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Tolkien: ‘The Lord of the Rings’

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Reflections on the various works in the exhibit

Imprints and Impressions: Milestones in Human Progress
Highlights from the Rose Rare Book Collection, Sept. 29-Nov. 9, 2014
Roesch Library, University of Dayton

J. R. R. Tolkien
The Lord of the Rings
- London, ca. 1953-1955
- Page proofs of the first edition with author’s final revisions; binding by Don Glaister

In 1925—at the age of thirty-three—J. R. R. (John Ronald Reuel) Tolkien accepted a position to serve as the Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Pembroke College, University of Oxford. The choice to accept this position would profoundly change the direction of his life and his career. Before accepting this position at Oxford, Tolkien held a position as a medievalist at the University of Leeds. With this change of position from Leeds to Oxford, Tolkien would have the time and space to explore what his son Christopher Tolkien characterizes as “the rising of new imaginative horizons.” These horizons first materialized in the composition of The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings.

Unfortunately, these new endeavors forced the elder Tolkien to abandon translation projects that he was working on at the same time. These abandoned projects have recently been brought to print by Christopher Tolkien. Two—The Fall of Arthur (2013) and Beowulf (2013)—are important to the narrative I am telling here.

In The Fall of Arthur, J. R. R. Tolkien vigilantly maintained the Old English metrical pattern, which constituted a complicated rhyme scheme based on an Anglo-Saxon poetic scheme—a distinctive pattern that differs from the French system of end-rhymes. The Fall of Arthur reproduced the rhyme scheme of the Anglo-Saxon epic Beowulf—a poem that clearly stands as one of J. R. R. Tolkien’s greatest loves.

J. R. R. Tolkien also abandoned a translation of the Beowulf poem to work on The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings. Christopher Tolkien arranged for the publication of what his father had done in his translation of Beowulf, though this 2013 publication is unfortunate in some ways because there exist many fantastic translations of Beowulf into poetry (the Old English poem was written in poetry); Tolkien’s version will remain in the shadow of these poetic translations. In fact, I think that J. R. R. Tolkien’s translation of Beowulf is prose. I suspect that Tolkien, himself a great lover of Beowulf, would not
have wished for the Old English poem to be known of as a prose text and might have completed a prose translation as a way of assisting his students in their own translations.

Tolkien’s deep relationship with Beowulf framed not only his teaching, but also his scholarship and his fiction. He opened his Old English classes, for instance, with the word, “Hwæt!” or Listen!—the first word in Beowulf. In addition, Tolkien wrote a marvelous scholarly essay—still read by scholars today—“‘Beowulf’: The Monsters and the Critics,” about the reception of the monsters in Beowulf. To quote Joan Acocella of The New Yorker, in this essay, J. R. R. Tolkien reveals that he “preferred the monsters to the critics. In his view, the meaning of the poem had been ignored in favor of archaeological and philological study.”

Lastly—and this point is central to the fictional works that guide Tolkien’s fantasy work about Middle-earth—there are orcs in Beowulf! Even more, both The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings are stories that emerge from the themes of Beowulf.

J. R. R. Tolkien remained first and foremost an Oxford University professor of Anglo-Saxon studies. Tolkien immortalized the great Old English epic in his well-known fantasies about elves, hobbits, dwarfs, and orcs. Consider these lines from Beowulf. In what you are about to read, the scop [poet] of Heorot [the great hall in which the Danes and Geats meet, eat, and celebrate] acts as the entertainer of the evening and weaves a yarn about Grendel’s birth:

Metod for þy mane mancynne fram.  
Þanon untydras ealle onwocon,  
eotenas ond ylfe ond orceneas,  
swylce gigantas, þa wið Gode wunnon lange þrage; he him ðæs lean forgeald.  
(110-114)

My translation:

[For this crime* Metod makes mankind deal with this murderous foe  
From him all the evil beings arose,  
Eotenas and elves and orcs,  
Such giants, that with God contend  
For a long time; for that he repays him this reward.]

*Cain’s slaying Abel

And thus were born Tolkien’s orcs of The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings.

J. R. R. Tolkien retired from the University of Oxford in 1959 as the Merton Professor of English Language and Literature at Merton College. Born in South Africa in 1892, he died in England in 1973. Tolkien’s seat at Merton College continues to be filled by medievalists to this date.

—Miriamne Ara Krummel, PhD, Associate Professor, English
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