

Thomas Honegger, the Series Editor, begins the Preface of *Roots and Branches* with a story - he missed much of a conference in Dublin in 1992 because he was so absorbed in reading the *The Road to Middle Earth*, by Tom Shippey. The papers in *Roots and Branches* are drawn from 25 years of Shippey's work on Tolkien, from 1982 onwards. Some are previously published articles; a number were first given as lectures or talks and have been revised for publication here. As Honegger comments: "We are grateful to Tom Shippey to the care and labour he devoted to this volume... and are proud to offer the reader a rich, varied and nourishing banquet of Tolkien-related essays." The only objection that can be made is that some of Shippey's fondly-remembered talks or articles are omitted – perhaps there may be a second volume in the future.

The book is in four parts. 'The Roots – Tolkien and his predecessors' contains essays showing the range of literature in which sources for or common themes in Tolkien's work may be found, ranging from the Beowulf poet to Wagner. 'Heartwood – Tolkien and Scholarship' considers Tolkien's work as an academic. The twelve chapters in these two parts draw on Shippey's own extensive knowledge of philology and of the ancient and medieval literatures of Northern Europe. He gives a clear and fascinating introduction to the sources which Tolkien knew well, and then shows how they appear in Tolkien's academic work.

In the third section, 'The Trunk', there are six articles on *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*. Here Shippey shows the role played in Tolkien's creative work by literary and folk tradition. There is also a consideration of the common themes in Tolkien's writing and in the work of other contemporary authors. Social issues as well as literature play an important role; a chapter entitled 'Images of Class in Tolkien' gives much food for thought.

The final section, 'Twigs and Branches; Minor Works by Tolkien' includes one of the earliest pieces, written for *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1982 when *Mr. Bliss* was first published. *Mr. Bliss* has just reappeared, and if you don't already have a copy Shippey's review may well encourage you to go out and buy it. Having compared Mr. Bliss to Tom Kitten or Mr. Badger, Shippey notes: "This is a classic like they don't write any more..." On a more serious matter the essay on Beorhtnoth treats a theme which appears in Tolkien's writing at various times in his life. Here Shippey refers to four works: *Farmer Giles of Ham*, *Leaf by Niggle*, *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth*, and *Smith of Wootton Major*: "all four create a dialogue between a real world and a fantasy world; all end up in giving permission in a sort of way to use fantasy; but in the process they all indicate a kind of argument *against using fantasy*." This is an example of the richness of Shippey's critique of Tolkien's work, in that it raises questions whilst giving answers.

Many concepts are introduced, one or two of which might be questioned. But overall this book is inspiring and enjoyable because Shippey shares so *many* ideas. In the Introduction he mentions, amongst other topics for future examination, Tolkien's literary relationships —particularly Victorian and Edwardian studies of folk- and fairy-tales—and Tolkien's continual re-writing of his own early work. He concludes the Introduction by showing how much Tolkien's work offers. "Once one starts recommending works on Tolkien," Shippey writes, "so many are the perspectives he opens that there is just no end to it. As the Old Norse hero said (slightly adapted) *orþz Piccir enn vant oss hváro*: 'each of us thinks there is more to be said.' And so there is, as twenty-five years have repeatedly shown me." To repeat Honegger's comment, this book is 'rich, varied and nourishing'. **Maggie Burns**

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## Commentary: **Women, Oxford and Tolkien**

*David Doughan*

Tolkien's attitude to women is generally assumed to be at best old-fashioned, not to say patriarchal or even misogynist. He did indeed make one or two pronouncements that are prayed in evidence, most notoriously in his letter to his son Michael, who was contemplating marriage in 1941, which contained such pronouncements as:

... it is [women's] gift to be receptive, stimulated, fertilized (in many other matters than the physical) by the male. Every teacher knows that. How quickly an intelligent woman can be taught, grasp his ideas, see his point - and how (with rare exceptions) they can go no further, when they leave his hand, or when they cease to take a personal interest in him.<sup>1</sup>

This was fairly typical for an Oxford man of the time; in fact, some other dons in Tolkien's circle were just as bad, if not worse. As Dorothy L. Sayers said of Lewis:

One just has to accept that there is a complete blank in his mind where women are concerned. Charles Williams and his other married friends used to sit around him at Oxford and tell him so, but there really isn't anything to be done about it.<sup>2</sup>

