

INTERVIEW TO TOM SHIPPEY – REGRESO A HOBBITON 2x08

1. How would you characterize your contributions to Tolkien studies?

The simplest way to answer that is to say that I had two ideas. The first was to see Tolkien as a comparative philologist, and to put him into that extremely powerful intellectual tradition, dating back to Jacob Grimm. That came out as *The Road to Middle-earth*. The second idea was to try to see him in the context of the twentieth century, and in particular to see him as one of several “traumatized authors” who could only express their reactions to trauma through fantasy. That came out as *Author of the Century*.

Now that seems easy enough, but in my own defense I should say that there were powerful forces operating against both ideas. Philology, especially comparative philology, had never been very popular within the English-speaking intellectual establishment, and by 1980 it had been almost eliminated from universities in Britain and America. It wasn't just ignored, it was seriously disliked, and the mere hint of it accounted for a great deal of the bitter opposition which Tolkien faced, and still faces, from those who claim to determine literary merit.

Furthermore, the idea that the fantastic had been the dominant literary mode of the twentieth century – which is how I started off *Author of the Century* – was also very much resented. The idea was almost literally unthinkable to professional literary critics in universities, and their pupils who wrote for newspapers and journals. I don't think any of them noted that I carefully said “the fantastic” rather than just “fantasy”. “The fantastic”, as I use it, takes in not just fantasy but also science fiction and also all the ancestor-genres like ghost-stories and wonder-tales and fantastic voyages. So I mean 1984 and *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Lord of the Flies* and *The Once and Future King* as well as *Lord of the Rings*. I started off from the fact that works like these regularly dominate not only the best-seller lists but also the polls of readers' favourites. They've won democratically, even if this has not been accepted by our literary oligarchs.

And then I've written a lot of other pieces, many collected in *Roots and Branches*. But two big, true, unpopular ideas are maybe enough for anyone!

2. How does your work in medieval studies relate to Tolkien?

It started much earlier. My first book was on *Old English Verse*, published 1972, and the first time I wrote on Tolkien was the essay in *Essays in Memoriam*, 1979. The only connection my early work had with Tolkien was that, like him, I felt that language study and literary study should not, must not, be kept apart. So to begin with I was trying to make those interested in literary criticism see that medieval literature could be read the same way as any other period's literature, and be responded to in the same way – but to do that, you had to be able to understand the language it was written in! Pretty obvious, really, but the two sides had drawn apart. It comes out very clearly in C.S. Lewis's *Diaries* of his time at Oxford in the 1920s, and it annoyed Lewis very much. But the

situation was not far different in the 1970s, when I got to Oxford, except that there was no longer a balance of power. The philologists by that time had lost decisively, suffered what Elrond calls “the long defeat”.

3. What would Tolkien think of contemporary medieval scholarship?

I can’t help thinking he would put his head in his hands and say, “Oh Lord, what have I done?” Because Tolkien, in 1936, with his famous *Beowulf* lecture, in a way killed the thing that he loved. He told people that they had to read the poem as a poem, and that was quite right. But he also told them that they *didn’t* need any more to understand all that boring German and Danish philological scholarship – and that was seized on very eagerly by all the people who never wanted to. As we say in English, we threw the baby out with the bathwater, and claimed Tolkien’s authority for doing so.

That’s just as regards *Beowulf*, but a lot of other babies were thrown out as well. It’s a great pity that Tolkien never wrote the scholarly monograph for which he was ideally suited, a study of the medieval literature of his own homeland, the counties of the west Midlands. No-one ever has, the texts and poems of that place and time are still often barely edited – of course Tolkien and Gordon had shown the way with their edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* – but the road has not been followed much. Medieval English scholarship is till curiously focused on what I call “the Golden Triangle” between London, Oxford and Cambridge – where the big universities are, where the politicians come from, and where the government money goes. But this is a very limited and even off-centre picture, in the Middle Ages.

4. You collaborated with Leonard Neidorf and Rafael J. Pascual in *The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment*, and you’re now editing with them *Old English Philology: Studies in Honour of R.D. Fulk*. What impact do you think these books will have?

I hope that the most immediate response to the *Dating* volume will be to undo the damage caused by the 1981 volume on *Dating*, and its spin-offs (and behind that, if accidentally, by Tolkien in 1936). This damage has been considerable. I’ve remarked elsewhere (see my short article on Jacob Grimm online at academia.edu) that there is a clear parallel between the theory of evolution and the development of comparative philology, two of the great intellectual achievements of the 19th century. In both cases one man, Charles Darwin or Jacob Grimm, was the instigator, but in both cases someone else would have got there if they hadn’t: Alfred Wallace or Rasmus Rask. Both Grimm and Darwin addressed very evident questions – what made animals different, what made languages different – and ignored the old mythical explanations (Noah’s Ark and the Tower of Babel). Both men were followed by whole armies of investigators, who developed, extended and corroborated their ideas until they became rationally unchallengeable.

