revised and frequently used texts of standard lectures, extensive research notes on the language and style of a text (e.g. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*), or drafts for his published articles. This stupendous treasure-trove of notes and drafts is the product of a long and busy academic life and a close examination has shown that they would contain material – in various degrees of refinement – for many a publication. The posthumous edition of Tolkien’s notes and comments on *Finn and Hengest* by his pupil Alan Bliss (in 1982) are just one example. The relatively few essays that Tolkien saw into print during his lifetime constitute thus the proverbial tip of the iceberg and are witnesses to a time when the demands of the recurrent research assessment exercise had not yet forced academics to publish as much as possible in whatever form. As a consequence, Tolkien’s influence was as much (if not even more) indirect by means of his actual

teaching and thesis-supervision, where he must have discussed and shared his research with his students,<sup>1</sup> inspiring them to start their own explorations in the field.

This attitude of sharing and especially of inspiring students comes to the fore in his “Valedictory Address to the University of Oxford” (given June 5, 1959) where he attacks the practice of severely limiting the students’ academic freedom so that, as a consequence, they are no longer able to follow their own intellectual curiosity (MC 227). The motivation for any genuine research must not be the desire to attain a degree, but “the desire for knowledge” (MC 227) pure and simple – and not limited by any departmental ideology. Thus, Tolkien argues, the division into *Lit* and *Lang*<sup>2</sup> at Oxford University is not only artificial and unfortunate but also downright detrimental for the entire subject and its students precisely because it creates a distinction where none actually exists because anyone with a general interest in English will necessarily be concerned with both.

Tolkien’s own papers are often products of the holistic approach he favoured, combining philological expertise with historical knowledge and literary sensibility. The prime example of such a successful ‘collaboration’ is arguably his “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth” (published in 1953 – see Tolkien 2001a) in which he combines historical information with philological analysis and literary co-creation.<sup>3</sup> His philological interpretation of *ofermōd* has provided the starting point for a fruitful and extensive debate about the poet’s stance towards the ‘heroism’ of the Anglo-Saxon leader Beorhtnoth.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Tolkien scholars have taken up his arguments for the evaluation of leader-figures in his own works of fiction.<sup>5</sup> This practice of applying Tolkien’s comments on (mostly medieval) texts to his own works of fiction has gained increasing currency among Tolkien scholars so that his essays on *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and fairy-stories have been repeatedly used in an attempt to establish an ‘intertextual’ framework for an exploration of his authorial intentions.

As mentioned above, Tolkien often uses a ‘holistic’ approach and his essays are therefore often difficult to categorise. Nevertheless, I have tried to group them according to their main focus into three categories: 1) Tolkien on words (comprising those papers that center on the philological analysis of a word); 2) Tolkien on language (i.e. essays dealing with more general aspects of language); and 3) Tolkien on (medieval) literature (where one or several literary works stand in the foreground).

### **Tolkien on Words**

Almost all of Tolkien’s early scholarly publications focus on a ‘hard word’ or difficult and obscure expression (e.g. *Sigelwara land* or the name *Nodens*). They were written for a specialised readership and published in renowned and venerable academic journals such as *Medium Aevum* or *Review of English Studies*. Tolkien brings to bear the full weight of his *Oxford English Dictionary*-trained philological scholarship, which had been expanded and honed by his work on *A Middle English Vocabulary*

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<sup>1</sup> See discussion of Tolkien’s collaboration with his students M.B. Salu and S.R.T.O. d’Ardenne in ch. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Lit[erature]* referring to the courses focussing on the study of the literary texts beginning with Chaucer, whereas *Lang[uage]* denotes the study of Old and Middle English and the literature of these periods.

<sup>3</sup> See Honegger (2007).

<sup>4</sup> See Shippey (2007c).

<sup>5</sup> Ferré 2007.