To be fair, Oxford was not alone in this; Cambridge could be at least as bad. For example, Sir William Ridgeway, a candidate for Cambridge praelections 1906, was extremely doubtful about women students. He reckoned that the good-looking ones had an unfair advantage in the *viva*: one recent candidate had even gone on to marry her *viva* examiner, and 'those women researchers who do not get married seem to do nothing.' It will come as no surprise to learn that, like most Cambridge graduates until 1948, he was vehemently opposed to women being full members of the University, and to put him further in context, he believed that without compulsory Greek Cambridge would rapidly descend to the level of a 'glorified technical college' that might struggle to finance even a 'trips in brewing'.<sup>3</sup>

Cambridge was indeed less than receptive to women, but Oxford was hardly better. Until the late 19th century Oxford, like Cambridge, had been an exclusively male, even monastic, world; fellows originally had to take holy orders, and it was not until 1871 that, following parliamentary pressure, they were grudgingly permitted to marry. By then British women had already been campaigning for women's access to higher education for some time, a very slow process that bore fruit mainly outside Oxbridge, the lead being taken by Owens College, Manchester - although the real turning point was when London University admitted women to degrees in 1878, and most other non-Oxbridge universities followed suit. But Oxbridge held out. Still, as early as the 1860s various groups had started arranging classes for women taught by some of the more radical Oxford and Cambridge lecturers. To accommodate the young women who wanted to take advantage of this, houses, rather grandly called 'halls', were bought, and so women's colleges had their first beginning, most famously by the efforts of Emily Davies at Hitchin in 1867, an establishment which in 1873 moved to Girton, near Cambridge, to join Newnham Hall, which had been set up in 1871. Oxford at this stage lagged behind Cambridge. Women at Oxford had been allowed to sit some university examinations (though not take degrees) since the 1860s, but proposals for women's halls only came to fruition in 1879, when two halls were established. The reason for the delay was disagreement over religious affiliation. The foundation that became Lady Margaret Hall (named after the mother of Henry VII) was to be solidly Anglican, and a number of sponsors of women's education at Oxford, being radically minded, did not like this, so they independently set up what they called Somerville Hall (named after the 19<sup>th</sup>-century scientist Mary Somerville). Later in the 1890s these two were joined by two other women's colleges, St. Hilda's and St. Hugh's.

Each of these halls, or colleges, came to acquire a particular reputation. In her outstanding history of Somerville, Pauline Adams quotes a saying current in Oxford *ca.* 1930: 'Lady Margaret Hall for Ladies; St. Hugh's for Girls; St. Hilda's for Wenches; Somerville for Women.'<sup>4</sup> Somerville especially has always had a reputation for powerful women, its alumnae including Vera Brittain, Indira Gandhi, Dorothy Crowfoot Hodgkin, Winifred Holtby, Emma Kirkby, Marghanita Laski, Winnie Mandela, Iris Murdoch, Esther Rantzen, Eleanor Rathbone, Dorothy L. Sayers, Margaret Thatcher, and Shirley Williams.

Anyway, women, whether at Somerville or elsewhere, definitely had a physical presence in Oxford by the 1880s. However, this was not at all to the liking of the governing circles of the University. Considerable opposition to the presence of women remained, and the revered Dr Pusey of the Tractarian Movement spoke for many when he said in 1884 that the establishment of women's halls was one of the greatest misfortunes that had happened to Oxford even in his own time. One of the reasons for this was the assumption that women's brains just weren't up to it, and that it was a waste of time to send them to university. In the outside world the idea of women's higher education was seen as something of a joke, and was treated very lightly by, for example, Tennyson in *The Princess*, talking of 'prudes for proctors, dowagers for dons and sweet girl graduates'. Gilbert and Sullivan's *Princess Ida* also took a similar indulgent line. More seriously, in 1871 Ruskin, when giving a series of public lectures proclaimed: 'I cannot let the bonnets in on any conditions this term. The three public lectures will be chiefly on angles, prisms (without any prunes) and other such things of no use to the female mind'.<sup>5</sup> It was also asserted not only that women's brains might overheat, and that they would get brain fever, but that studying such things as the classics or mathematics would sap the energy they ought to be devoting to motherhood. When in 1890 Margaret Alford at Girton was bracketed in the Cambridge Tripos with the senior classic, and in mathematics Philippa Fawcett was ranked 'above the senior wrangler' (though neither of them could legally take Cambridge degrees) this did nothing to change anybody's ideas - not at Cambridge, and certainly not at Oxford. Oxford of