Here the parallels diverge. While the claim that Darwinism is “only a theory” is now confined only to Creationists, and is no longer intellectually respectable, rejecting the evidence of philology has (especially since 1981) become normal rather than exceptional

in British and American universities. You might say it's not even rejected by argument, just neglected, assumed to be irrelevant. Well, we hope – and the reviews indicate that this is already happening – that the Neidorf volume on *Dating* will make people think again. The range and strength of its arguments for an early date for *Beowulf* – not a late date, not an indeterminable date – should convince anyone who is not, like Creationists, ideologically committed. In many areas proof is not attainable. But (as Robert Fulk has often said) probability may reach such a level as to make denial irrational: especially where “a theory” explains elegantly and economically prodigious amounts of accumulated data.

Robert Fulk was of course the keynote speaker for the conference which generated Neidorf's *Dating*, and the festschrift which he and I and Rafael have put together will not only bear tribute to his initially lonely efforts to keep philology within scholarly awareness, but also remind people of the range and strength of his contributions. Remembering my parallel above, I might say that Robert Fulk has been to Grimm as Richard Dawkins to Darwin. It's not by any means a perfect comparison, as Fulk is quite without Dawkins's aggression and intolerance. But Fulk has been “the critic of the century”, or shall we say of his half-century career, and *Old English Philology* will help people to see that.

Besides all that, we hope (and I confidently expect) that the two volumes together will act as a support and encouragement for younger scholars in particular. The range of approaches taken will show them that there is still much more to be gained by philological studies of all kinds: such approaches are there to be followed up. Moreover, the number of contributors – 13 for the *Dating* volume, 20 for *Philology*, though some names occur in both – will reassure junior scholars who may be wondering what direction to take, that their career-options are still open. The “jobs-market”, as it is crudely called in the USA, is a very frightening place to be, notably at the MLA conference after Christmas (the “hiring-fair”), and I have heard young post-grads say that they fear being overlooked because Old English studies are “too masculine”, or “not relevant”, or “insufficiently theoretical”. Well, now they know not everyone thinks that, and they have a powerful and respected body of opinion to support them. They can take these books into the interview room to show sceptical interviewers that the tide has turned!

5. What are some of your other current projects in medieval studies?

This is a sad question to answer, because I have been so slow in developing them. I have almost finished a book on Old Norse literature, centering on the many death-scenes, death-songs, “Last Stands” etc, which also doubles in a way as what one might call – and this is the kind of title that publishers like – “Top Ten Vikings”. I have written about half of a book called “How the Heroes Talk”, which seeks to apply pragmatic linguistics to *Beowulf*, Eddic poems, *Hildebrandslied*, saints' lives, the *Heliand* (etc.) Three articles of this kind have already been published, but I need to finish the job and set those articles in a wider frame.

6. Can the world expect any additional projects from you in the realm of Tolkien studies?

What the world needs, I feel, is a survey of Tolkien's effect and influences. But this is such a massive job, when one considers the explosion of fantasy since 1955, that I think it would have to be done by a consortium.

7. Which avenues of research in medieval studies and Tolkien studies do you think are most promising at present?

On Tolkien studies, I feel we still have little awareness of his literary and cultural background – and that has the same kind of cause as the turn-away from philological studies I mentioned above. When I was an undergraduate at Cambridge, our syllabus – I mentioned this in a recent article drawing on Erich Auerbach – was extremely restricted, without us or many of our tutors realizing the fact. In fiction, it was exclusively “the Great Tradition”, which dealt with the often-repressed emotional lives of a cultured, sheltered and privileged elite who were much less interesting than they thought they were. I won't name names, except to say that Henry James was in, but his much more widely-influential contemporary H.G. Wells was out. Firmly excluded also were all the “New Romancers”, as they are sometimes known – Conan Doyle, Rider Haggard, R.L. Stevenson, Bram Stoker, and many more.

Tolkien has much in common, especially as regards class-feeling, with the latter group; and conversely, much less in common with “the Bloomsbury Group”, whose members were (I think) a continuing provocation to the “Inklings”, especially Lewis. But there were people with links to both sides, like Naomi Mitchison, surely a New Romancer and a correspondent of Tolkien, whose brother J.B.S. Haldane however reacted sarcastically to Lewis's “Space trilogy” – google “Haldane” + “Auld Hornie, F.R.S.” This whole area of literary life in the early 20th century has hardly been noticed.

Meanwhile, in medieval studies I (and Michael Drouot) have put our disagreements with Tolkien's 1936 lecture online through “Scholars' Forum”,¹ but I have to agree with Tolkien that, for all the avalanche of studies about *Beowulf* as a poem, there has been remarkably little about the nature of alliterative poetry at any time, its strengths, its characteristic tropes and rhetoric. New Critical terminology just doesn't work, but we have not developed a different one. Tolkien, of course, spent many years trying to revive alliterative poetry, with to begin with very little success.