(1922), on the glossary to the edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1925 – see Tolkien and Gordon, 1967), by his dialect studies (cf. his preface to *A New Glossary of the Dialect of the Huddersfield District* (1928)), and by his wide reading for the review essays for *The Year's Work in English Studies*. The foundation for his argument is invariably the thorough and comprehensive etymological analysis of the word in question, a consideration of its occurrence in the known texts, and its possible historical references. His two-part article (published in 1932 and 1934 in *Medium Aevum*) on the Old English word *Sigelwara* is a good example of this approach. The term *Sigelwara* was used in Old English times to translate the Latin *Æthiops*, “Ethiopian”, yet Tolkien argues that it must have existed before literate Anglo-Saxons used it to refer to the inhabitants of Ethiopia. He regards the manuscript<sup>6</sup> form as deviating from the original correct form, which he establishes as *Sigelhearwan* (nom./acc. plural of *Sigelhearwa*). In the following, he adduces a plethora of textual evidence for the use and meaning of the two forms *sigel* and *hearwa* throughout the centuries and comes to the conclusion that *sigel* meant originally both “sun” and “jewel”, whereas *hearwa* is the Germanic form of an Indo-european root related to Latin *carbo*, “soot”. He then argues that before the term was applied to the sun-scorched people of Africa, it had referred to “the sons of Múspell [...],<sup>7</sup> the ancestors of the Silhearwan with red-hot eyes that emitted sparks, with faces black as soot” (Tolkien 1934, 110), allowing us some glimpses of a lost heathen mythology. Although Tolkien the philologist-scholar judiciously hedges his conclusions and is anxious to remain within the narrow limits of the philological method, we can, in hindsight, see that the argument had an impact on his legendarium. As Tom Shippey (2005, 49) has pointed out, it may have helped Tolkien to achieve an indirect naturalisation of the Balrog in the traditions of the North and “to create (or corroborate) the image of the *silmaril*, that fusion of ‘sun’ and ‘jewel’ in physical form.” It is furthermore an example of what Tolkien, in his lecture “A Secret Vice”, termed “mythology concomitant” (MC 210) for any language – whether invented, re-discovered, or living. It must have irked Tolkien greatly that philology was more and more considered a nasty “pill” (MC 225) to be pushed down the throat of unwilling students. He lived long enough to witness (and to mourn) the fading of the great philological tradition,<sup>8</sup> of which he had been a typical representative in the early decades of his academic work. Considering the general trend in academia towards a greater differentiation in and focus on synchronic linguistic studies and the concomitant loss of importance of philology (especially the historical dimension of language), it comes as no surprise that Tolkien’s essays in this field had only a limited impact and are little known nowadays.<sup>9</sup> His legacy to the generations after him lies not so much in his contributions to philology itself, but in the way he made it fruitful for the study and production of literature.

### Tolkien on Language

Tolkien’s philological papers discussed in the preceding section are, of course, also on ‘language’, yet what they contain of more general observations on the topic is rooted

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<sup>6</sup> See also ch. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Múspell, also called Muspellsheimr, is one of the nine worlds in the Old Norse mythology of the *Edda*. It is the land of fire and home of the fire-giants, i.e. the “sons of Múspell”, who will be led to Ragnarök by the fire-giant Surtr.

<sup>8</sup> See Shippey (2007a).

<sup>9</sup> See ch. 3.

in and developed from a close analysis of individual words. The two papers treated in this section, by contrast, focus primarily on general aspects of language and language philosophy, though the philological foundation is discernible throughout.

The first essay, published for the first time in *The Monsters and the Critics* in 1983 under the title “A Secret Vice”, goes back to the 1930s. The notes and minor revisions on the typescript suggest that it was presented twice, once in 1931, and then again two decades later. The topic is the possible origin, status, use and aesthetics of invented languages – a subject that caught the interest of a larger public when the first specimens of (sometimes untranslated) Elvish appeared in *The Lord of the Rings* and later texts, which led to the foundation of study-groups and publications on these languages. Later, the advent of the internet made it easier for creators and aficionados of created languages to get into contact and to share their passion. This has not always been so, and as Tolkien points out right at the beginning of his lecture, creating languages was usually a private affair kept secret, and any discussion of the topic had to make do with a very limited and personal set of languages. The lecture, as a consequence, develops into a commented linguistic biography, which describes Tolkien’s earliest encounters with created languages in the form of codes and nursery languages, such as Animalic and Nevbosh, both of which remain heavily indebted to traditional languages in phonetics and grammar (see also ch. 14). The primary motivation for inventing such languages is the desire for secrecy in communication. Yet, as Tolkien is eager to point out, the creative freedom gives rise to a new quality that goes beyond the aspect of mere practicality: the phonaesthetic pleasure derived from the beautiful sound-form of a word and the way it expresses the semantic content in a suitable and fitting manner. The English word ‘doom’ with its dark long vowel, final nasal sound and its connotations of judgment and catastrophe may serve as an example. This artistic aspect grows in importance as the number of speakers of a language decreases. Thus a created language neither shared with nor developed in exchange with other speakers is bound to reflect the linguistic and phonetic predilections of its creator; he is likely to choose those forms that meet his subjective aesthetic criteria and thus give him pleasure. This pleasure can, of course, also be found in existing languages, and Tolkien, quite fittingly for a student of medieval and classical languages, stresses the aesthetic appeal scholars find in languages long extinct.