course went out of its way to take no notice of what happened at The Other Place; and as for non-Oxbridge institutions, the Oxford attitude was exemplified by Benjamin Jowett, the famous (or notorious) Master of Balliol. When the equally famous (outside Oxford) Professor Blackie of Edinburgh University said to him: ‘Now you mustn’t think too hardly of us, Master!’ his reply was: ‘We don’t think of you at all.’<sup>6</sup> This attitude is not entirely dead at Oxford in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Nevertheless, Oxford was increasingly having to think about women, however reluctantly. The women’s halls were making their presence felt in numerous ways, not least because of their zeal for learning, so much greater than that of many of the men. The women had a point to prove, and they went out of their way to prove it. They were helped in this by the restrictions placed on them both by the university and by their own institutions. The university wanted to keep them as far as possible from having contact with male students, and the proponents of women’s education were equally happy to avoid the least pretext for implications of scandal. Women were not allowed male visitors. They had to be chaperoned at all times. Additionally, they were supposed to keep a low profile in public, to be ladylike, demure, quiet, unassertive. And of course, when male undergraduates as part of a rag attacked the women’s halls, it was the women who were gated as a result. At least this discrimination meant that, compared to the young men, the young women had very few distractions, and could actually do some work.

Then came the First World War. Increasing numbers of dons and male students volunteered or were conscripted for military service, and Oxford temporarily became a less overwhelmingly male place. Also, Somerville’s buildings were taken over for the duration as a temporary hospital for servicemen, and Somerville women were moved to Oriel College. Formerly, they had felt that they were on the fringe of the university, but now they were physically in the heart of it. Then early in 1918 women (admittedly not all women, but a substantial number) were given the parliamentary vote. Women also could stand for parliament, and did; in 1919 one woman, Lady Astor, became an MP. Also the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919 meant that women were no longer prevented from serving on juries, acting as magistrates or indeed entering the legal profession. And in 1920, after much agonising, Oxford University finally admitted women to membership of the university. They could now take not only examinations, but degrees, and could now write ‘B.A. Oxon.’ after their names. In fact Oxford almost immediately repented of its boldness, fearing an exodus of men to Cambridge, and a quota was placed on women students. Also, women were supposed to keep strictly the low profile they had grudgingly maintained in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As Vera Chapman (‘Belladonna Took’), who went up to Lady Margaret Hall in 1918, put it:

Our colleges were rigidly cloistered. One man, and one man only, stood as guardian at our door – the porter – and he might admit fathers, or uncles, or brothers, but not, *not* cousins. ... If one of us wished to entertain a young man to tea, she required first a letter from a parent to the Principal – then a public sitting-room in the college must be booked, and then a senior member (or ‘Don’) must be engaged to join the party and act as chaperone. For we were still emerging slowly from the ‘chaperone age’.<sup>7</sup>

They were emerging far too slowly for many of the post-war women, at least some of whom had done war service of a dangerous and demanding nature and many of whom had lived independently. They were now expected to return to the pre-war standards, keep their heads down, and accept meekly what was handed out from above. In fact even before the war, by no means all women students had been as biddable as this; and now that they had won the right to equality, both within the university and to a limited extent outside it, they were minded to express their equality positively, or, in the case of Somerville, combatively. Somerville always had a ‘going-down’ or end-of-year play, and in 1921 this culminated in a song to the tune of the old German carol ‘*Tannenbaum*’. The song concluded with the following lines:

Then let us raise the song on high  
All law and order we defy  
With strident voice and laughter clear  
We’ll keep the red rag raging here.<sup>8</sup>

The language here is remarkable; as well as flaunting a menstrual reference, it deliberately claims the word ‘strident’, usually applied as a derogatory term to feminists; and it may well be that many of the women present would hear an echo from suffrage days of Cicely Hamilton’s words to Ethel Smyth’s *March of the Women*:

Firm in reliance

Laugh a defiance  
Laugh in hope, for sure is the end.

Of course a fair number of Somervillians were seriously stropky feminists. A widespread attitude was later expressed by an old Somervillian, Winifred Holtby, novelist and prominent member of the campaigning feminist Six Point Group:

I am a feminist because I dislike everything that feminism implies. I desire an end of the whole business, the demands for equality, the suggestions of sex warfare, the very name of feminist. I want to be about the work in which my real interests lie, the study of inter-race relationships, the writing of novels and so forth. But while the inequality exists, while injustice is done and opportunity denied to the great majority of women, I shall have to be a feminist with the motto Equality First.<sup>9</sup>

So these were the sort of women Tolkien was returning to in Oxford. I don't think there is any information about his relations with women (apart from Edith) in his undergraduate days, though while at King Edward's School he spoke, apparently humorously, in a debate on a motion supporting militant suffragettes<sup>10</sup>. At that time the issue of women's rights was generally regarded as a bit of a laugh; the suffragette was a figure of fun, and students were always on hand to try and disrupt suffrage meetings. Militant suffrage activities seem to have been regarded as a sort of rag, on the same level as highjacking a bus, which may have been what attracted Tolkien's interest when a boathouse was burned in 1913; he and Allen Barnett were photographed among the crowd looking at the ruins.<sup>11</sup> Before the war, women at Oxford, by and large, were taken seriously only by women - with, as someone said, rare exceptions.

