

## THE INFLUENCE OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S MASCULINIST MEDIEVALISM

J.R.R. Tolkien's essay "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*" is universally regarded as the most important critical discussion of *Beowulf* in the twentieth century. An informal survey of medieval literature classes I have taught or taken suggests that about one third of the students who enroll in such classes do so because they were attracted to medieval literature by Tolkien's fantasy writings. Thus Tolkien, unlike other influential critics or popular fantasy writers, shapes perception of the Middle Ages from both the top down and the bottom up.

Tolkien's ideological positions in his works include reverence for what T. A. Shippey calls "the true tradition" of medieval literature and a disdain for authors (like Wagner) who Tolkien thought had corrupted that tradition (220). Traditions for Tolkien were inheritances repeated unchanged across many generations, passed from father to son. Thus traditions are a form of what I call "masculine reproduction," the replication of identities from one man to another without the visible influence of women. Women are almost entirely absent from *The Lord of the Rings*, and "*The Monsters and the Critics*" fails to even mention Grendel's mother.

This attitude towards women in Tolkien's work is generated, I believe, from anxieties intrinsic to masculine reproduction. Such reproduction does, after all, rely upon the real reproduction of bodies performed by men *and* women. But masculine reproduction valorizes exchanges of culture and identity between men alone. The more such exchanges are valorized, the smaller the place for women, and when women are excluded from masculine institutions, these institutions lose a measure of control over their own reproduction.

Tolkien's elves, although immortal, no longer produce new children to re-populate their kingdoms. Ents have no children because they have lost their Entwives. Female dwarves are so like males that non-dwarves cannot differentiate between them. Tolkien's Middle Earth, though beautiful, is dying for lack of reproduction. Likewise a criticism that excludes women, gender, reproduction, and sex is doomed to extinction. Some critics have chosen such extinction with their eyes open (in unpublished notes dating from around 1937 Tolkien suggests that he may be at the end of the tradition of Old English studies)<sup>1</sup> just as *Beowulf* begins his fight with the dragon knowing that he will not survive. Undoubtedly this fatalism, communicated to students by Tolkien's fiction, is one they find appealing and identify with the Middle Ages.

Because many students inherit their perceptions of medieval literature through Tolkien's interpretations, they are often surprised to find women in the literature they read in their classes. When student perceptions of the Middle Ages clash with what they are taught by contemporary teachers, many students are likely to resent the "intrusion" of gender (among other topics) into their comfortable

fantasy world. It seems to me that the challenge for educators concerned with gender is to complicate productively the world view inherited from Tolkien without completely destroying students' familiarity with and love for their idealized (and ideologized) view of the Middle Ages. One way to achieve this complication is to show that men have gender in Beowulf and other texts beloved by Tolkien, that this gender requires them to perform certain roles, and that these requirements often lead, to misuse one of Tolkien's more famous quotes about Beowulf, to "sufficient tragedy" (24).

Michael D.C. Drout  
Loyola University, Chicago

Works Cited:

Shippey, Thomas A. *The Road to Middle-Earth*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1983.

Tolkien, J.R.R. "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics." *Interpretations of Beowulf*. Ed. R. D. Fulk. Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1991. 14-44.

<sup>1</sup> Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Tolkien A28 B, fol. 160r.

## FEMINISM WITHIN AND WITHOUT THE ACADEMY

Even though the trajectory of feminism in medieval studies follows that of feminism more generally in the humanities, the apparently unique problems of being a feminist in this field are emerging with greater clarity. In these brief remarks, we offer—and the “we” throughout this essay refers specifically to the three authors—our personal views of these problems, which in our opinion are both consonant and dissonant with the wider experience of feminism in the academies at the end of this century. Let us be quite clear where the three of us stand as feminist medievalists: we celebrate and affirm the achievements of feminism in medieval studies but we believe that criticism is an essential and necessary component of committed feminist inquiry.

Our thinking about our own feminist commitment and its relation to institutionalized academic practice reached a watershed two years ago following the publication of the *Speculum* volume on gender by the Medieval Academy of America, and our experience of the Kalamazoo session where it was discussed.<sup>1</sup> What concerns us here is not the individual essays but what the volume as a whole **represents** and **practices**, issues which were taken up but not widely debated by the session. Briefly and bluntly: we thought that the volume located its project within a utopic humanist vision, one which reinstated Western Eurocentric heterosexuality at its core, and which left out most of recent feminist inquiry into representation, ideology, and social construction. Through its