The criteria determining the aesthetic appeal of a language remain necessarily vague – it is in the end a matter of individual linguistic character that determines a language-creator’s choices (MC 211).<sup>10</sup> This view seems to link up with Tolkien’s views on the concept of ‘native language’ first proposed in his lecture “English and Welsh” (see below), though he does not yet use the terms ‘native language’ and ‘cradle tongue’ to express his ideas. The specimens used to illustrate the aesthetic appeal of an advanced created language are all taken from Tolkien’s own hoard of Elvish (Quenya and Sindarin) poems – referring to persons and events from his legendarium and one may wonder what the original audience’s reaction was. Tolkien obviously relied on the poems’ aesthetic appeal and poetic qualities – aspects he could expect his listeners to appreciate in spite of their complete ignorance of either language.

A second point of importance is Tolkien’s claim that for the “perfect construction of an art-language it is found necessary to construct at least in outline a

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<sup>10</sup> See Ross Smith’s study (2007) and Fimi’s chapters in her book (Fimi 2009, 69-115) for an in-depth discussion of these aspects.

mythology concomitant” (MC 210). This is echoed in his later claim in the “Foreword” to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings* that his legendarium “was basically linguistic in inspiration” (FR xxiii) and the result of a wish to provide a world, history, mythology and people for his languages.<sup>11</sup>

The other paper of relevance for this section was given at Oxford on 21st October 1955 as the O'Donnell Lecture and published under the title “English and Welsh” (see also ch. 19). Although Tolkien's lecture was aimed at an obviously philologically educated audience – as can be deduced from his remarks directed to his listeners as well as from some of his rather detailed comments on linguistic aspects, such as the shared phenomenon of i-mutation or the possible influence of Celtic forms on the Old English verbal forms of the verb ‘to be’ – he makes some more general points that are of interest for the study of his literary texts. First, he discusses the complex and often confusing relationship between language and race, pointing out that although language plays a central role for the cultural and political identity of a people, it can be easily transferred from one race to another. This is to some extent reflected in Tolkien's fictional texts where we find peoples adopting languages other than their own (e.g. the Men of Númenor speaking Elvish, or the Hobbits abandoning their original tongue after entering the Shire and using Westron instead). Developing his argument about race and language further, Tolkien then explodes the myth of the “typical Teuton” and the “typical Celt” by means of textual passages from their respective literatures. The picture Tolkien paints of the language-contact situation in Britain during the first century after the Anglo-Saxon invasion is detailed and nuanced, avoiding the usual clichés and simplifications, and could be seen as one possible source of inspiration for the similarly complex contact-situation in Middle-earth.

