

J.R.R. Tolkien (1892 – 1973)

- Professor of English Language, Leeds
- Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon, Oxford
- Merton Professor of English Language and Literature, Oxford
- Scholarship included a seminal lecture on *Beowulf* - "The Monsters and the Critics" - a new edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, philological research for the Oxford English Dictionary, and numerous lectures and papers.



Philology: Tolkien and Lewis

"... languages and names are for me inextricable from the stories. They are and were so to speak an attempt to give a background or a world in which my expressions of linguistic taste could have a function. The stories were comparatively late in coming."
~ J.R.R. Tolkien, from a letter to W. H. Auden (*Letters* 214)

Long before *The Hobbit* ever made its first appearance in 1937, Tolkien had begun extensive work on the stories that would become *The Silmarillion*. These stories - as Tolkien later recounted - grew out of his own love of inventing languages. The languages came first, then the stories. *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* - originally unrelated to the larger body of work - were gradually drawn into the legendarium. All of Tolkien's linguistic knowledge of vowel-shifts, mutations, phonology, syntax, and philological reconstruction of lost words and languages, was applied to his own invented languages that formed the framework for his secondary world. Numerous plot devices turn on matters of language - King Thingol's decision to ban Quenya from his realm has major political and historical consequences; Frodo and Bilbo's knowledge of the elven tongues becomes significant at more than one point in *The Lord of the Rings*; and Aragorn's command of Rohirric, which astonishes the guards of Edoras. Indeed, the history of language in Tolkien's invented mythos is inextricably bound up with the history of his invented world.

"In the fraction of a second which it took Ransom to decide that the creature was really talking, and while he still knew that he might be facing instant death, his imagination had leaped over every fear and hope and probability of his situation to follow the dazzling project of making a Malacandrian grammar." (*Out of the Silent Planet*, Lewis 56)

The character of Ransom bears so many superficial similarities to Tolkien that it became somewhat of an urban legend that Lewis had directly modelled the protagonist of his space trilogy on his fellow Inklings. Tolkien and Lewis both explicitly denied this, but certainly what cannot be denied is that Ransom *does* possess both Lewis and Tolkien's love of philology. Lewis's aptitude for philologic research matched Tolkien's - in his *Studies in Words*, Lewis devoted an entire book to tracing the meanings, connotations, and developments throughout the history of literature of precisely ten words. *Language*, particularly the Malacandrian language - later discovered by Ransom to be Old Solar - plays a significant and vital role in his trilogy. One of Ransom's greatest joys - and challenges - when first arriving on Malacandra is to acquire the language, an endeavour that later becomes critically important when he is chosen to travel to Venus. The problem of *translation* is given key attention when Weston addresses the Oyarses of Malacandra. And indeed, in the epilogue, one of Ransom's principal regrets concerning the book is the "ruthless way in which you [Lewis] have cut down all the philological part ... we are giving our readers a mere caricature of the Malacandrian language" (Lewis 153).

Tolkien, Lewis, and Medieval Cosmology

"I have made no serious effort to hide the fact that the old Model delights me as I believe it delighted our ancestors. Few constructions of the imagination seem to me to have combined splendour, sobriety, and coherence in the same degree." (*The Discarded Image*, Lewis 216)

In both his *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature* and his *The Discarded Image*, C.S. Lewis clearly and cogently describes the Medieval Model of the universe - a model as far removed from our modern understanding as Galileo's views were from Aristotle's. It is precisely this Model that Lewis uses as the basis for his space trilogy - where Ransom journeys not only out into the cosmos, but figuratively back in time. Although his books are often classed as "science fiction," Lewis is looking backwards, not forwards, in his representation of space travel. The universe that Ransom discovers is Lewis's imaginative conception of the medieval Model: a universe where the concept of 'space' as a infinite dark abyss is entirely replaced by the Heavens, lighted by the Sun and stars, glorious and beautiful and marvellously ordered - each planet associated with its Influence (Lewis's Oyarses), and all in harmony.

