

## Book Review Supplement

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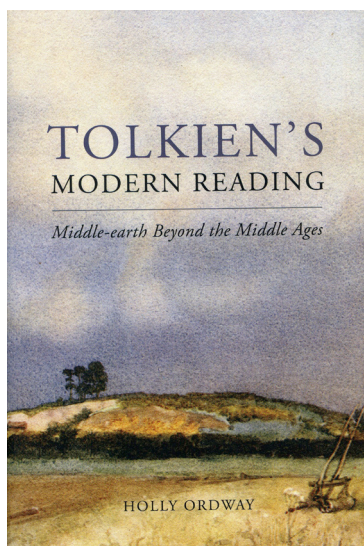
**Holly Ordway, *Tolkien's Modern Reading: Middle-earth Beyond the Middle Ages*. (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire, 2021), \$29.95 (hardcover).**

It was not until I read Holly Ordway's *Tolkien's Modern Reading: Middle-earth Beyond the Middle Ages* that I realized I had long been harboring a false portrait of J.R.R. Tolkien. In this well-organized, painstakingly researched book, Ordway, a Fellow of Faith and Culture at the Word on Fire Institute and visiting professor of apologetics at Houston Baptist University, lays to rest the long-held illusion that Tolkien lived a life cut off from the modern world: that he did not approve of—and rarely, if ever, read—books written after Chaucer, that he was opposed to all technology, that he never read the newspaper or engaged with the issues of his day, and that he was impervious to all influence from his friends or the wider world around him.

*Tolkien's Modern Reading* is dedicated to Michael Ward, author of *Planet Narnia*, and like *Planet Narnia*, it makes its case by means of a heady mixture of carefully sifted facts, rhetorical force, and psychological insight into the deep and essential character of its protagonist that would put the best British solicitor to shame.

"The picture of Tolkien," argues Ordway, "as fundamentally backward-looking, happily living in total rejection of the modern world, must be abandoned" (24). Ordway shatters this picture by documenting every post-1850 work of fiction, poetry, or drama written in English that we know from eyewitnesses or Tolkien's own letters that Tolkien read: a collection that adds up to a "total of 148 authors and more than 200 titles" (295).

In tracing the influences these authors and their works had on *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*, Ordway is careful not to push for simplistic one-to-one correspondences. Tolkien's mind did not work that way. Rather, it absorbed all that it read, borrowing a plot point or generic experiment here, a linguistic flourish or memorable place name there, and then allowed it all to bubble up in the exacting and personal context of Tolkien's wider legendarium. In pursuing the patterns of influence that shaped Tolkien's capacious intellect and imagination, Ordway comes back again



and again to Tolkien's own metaphorical claim that *The Lord of the Rings* grew "like a seed in the dark out of the leaf-mould of the mind: out of all that has been seen or thought or read, that has long ago been forgotten, descending into the deeps" (274).

Ordway does not allow a single seed or leaf to slip by her careful eye, but she is no reckless source hunter. For her, "it is not enough simply to identify a source or influence and stop there in foolish triumph. We must go further and be attentive to context, purpose, style, effect, and above all, meaning; we must ask, 'How does Tolkien use it? What insight do we gain from having discerned this connection? What does this tell us about his writings and even about him and his own creative processes?'" (41).

For example, Ordway does a wonderful job showing how Tolkien's reading of modern fantasy and adventure novels helped provide him with different narrative devices for framing his Middle-earth tales in such a way as to increase their veracity. Tolkien's use of the stained and blackened Book of Mazarbul to lend realism to the Fellowship's descent into Moria was likely influenced by the fictional potsherd of Amenartas that H. Rider Haggard used to ground his *She* in an ancient, layered past that can only be glimpsed now in ruined artifacts. In a similar way, Haggard's innovative use of a map in *King Solomon's Mines* to draw the reader into his tale likely influenced Tolkien's similar use of a map in *The Hobbit*.