The greater part of the lecture focuses upon the relationship between the two British languages and their speakers, as the title suggests. Towards the end, however, Tolkien introduces a new topic, which has only a tenuous relationship to the overall theme. He takes the (subjectively felt) beauty of Welsh as the starting point for an inquiry into the foundations of personal linguistic aesthetic preferences. Tolkien proposes that every person has a “native language” (MC 190), which seems to be a hereditary and thus genetically transmitted linguistic predisposition (if not indeed a genetically inherited full language) that is ultimately responsible for his or her individual and otherwise inexplicable linguistic aesthetic preferences. This “native language” need not be (and probably is not) identical with what Tolkien calls the “cradle tongue”, i.e. “the first-learned language of custom” (MC 190). Tolkien never published his ideas in a more developed and explicit form, though the question of individual aesthetic linguistic predilections was addressed in his lecture “A Secret Vice”, too. These ideas, taken together with his notes on his created languages, the few instances of genetically transmitted knowledge (cf. *The Lost Road* and *The Notion Club Papers* – see chs. 10 and 11) and the presentation of invented-language texts in his literary works, provide the reader with tantalizing glimpses of a theory of language that would stand in opposition to the dominant linguistic theories.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This is, however, too radical and simplifying a claim. See Fimi's study (2009) for a nuanced and comprehensive analysis of the development of Tolkien's languages on the one hand, and his legendarium on the other.

<sup>12</sup> See the respective chapters in Smith (2007) and Fimi (2009).

## Tolkien on Literature

Even if Tolkien had never published *The Lord of the Rings* or anything else, he would still be remembered among medievalists for his one paper that effected a radical change in *Beowulf* studies: “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics” (delivered in 1936, published in 1937 – MC 5-48). The number of publications on the poem was already high back in Tolkien’s day and has increased ever since so that there is probably no scholar alive who can claim to have an overview of the field in its entirety. Yet almost all publications that were written after Tolkien’s lecture acknowledge, in one way or another, the importance of his 1936 contribution in which he argued for the re-evaluation of the Old English epic as a piece of literature and according to an aesthetic proper to the work.<sup>13</sup> It does not lack a certain irony that it took a philologist (and thus a representative of *Lang*) to establish the literary credentials of what has since then been labelled (somewhat erroneously or at least for the wrong reasons) the ‘national epic of England’. We must not think that Tolkien had changed sides and gone over to the *Lit* faction. On the contrary – his masterful interpretation of the poem is rooted in his continuous and intimate study of its language, and a demonstration of the fundamental unity of the study of English. Tolkien’s knowledge of *Beowulf* was deep and detailed,<sup>14</sup> yet he carries it lightly in the main part of the text – which is almost completely free from philological analyses in the narrower sense of the word. What there is of technical philological discussion has been banished to the “Appendix” so that it does not disturb the flow of the argument. Thus the success of Tolkien’s argument and the overwhelming influence of his lecture are as much due to his skilled rhetoric as to the originality of his approach (cf. Drout 2002 & 2006).

Tolkien begins his lecture by briefly sketching the contemporary scholarly approach, which he sees as dominated by the historical discourse that treats *Beowulf* not so much as a poem but rather as a historical document. Analysed from such a point of view, there are of course major deficiencies to be noted. The author, according to those critics, has put the marginal elements such as the fantastic monsters in the center and neglected the development of the narrative potential of those numerous historical episodes and digressions. Tolkien, by contrast, argues that the poem’s structure is not to be compared to that of a narrative epic such as the *Aeneid*, but that it is rather based on the static contrast between the three episodes with the fights against the monsters at their center. They depict three crucial moments in a heroic life – the first two fights against Grendel and his mother respectively are the deeds of a young warrior on the rise. The last and final confrontation with the dragon provides the fitting conclusion to a long, successful reign. The balance is between these elements, and Beowulf’s death in his fight against the (mythical) dragon is tragic but nevertheless much more fitting than would be an end by a (historical) Swedish sword.

Tolkien identified the poet’s intention as wanting to compose a heroic-elegiac poem (MC 31), and he therefore “expended his art in making keen that touch upon the heart which sorrows have that are both poignant and remote” (MC 33). The tone of the Old English epic is one that evokes the sympathetic sorrow of the audience and the whole “must have succeeded admirably in creating in the minds of the poet’s contemporaries the illusion of surveying a past, pagan but noble and fraught with deep

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<sup>13</sup> See Drout (2010) and Shippey (2010) for discussions of the lecture’s/essay’s impact.