"And it came to pass that Ilúvatar called together all the Ainur and declared to them a mighty theme, unfolding to them things greater and more wonderful than he had yet revealed; and the glory of its beginning and the splendour of its end amazed the Ainur, so that they bowed before Ilúvatar and were silent." (*The Silmarillion*, Tolkien 3)

From the Music of the Ainur and the music of the heavenly spheres that so delighted Henryson, Dante, and Troilus, to Eärendil the Evening Star - echoes of the old cosmology and astronomy resonate throughout Tolkien's work as well. As we know from drafts published in *The History of Middle Earth*, Tolkien was persistently inconsistent about whether Middle-earth was round, or flat. Direct evidence for both still survives in the text of *The Lord of the Rings*, even though the question was seemingly answered with the posthumous publication of *The Silmarillion*.

"Make It New": Medievalism and Modernism in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis

Summary

How are medieval texts relevant to modern writers? What value can be found in studying medieval texts, and what value can be found in returning to these texts in the composition of new works of literature? How can these texts be used - how are these texts used - in modern fiction? The project focuses on two renowned modern authors, J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, examining their fiction in the context of not only their own substantial contributions to medieval scholarship, but also in the context of critical discussions concerning the value, role, and scope of neo-medievalism.

Introduction

"Our return to the Middle Ages is a quest for our roots and, since we want to come back to the real roots, we are looking for 'reliable Middle Ages,' not for romance and fantasy, though frequently this wish is misunderstood and, moved by a vague impulse, we indulge in a sort of escapism à la Tolkien." (Eco 65)

In Umberto Eco's influential essay, "The Return of the Middle Ages," he dismisses romance and fantasy alike, specifically citing Tolkien as an example of mere "escapism". Although Eco cogently argues for the necessity of distinguishing between the ways in which neomedievalists revisit the period - laying out ten distinct types of "Middle Ages" in some detail - and commends above all what he terms the "Middle Ages of philological reconstruction" (Eco 70), it is clearly that he has seriously misunderstood Tolkien, whose fiction grew directly out of his academic interest in philology. Lewis's works of fantasy fiction, similarly, were rooted in a scholar and philologist's rigorous approach to the medieval period, and the romance that Eco so disdains is in fact an integral and vital part of the medieval tradition. In fact, both Tolkien and Lewis *do* engage with the period through philological reconstruction, drawing extensively on their own academic and professional work in the field.

"... modernity means the recognition of a significance in medieval literature which is only to be obtained by a reflective passage through its alterity." (Jauss 198)

Hans Robert Jauss, in contrast, justifies current scholarly interest in the Middle Ages on a three-fold basis: the "aesthetic pleasure, the surprising otherness, and the model character of medieval texts" (Jauss 182), showing how the very alterity of medieval texts can be a means of accessing their significance. Tolkien and Lewis are not returning to the Middle Ages ironically or out of nostalgia; rather, they represent in their fiction that part of the medieval tradition that they find valuable - that they find not only aesthetically pleasing, but relevant and significant to their own time. Both were keenly interested in the cultural and historical background of the period, and drew extensively on not only their studies in medieval linguistics, but on the medieval romance tradition, and on medieval cosmological and astronomical beliefs. To derive pleasure from such study of medieval history and language, and to incorporate that study into fictional writings, with scholarly rigour, is hardly escapism.

C.S. Lewis (1898 – 1963)

- Fellow and Tutor in English, Magdalen College
- Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English, Cambridge
- Scholarship included *The Allegory of Love*, an influential examination of the history of the courtly love tradition and of its allegorical use in medieval texts, *The Discarded Image*, in which Lewis presents a compelling and detailed portrait of the medieval astronomical and cosmological model, the philological text *Studies in Words*, and numerous lectures and papers.