However, Tolkien had been eased into post-war Oxford and the changing status of its women immediately after the war, when he was working at the *New English Dictionary*. To boost the exiguous family income, he engaged in private tutoring, and was an immediate success with the women's colleges, especially Lady Margaret Hall and St. Hugh's, first because they were lacking in expert tutors of Old English, and also because, as he was a married man, with wife and children in residence, the students did not need chaperoning when they went to his house. Thus his popularity with women students at this time was understandable, but it is also remarkable that when he returned to Oxford in 1926, as Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon, he again had a positive reception from his women students, not only because he took his work as a teacher seriously, but also because he was perceived as being notably sympathetic to women undergraduates, which was somewhat unusual among dons at this time. One of his final year students was one Mary Challans, who later achieved fame as Mary Renault, and who was at that stage in her life highly interested in things medieval; she obviously got on well with him at the time, and in much later life they shared an appreciation of each other's fiction. To give some idea of how Tolkien was regarded by his women students, there is the case of Mary Renault's close friend Kathleen Abbott who in 1990 was still referring to 'darling Tolkien'.<sup>12</sup> Then there are the cases of Mary Salu and especially Simonne D'Ardenne - two students of Tolkien who were obviously among the 'rare exceptions' he mentioned in that notorious letter, since when they left his hand they went on to make highly successful careers as philologists and medievalists, and indeed became great friends of the Tolkien family. In addition, Simonne D'Ardenne, who was involved in the Belgian resistance during the war, was instrumental in getting the University of Liège to award Tolkien an honorary doctorate in 1954.<sup>13</sup> And of course, Priscilla, Tolkien's daughter, studied at Oxford, with her father's active encouragement. She recalls that he believed completely in higher education for girls, and it was a source of pride and pleasure that he had a daughter as well as sons at Oxford.<sup>14</sup>

So Tolkien was by no means a misogynist, or even a male chauvinist pig, which is what makes that bizarre letter to Michael so uncharacteristic. It really does contain a whole bunch of received clichés on the relationship between the sexes, and you can almost hear the formulas clicking into place:

Man's love is of man's life a thing apart,  
'Tis woman's whole existence.<sup>15</sup>

Higamous hogamous, woman's monogamous -  
Hogamous higamous, man is polygamous.<sup>16</sup>

It even recalls the old music hall joke about the order of the marriage service: the couple go up the aisle to the altar, and everybody sings a hymn. Aisle - altar - hymn. (Say it aloud.)

Much of this reflects Tolkien's Catholicism, especially when dealing with man's polygamous nature, which can only be done within marriage by 'great mortification'. Having been brought up as a Catholic in the 1940s and 1950s, I have experience of this attitude; before Vatican II priests were very big on mortification, in a way that only Opus Dei really seems to be now. Young lads especially were instructed to control their sinful urges by means of this same 'mortification' for the sake of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who looked sorrowfully on adolescent boyhood. But all the same there were areas outside sexuality where mortification, or restriction, or even compromise, were ruled out, and these included a man's right to go off and spend the evening with his friends, abandoning his wife who had to stay and look after home and children.<sup>17</sup> In fact, over the years, Tolkien's position on this became rather more nuanced, as can be seen from his works.

The most obvious statement in *The Lord of the Rings* of the male-female contrast is in the case of the Ents and Entwives, into which, as Tolkien put it 'has crept a mere piece of experience, the difference of the "male" and "female" attitudes to wild things, the difference between unpossessive love and gardening.' Or, it could be said, gatherer-hunter civilisation as against horticulture and agriculture; or yet the Entwives doing the work, while the Ents go gallivanting round the countryside. Tolkien considered himself to be a bit of an anarchist (though not in Spanish Civil War terms), and felt that most men are similarly inclined, glossing over the fact that women are left literally holding the baby and usually cleaning up after the men. And yet, as I've said, in his latter years he seems to have seen things rather differently. For example, it's difficult to imagine the man who wrote that letter to Michael quoting with approval Simone de Beauvoir, as he did in a 1960s television interview. Also in about 1960 Tolkien started one of his most interesting (and frustratingly abandoned) stories: *Indis i-Kiryamo*, *The Mariner's Wife*, or *Aldarion and Erendis*.