<sup>14</sup> There exist two (partial) translations of *Beowulf* among Tolkien’s academic papers in the Bodleian – one into alliterative verse, the other into prose.

significance – a past that itself had depth and reached backward into a dark antiquity of sorrow” (MC 27) – which could be as well a characterisation of Tolkien’s own epic of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Tolkien’s analysis of *Beowulf* thus not only influenced all later scholarly work on the Old English poem, but became likewise a metatext for the interpretation of his own legendarium, to which he himself seems to have created a link by identifying the *Beowulf* poet as one Heorrenda,<sup>15</sup> half-brother of Hengest and Horsa, the semi-historical leaders of the Anglo-Saxon invasion of Britain in his planned frame narrative for *The Book of Lost Tales*. He made Eriol their father and thus linked his legendarium with the pre-history of the English as it appears in both primary-world history and the poetry of the Anglo-Saxons (e.g. in poems such as *Beowulf*, or *Deor* – see ch. 15).

*Beowulf*, ever since its availability in scholarly editions from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century onwards, has been generally considered the epitome of Anglo-Saxon literature. It was (and still is) a canonical work to be studied by every serious-minded student of Germanic languages and literatures. So when Tolkien chose *Beowulf* as the topic for his Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecture to the British Academy in 1936, he could be sure that his audience was familiar with the poem. Almost two decades later, when invited to give the W.P. Ker Memorial Lecture, which was delivered on 15 April 1953, he opted for another canonical text: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Tolkien was doubly qualified for talking about this late 14<sup>th</sup>-century Middle English romance.

Firstly, he had prepared an edition of the poem (together with E. V. Gordon) in 1925 (Tolkien and Gordon, 1967), the scholarship and accessibility of which helped greatly to establish it as a set text. Furthermore, Tolkien had repeatedly lectured on the poem during his long academic career. Thus, the fact that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was considered one of the canonical works of Middle English literature was due to a great extent to Tolkien’s own work.

Secondly, his lecture coincided with the conclusion and slightly later (December 1953) broadcasting of his translation of the Middle English poem. He had prepared a translation of the poem that faithfully imitates the complex verse-pattern of the original while at the same time remaining as close to the original wording of the text as possible yet with special consideration for the requirements of its overall comprehensibility and enjoyability as a poem – a translation that could be seen as a practical illustration of his ideas set forth in his “Prefatory Remarks” on Clark Hall’s translation of *Beowulf* in 1940. The lecture was thus to be, as Christopher Tolkien believes, his father’s “principal pronouncement on the poem to which he devoted so much thought and study” (MC 1). It may come therefore as a surprise that it was not available in print until its inclusion in *The Monsters and the Critics* in 1983, and its impact on scholarship of the poem has, as a consequence, been very small.

In his lecture, Tolkien explicitly forgoes any investigation into the sources and analogues of the story and instead concentrates on the narrative skill of the poet in his re-arranging of traditional plot elements (e.g. the ‘Perilous Host’ motif) – a strategy that had been so successful in his 1936 *Beowulf* lecture. Tolkien locates the nub of the poem in the third fit, i.e. the temptation of Gawain by the beautiful lady in Castle Hautdesert and the confession on the day before his departure. By means of a close reading of central passages Tolkien identifies the main aim of the poet as an exploration of “the problems that so much occupied the English mind: the relations of

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<sup>15</sup> The Old English poem *Deor* mentions Heorrenda as the *scop* (court-poet) who usurped Deor’s place.

Courtesy and Love with morality and Christian morals and the Eternal Law” (*MC* 105). He argues that the testing of Gawain took place on three distinct (and hierarchically differing) levels. On the lowest plane we find jesting pastimes, such as the “exchange of winnings” compact with his host. On the next higher level we have the rules of courtesy “as a code of ‘gentle’ or polite manners” (*MC* 95), which comprise the morally dangerous game of courtly lovemaking. Last and highest are the “real morals, virtues and sins” (*MC* 95). The central problem is thus how to deal with the advances of the lady on the one hand, and how to treat the gift of the (allegedly magical) girdle on the other. Tolkien’s answer is clear: Gawain is bound to follow the moral precepts in all cases, which is why his “breach of courtesy” when rejecting the explicit sexual advances of the lady is not only pardonable but the only morally correct solution. Keeping the girdle for himself and not even mentioning it is, by contrast, merely a breach of the compact with his host and thus preferable to a breach of courtesy towards the lady (see also chs. 16 and 27).