Tolkien, Lewis, and Medieval Romance

"...Tolkien's knowledge of mythology, especially the mythologies of northern Europe and the British Isles, was both deep and wide. He was familiar with the Icelandic Eddas and sagas and with the Germanic history-cum-myth of the Huns and Burgundians; he knew the Irish hero tales, the Welsh Mabinogion, and the complex and comprehensive Arthurian "Matter of Britain," which influenced him more than is currently acknowledged." (*Interrupted Music*, Flieger 29)

Although Tolkien explicitly drew a distinction between his invented mythology and the Arthurian legends - which he saw as flawed both in their explicitly Christian content and in, as he wrote, the "fantastical, incoherent and repetitive" (Letters 144) nature of Arthurian 'faerie' - there is nonetheless substantial evidence for the influence of medieval epic romances (both Arthurian and others) on Tolkien's fiction. It is certainly true that Tolkien was well acquainted with the medieval romantic tradition; in collaboration with E.V. Gordon, Tolkien published a translation of the Middle English *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in 1925. He also spent substantial time working on an (unfinished, as yet unpublished) long poem dealing with the Fall of Arthur (Letters 219). Indeed, he clearly identified *The Lord of the Rings* with the medieval romantic tradition: "My work is *not* a 'novel,' but an 'heroic romance' a much older and quite different variety of literature" (Letters 414). From allusions to "Broceliande" in early drafts of the Lay of Leithian and Tolkien's own attempts to revive the medieval geste, to the echoes of Arthur that can be seen in the characters of Aragorn and Frodo, to the parallels between the haunting final scene at the Grey Havens and Arthur's departure to Avalon, the romantic tendencies of Tolkien's texts are inescapable.

"Lewis's whole person was drawn to a time when Western civilization could with some accuracy be called Christendom and when a predominant literary form was epic romance." (Downing 60)

Direct allusions to the Arthurian tradition are not hard to find in the space trilogy, particularly in *That Hideous Strength*. That Lewis was intimately familiar with the medieval romance tradition is also hardly in doubt - his scholarly reputation was first established with the publication of *The Allegory of Love*, and he also published several essays on Malory. In *Out of the Silent Planet* and *Perelandra*, allusions to the Arthurian legend are subtle and easy to miss, but in *That Hideous Strength*, Lewis makes the Arthurian tradition a central feature of the novel, through the resurrection of Merlin. Ransom takes on the title of the Pendragon of Logres, and Merlin becomes the instrument of divine providence and justice as the vehicle through which the Oyarses - the Powers of Heaven - channel their power. The historical difference between Britain and Logres is also examined in some detail, as Ransom and Merlin react against an increasingly depraved - and, in some ways very "modern" - society.

Tolkien, Lewis and Modernism

"Tolkien, it is true, did not embrace the twentieth century. But neither did he run from it. Rather, he forced his readers to confront their world from a different perspective, a perspective informed by the power of myth, symbol, and examples of true heroism." (Birzer 109)

"The strong and audible voice he assigns to the past, to history ... coexists with his voicing of characteristically contemporary concerns ..." (Nagy 30)

"Tolkien's look backward is not nostalgic or a reveling in 'betrayed idealism.' It is a conscious and sophisticated meditation on the stakes of medievalism, a revelation that our view of the medieval past is tinted by modern appropriations of it." (Long 126)

"Modernism" and the "modern" rarely connote anything positive in Lewis's extensive writings. T.S. Eliot was a frequent target of his censure, and the space trilogy was written partially as a reaction against the novels of H.G. Wells. Up until quite recently, furthermore, examination of Tolkien's works in the context of the modernist movement has also been rare. It is critically important to recognize, however, that both writers - through the use of language, myth, and philology - address many of the same topics as other modernist writers: what constitutes heroism? What are the effects of war? How does power corrupt? How can myth and mythopoeia enhance our understanding of the modern world? What is the role of language in history and what are the limitations of language? Tolkien has been seen by many critics as addressing the issues of industrialization through his portrayal of Isengard and Mordor; Lewis attacks 'false science' explicitly in his depiction of the N.I.C.E. Ezra Pound's injunction to "make it new" has been understood by some as the injunction to abandon old traditions and literatures entirely and to create something entirely unique; but the phrase has also borne another interpretation, for both Tolkien and Lewis take medieval literature and literally make it new - bringing it alive, in a fictional, imaginative, creative form.