Still, Ordway explains, though Tolkien was happy to borrow such devices from Haggard, he was aware that Haggard wrote from a perspective that was quite different from his own. Whereas Haggard's heroes, like those of the Norse sagas Tolkien loved, act out of a fatalistic worldview, the Catholic Tolkien believed firmly in an interplay between divine providence and human free will. That is why Tolkien's heroes, though they take great risks for their comrades and their cause, do not give in to despair or throw away their lives needlessly because they believe all things are fated, as the deceived and broken Denethor does. In the actions of Aragorn, Frodo, and Sam, but not in Haggard or the sagas, we encounter "Tolkien's Christian understanding of providence, presented in an epic context and thereby subtly reacting against both the pagan sense of fate or doom and a certain modern tendency toward determinism" (186-87).

Ordway carries this kind of careful reading into various areas of Tolkien's work. Thus, rather than posit a single source for Tolkien's Hobbits, she locates three different ones that work cooperatively: 1) for their size, shape, and general look, the mostly forgotten Snergs of E.A. Wyke-Smith's *The Marvellous Land of Snergs* seem to have provided a subconscious source; 2) for the neatness and snugness of their holes, the stories and illustrations of Beatrix Potter's tales likely provided some inspiration; 3) for their bourgeois and sometimes smug nature, Sinclair Lewis's realistic novel *Babbitt* seems to have played a role. Note that while there is no linguistic link between Snergs

and Hobbits, the word rabbit and the name Babbitt share an aural link that Tolkien himself admitted to.

Insights like this abound in *Tolkien's Modern Reading*, and many are complemented by one of the best conceived and executed photo galleries I have ever encountered. Thirty-nine figures in full color, each boasting a detailed caption that can stand on its own, bring to life the world of fantasy and adventure that so thrilled and inspired Tolkien.

Ordway maintains an objective, even-handed, irenic tone throughout her book; however, there is one area in which she is forced to adopt a polemical stance. To argue properly and fully for her thesis, Ordway has no option but to critique the work of the scholar who crafted the false portrait of the anti-modern Tolkien that has been accepted and repeated by scholars and fans and that Ordway works so hard to deconstruct. I speak of Humphrey Carpenter (1946-2005), author of the (only) authorized but deeply flawed biography, *Tolkien* (1977), which narrative-setting book he followed up with two other works that have fixed in concrete the image of the anti-modern Tolkien for the last four decades: his collective biography of *The Inklings: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and Their Friends* (1979) and his authorized edition, with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien, of *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (1981).

The evidence Ordway amasses about Tolkien's reading alone gives the lie to Carpenter's portrait of Tolkien; but she further reveals how hastily written and even more hastily edited the biography was (after Christopher Tolkien tore apart the first draft), and how "in his selection of letters and in his editing of them we can observe an agenda at work that serves to make Tolkien seem impatient, defensive, and uninterested in anything modern" (12). "Carpenter," Ordway argues, "seems neither to have well understood, nor particularly to have liked, Tolkien—or, for that matter, any of the other Inklings" (277).

In fact, when Carpenter was asked in a 1979 interview which Inklings he would have had the strongest rapport with, he answered, "I don't think I would with any. One looks about at other groups that *do* exist still in Oxford and says, 'Oh, there's that little clique in the corner again chatting away and reading their own poems. No, I'm not the sort of person who goes in for that sort of thing.' I suspect I would have been extremely rude about it at the time" (277). Ordway then adds that Carpenter went on "to disparage 'Lewis and his cronies' as 'a mutual congratulations society'—something that more extensive research has demonstrated it certainly was not" (277).

Although Ordway concedes that the false portrait of Tolkien as anti-modern was contributed to by a misapplication of Tolkien's work on the Oxford English Syllabus to his own reading and writing and by "his tendency toward hyperbole and his innate English habit of self-deprecation" (276), all of which she explains well for her American readers, Ordway still lays the

majority of the blame on Carpenter. The case she makes is a strong one, and I believe it will encourage current and future Tolkien scholars to reassess their view of the maker of Middle-earth.

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