This brief outline of Tolkien’s argument makes clear that a direct exploitation of his lecture for an interpretation of his fictional work is difficult, and there exist to date few scholarly publications that try and use his ideas on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as an inter- or meta-text for the study of *The Lord of the Rings* (e.g. Schlobin 2000). The moral dilemma identified as the central element of the Middle English romance may have parallels in similar situations in Tolkien’s own epic romance, so that his thoughts prove illuminating for them, too, yet they are not as obviously relevant for or applicable to his work as the observations in his “On Fairy-stories” (see also ch. 5).

The subject of Tolkien’s Andrew Lang Lecture, delivered at the University of St Andrews on 8 March 1939, is not another recognised masterpiece of medieval literature but a literary genre that many people would have considered ‘sub-literary’: fairy-stories. The theme was to some extent suggested by the fact that the lecture was expected to have a connection with the work of Andrew Lang, who was widely known for his scholarly and literary interest in fairy-tales. Taking Andrew Lang’s volumes of collected fairy-stories as his starting point of research, Tolkien must often have felt irritated by what was included under this heading in Lang’s and also in other similar collections. Thus, instead of commenting on the literary value and qualities of the tales found in Lang’s volumes, Tolkien decides to use the opportunity for an exploration of the origins, nature, characteristics, and key functions of fairy-stories – and ends up writing a text that provides insights into his thoughts on mythopoeia and literary subcreation in general rather than in Lang’s fairy-stories proper.<sup>16</sup>

For a long time the lecture itself had virtually no impact. Delivered shortly before the outbreak of WW2, its publication was delayed until 1947 when it was included in a volume commemorating his fellow-Inkling Charles Williams, which must have been read by relatively few people and quite soon went out of print. In addition, Tolkien had camouflaged the true theme of his essay so well so that it was read merely by those who wanted to find out more about fairy-stories – and probably came away somewhat mystified. The reception was therefore very slow and the discovery of the essay’s true potential began only with its re-publication (together with the short story “Leaf by Niggle”) in *Tree and Leaf* in 1964. From then onwards it moved into view of an audience that knew its author primarily as the creator of a

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<sup>16</sup> The recent critical edition of Tolkien’s lecture text, his notes and preliminary sketches by Douglas A. Anderson and Verlyn Flieger (Tolkien 2008b) allows us to study the development of Tolkien’s ideas in some detail.



fantasy epic, and the way was open for making connections between the Tolkien who was talking about Sub-creation, Fantasy, and Escape, and the Tolkien who, during the same period, had been busy writing what would become *The Lord of the Rings*. In hindsight and with many of Tolkien's sub-creative texts now available, it is of course easier to recognise and assess the importance of the concepts he presented for the first time to an audience that was expecting to hear a paper on (primarily) Lang's traditional fairy-stories.

The argument of the lecture is somewhat meandering, which is due to Tolkien's endeavour to keep up the pretence of talking, at least intermittently, about Lang's fairy-stories. The following discussion lays therefore no claim to completeness or to following the sequence of his arguments, but merely tries to present the most important ideas and concepts.

The first part of the lecture is an extensive and critical exploration of the semantics and etymology of the key-term "fairy" and some of its compounds, such as "fairy-story". Tolkien comes to the conclusion that "[m]ost good 'fairy-stories' are about the *aventures* of men in the Perilous Realm<sup>17</sup> or upon its shadowy marches" (*OFS* 32), which implies that most of the tales that are traditionally labelled "fairy-stories" fall short of the ideal. At the heart of Faërie lies the desire to "survey the depths of space and time [... and] to hold communion with other living things" (*OFS* 35). Yet fairy-stories must not grant the fulfilment of these desires by means of narrative mechanisms such as spaceships, time-machines, or the machinery of dream since these are incompatible with the artistic enchantment wrought by Faërie, whose power resides in the ability "of making immediately effective by the will the visions of 'fantasy'<sup>18</sup>" (*OFS* 42). Tolkien furthermore points out that children are neither more credulous than adults nor necessarily the ideal audience for these tales, which have ended up in the nursery by misfortune and accident rather than due to any intrinsic qualities of their own. The story-maker's task, whether writing for children or adults, or both, is to create "a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside" (*OFS* 52). It is towards this enchanted state that Fantasy as a natural human activity aspires.