8. You were involved with the production of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* movies. Could you describe your involvement and share some opinions on these films?

My involvement really consisted of making sure all the (many) names were pronounced correctly. This is not so easy. Tolkien uses the word “Thain”, as a title for hobbits, “Gwaihir” (for an eagle), and Thrain (so spelled in *The Hobbit*) for a dwarf, and in each case the -ai- is pronounced differently. I produced a long video-tape for the actors, which

I must say they stuck to very accurately – with one exception. Sméagol came out as “Smeagle”. They must have forgotten to ask me about that one. The *Hobbit* movies were much less careful about the dwarf-names.

As for opinions, I have to say that Jackson was coping with a changed medium, and a changed audience. I was impressed by his comments on why he made the changes he did in the *LotR* movies – characters could not merely be left in abeyance, like Arwen (a place had to be made for her in the second movie, though she does not figure in the second book). Nor could major action-scenes like the destruction of Isengard merely be told in flashback! In movies, you **MUST** show, not tell! Or the special effects team will break its collective heart! And there were other forced changes which I understood. What was lost, I felt, was first, something in Tolkien which was hard-hearted and realistic: Tolkien was a combat veteran who passed his life in the company of other veterans. They understood that the bold aggression rewarded in video-games was not always so rewarded in real life. More subtly, I felt – but not many have agreed with me – that the movies lost Tolkien’s almost-imperceptible presentation of the effects of Providence, or if you prefer, the Valar.

These criticisms are much more easily made about the three *Hobbit* movies. Once again I think Jackson put his finger on the problem with *The Hobbit* as a narrative: it is highly episodic, one thing after another. It needed a connecting thread, which Jackson introduced (the continuous pursuit by the orcs). What it lost was the development of Bilbo as a hero, from being regarded with complete contempt to his final demonstrations both of physical courage (going down the tunnel to Smaug a second time), and moral courage (handing over the Arkenstone, and then returning into the power of the dwarves whom he has betrayed). All Bilbo’s big scenes, in the book, take place when he is alone and in the dark, and movies don’t do this very well. But we had too much waving a sword and charging, video-game heroism, instead.

9. In addition to being a prolific scholar, you are also a celebrated teacher, whose lectures were recently recorded and published by The Teaching Company. How would you characterize your philosophy of teaching?

Perhaps here I can quote my successor at Leeds, Andrew Wawn. He said that whenever he went out to confront the 250 students of the new intake at Leeds, he knew that not one of them had any interest in medieval studies. But every one of them could have! (And they did: year after year we had to cap the number of entrants to our Old Norse courses because we could not fit any more into our allotted times at the language laboratory.) My view is that every student knows something, and probably something I don’t. The trick is to connect what I am trying to tell them with what they know already.

Just to give one example, the most perceptive comment I ever heard on Old Norse sagas came from an undergraduate student at St Louis, who was studying aeronautical engineering. I was explaining the plot of *Laxdæla saga*. What is the cause of the death of Kjartan? His abandonment of Gudrun? The jealousy of Bolli? The family grudge going back to Hoskuld’s purchase of a concubine? Or is it the cursed sword? But as I droned on, young Joseph Yurgil spoke up, and said: “Stop! You are describing what we in

aerospace call, ‘an error-chain’.” And then he told us what an “error-chain” was, and why airliners crash. But that told us a lot about sagas too.

10. Looking back on your career, what accomplishments are you most proud of? In your voluminous corpus of scholarship, are there certain works that you regard most highly?

There’s a kind of discrepancy here. I think my most-read book may well be *Tolkien: Author of the Century*. But this did not take me long to write, and was strangely trouble-free – largely because my editor at HarperCollins, Jane Johnson, kept on telling me “No footnotes! Not a single footnote!” (Did I smuggle two or three past her? No more than that.) But my least-read book must certainly be the *Critical Heritage* volume on *Beowulf*, for which I read almost everything written on the poem up to 1935, most of it in German or Danish or Swedish, and translated large amounts of it (my friend and colleague Rory McTurk helped me with the Swedish, but my Danish collaborator Andreas Haarder unfortunately had an incapacitating stroke). But then few copies were printed, and they were sold at an exorbitant price. I have now put my long “Introduction” up on academia.edu, and I may put the whole book there, if I can settle copyright issues. I think my mini-book on *Beowulf* had a lot of new ideas, back in 1978.

¹ Our two essays are online at <http://www.lotrplaza.com/showthread.php?18483>, and <http://www.lotrplaza.com/showthread.php?17739>. The two essays complement each other, but were written entirely independently.