In a later section Tolkien discusses the purpose of fairy-stories and identifies three further key-characteristics in addition to that of Fantasy, namely Recovery, Escape, and Consolation. The Recovery in the Tolkienian sense implies the "regaining of a clear view" that frees us "from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity" (*OFS* 67) which has its origin in our possessiveness. The products of Fantasy, such as centaurs or a green sun, help us to see our own horses and sun with renewed clarity – maybe not as what they are, but certainly as what they were meant to be seen. "Recovery" designates thus the restorative aspect of fairy-stories and is closely linked to "Escape". Tolkien avoids giving a clear-cut, one-sentence definition for this term, yet his discussion (*OFS* 69-76) makes clear that one important function of "Escape" is to leave behind the limitations of normal life. Again, Fantasy provides the means to overcome the (mental) obstacles and boundaries imposed by society and the primary world. Thus, next to offering escape from such real-world threats as hunger, thirst, poverty etc., it even holds out the promise of the Escape from Death – after all, fairy-

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<sup>17</sup> The Perilous Realm is "Faërie, the realm or state in which fairies have their being [... and which] holds [also ...] mortal men, when we are enchanted" (*OFS* 32).

<sup>18</sup> Fantasy refers to the sub-creation by means of the "magic" of language which allows "the making of glimpsing of Other-worlds" (*OFS* 55) and presupposes the "freedom from the domination of observed 'fact'" (*OFS* 60).

stories are “not primarily concerned with possibility, but with desirability” (*OFS* 55). “Consolation”, finally, is achieved by the happy ending – especially in the form of the eucatastrophe, the “sudden joyous ‘turn’” which shows the working of “a sudden and miraculous grace” (*OFS* 75). In the “Epilogue”, this specific understanding of the happy ending is then related to the gospels: the *evangelium* is the divine fairy-story come true in our primary world, with the incarnation as the eucatastrophic turn that frees mankind from the bondage of original sin.

It is of interest that some key-concepts such as “sub-creation” or the specific connection between the happy ending of the fairy-story and the Christian gospel were not yet in existence in the original lecture and the early drafts. Also, we can see how Tolkien was developing and refining his critical vocabulary and concepts which, in the end, would comprise the central terms Fantasy, Enchantment, Escape, Recovery, and Consolation. And, as Heidi Krüger’s 2008 discussion of the development of “On Fairy-stories” has made clear, the documents show that the final product, i.e. the 1947 essay and its later reprints, is not so much a harmoniously unified whole, but rather a text that still harbours many of the contradictions, tensions and unresolved issues as the heritage of its long germination and diversified scope.

Its rise to fame and popularity among critics must be seen as largely due to the overwhelming popular success of *The Lord of the Rings* – a text that has irritated many a literary critic who found that his or her toolbox of criticism does not contain many suitable instruments to come to terms with it (see ch. 25). Tolkien’s essay has helped to provide some critical concepts and terminology to fill this gap and, as a consequence, *The Lord of the Rings* with its elements of Fantasy, Recovery, Escape and Consolation has often been interpreted as a (somewhat oversized) fairy-story in the Tolkienian sense of the term.<sup>19</sup> Since it also constitutes a prime example of the art of sub-creation, and has served as model for many of the later works in the genre, Tolkien’s essay has indirectly become the theoretical cornerstone for the secondary-world tradition within fantasy (vs. the Todorovian framework). Nevertheless, it would be pushing things a bit too far to put it into the same category as Aristotle, Sidney, Wordsworth, and Coleridge’s texts on imaginative writing (cf. Flieger & Anderson in Tolkien 2008b, 20).

## Conclusion

Most of Tolkien’s lectures and essays have for a long time suffered the fate of neglect and oblivion among their primary audiences – not least since some of them were published decades after he had delivered them orally. There are, however, a few exceptions, such as “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics” or his ideas on *ofermōd* as part of “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth, Son of Beorhthelm”. Both caused a sea change in the critical reception of the poems in question and have been part of the critical discourse ever since their publication. Yet the other greater number of Tolkien’s lectures gained in importance only due to a shift away from reading them in their original context towards applying their ideas to ‘Tolkien the author’. Thus his essays on medieval literature, fairy-stories or philology have become increasingly inter- and meta-texts for the interpretation of Tolkien’s works of fiction and thus gained a new lease of life.

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<sup>19</sup> The one work by Tolkien that comes closest to his ideal of a fairy-story is *Smith of Wootton Major* (Tolkien 2008e).

**List of Academic Essays and Other Relevant Academic Publications by J.R.R. Tolkien (in Chronological Order of Publication)**

1922. *A Middle English Vocabulary*. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press.
1924. "Philology: General Works." In *The Year's Work in English Studies Vol. IV, 1923*, edited by Sir Sidney Lee and F.S. Boas for The English Association, 20-37. London: Oxford University Press.
1925. "Some Contributions to Middle-English Lexicography." *Review of English Studies* 1.2: 210-215.
1925. "The Devil's Coach-Horses." *Review of English Studies* 1.3: 331-336.
1925. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Edited by J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press.
1926. "Philology: General Works." In *The Year's Work in English Studies Vol. V, 1924*, edited by F.S. Boas and C.H. Herford for The English Association, 26-65. London: Oxford University Press.
1927. "Philology: General Works." In *The Year's Work in English Studies Vol. VI, 1925*, edited by F.S. Boas and C.H. Herford for The English Association, 32-65. London: Oxford University Press.
1928. "Foreword." In Walter E. Haigh, *A New Glossary of the Dialect of the Huddersfield District*, xiii-xviii. London: Oxford University Press.
1929. "Ancrene Wisse and Hali Meiphad." In *Essays and Studies Vol. XIV*, collected by H.W. Garrod, 104-126. London: Oxford University Press.
1930. "The Oxford English School." *Oxford Magazine*, 48.21: 778-780, 782.
1932. "Appendix I: The Name 'Nodens'." In R.E.M. Wheeler and T.V. Wheeler, *Report on the Excavation of the Prehistoric, Roman, and Post-Roman Site in Lydney Park, Gloucestershire*, 132-137. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
1932. "Sigelwara Land [Part 1]." *Medium Aevum*, 1.3: 183-196.
1934. "Sigelwara Land [Part 2]." *Medium Aevum*, 3.2: 95-111.
1934. "Chaucer as a Philologist: *The Reeve's Tale*." In *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 1-70. London: David Nutt.
1937. *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*. London: Humphrey Milford.
1940. "Prefatory Remarks on Prose Translation of *Beowulf*." In *Beowulf and the Finnesburg Fragment. A Translation into Modern English Prose by John R. Clark Hall*, viii-xli. London: George Allen & Unwin.
1947. "Ipplen in *Sawles Warde*." Written together with S.R.T.O. d'Ardenne. *English Studies*, 27.6: 168-170.
1947. "On Fairy-Stories." In *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, 38-89. London: Oxford University Press.
1948. "MS Bodley 34: A Re-Collation of a Collation." Written together with S.R.T.O. d'Ardenne. *Studia Neophilologica*, 20.1-2: 65-72.
1953. "Middle English 'Losenger': Sketch of an Etymological and Semantic Enquiry." In *Essays de philologie moderne (1951)*, 63-76. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.
1953. "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth, Beorhthelm's Son." In *Essays and Studies*, N.S. 6, 1-18. London: John Murray.
1963. "English and Welsh." In *Angles and Britons. O'Donnell Lectures*, 1-41. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
1975. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl and Sir Orfeo*. Translated by J.R.R. Tolkien, edited by Christopher Tolkien. London: George Allen & Unwin.

1982. *Finn and Hengest. The Fragment and the Episode*, edited by Alan Bliss. London: George Allen & Unwin.
1983. *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, edited by Christopher Tolkien. Contains "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics", "On Translating Beowulf", "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight", "On Fairy-Stories", "English and Welsh", "A Secret Vice", and "Valedictory Address to the University of Oxford". London: George Allen & Unwin.
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