In this story we have two very self-willed characters who love each other but whose temperament eventually leads to a tragic separation: Aldarion, the restless voyager, away from home far more than present at it; and Erendis, the stay-at-home who increasingly comes to resent her husband's long absences and keeps their daughter from him. And although Erendis is portrayed as unnecessarily stubborn, it is Aldarion who appears even more at fault, not only for leaving behind his wife and daughter, but neglecting the rule of Númenor at home for adventures abroad. Male and female stereotypes are far more subtly expressed, as in the description of the society of women at Emerië, 'the cool, quiet gentle life ... without interruptions or alarms. Boys, like Íbal, shouted. Men rode up blowing horns at strange hours, and were fed with great noise. They begot children and left them in the care of women when they were troublesome'. This resonates very much with E. M. Forster's *Howard's End*, contrasting the woman-dominated family with the masculine world of 'telegrams and anger'. But, unlike the Entwives, Erendis does not go in for gardening. She it is who loves trees for their own sake, while to Aldarion they are mainly material for shipbuilding. And Tolkien puts into the mouth of Erendis, in an extraordinary address to her daughter, sentiments that are difficult to distinguish from the feminism of the 1970s and 1980s, accusing men of simply exploiting things, animals and people for their own ends and reacting violently 'when they become aware, suddenly, that there are other wills in the world beside their own'. She ends with this admonition:

Therefore do not bend, Ancalimë. Once bend a little, and they will bend you further until you are bowed down. Sink your roots into the rock, and face the wind, though it blow away all your leaves.<sup>18</sup>

The remarkable figure here is reminiscent of the birch in *Smith of Wootton Major*, a book Tolkien would have been working on at about this time.

This has come a long way from Ents and Entwives, and even further from that letter to Michael. It is also a long way from Oxford, both culturally and physically. Tolkien was finally at this period beginning to do what Edith wanted. They spent increasing amounts of time at Bournemouth, and finally moved there permanently in 1968, spending the last short years of Edith's life there; Tolkien at last mortifying not his flesh, but his desire for exclusive male company. Still, after Edith's death he moved back to Oxford.

So, finally, I have to say that as usual with Tolkien, his attitude to most things was much more complex than it appears at first sight, and this applies especially to women, where his perception seems to have developed remarkably over the years. The same can only be said of Oxford with considerable reservation, although in recent years it has learnt by and large to accept the presence of women on equal terms with a good grace.

*David Doughtan is Secretary of the Friends of The Women's Library, and a Gentleman of Leisure.*

1. J.R.R. Tolkien *Letters* p.49
  2. *Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers* v.4 London: Dorothy L.Sayers Society, 2000 (*Letter to Barbara Reynolds* 21 December 1955)
  3. Quoted in the *Times Literary Supplement* 7 October 2005
  4. Adams, Pauline *Somerville for Women* Oxford: OUP, 1996
  5. For this and other historical information on Oxford see: Brittain, Vera *The Women at Oxford* London: Harrap, 1960
  6. Benson, E.F. *As we were* London: Longmans, Green, 1930 pp 147-8
  7. *Proceedings of the J.R.R. Tolkien Centenary Conference* (1992) pp12-13
  8. Quoted in: Leonardi, Susan *Dangerous by Degrees* New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1989
  9. Article in *The Yorkshire Post*, quoted in: Brittain, Vera *Testament of a Friendship* London: Macmillan, 1940 (p.134)
  10. Scull, Christina and Hammond, Wayne *J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide: Chronology* London: Harper Collins, 2006 ( p.16)
  11. "Boats and boathouse destroyed by fire at Oxford", *The Daily Graphic*, 4 June 1913, p.3. My thanks to John Garth for this reference.
  12. For the experiences of Mary Renault and her contemporaries, see: Sweetman, David *Mary Renault: a Biography* London: Chatto and Windus, 1993
  13. Information on Mary Salu and Simonne D'Ardenne from the *Tolkien Family Album*
  14. Quoted in: Scull, Christina and Hammond, Wayne *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide* London: Harper Collins, 2006 (v.2 p.1111)
  15. Byron *Don Juan Canto I*
  16. Attributed to William James
  17. Carpenter, Humphrey *Biography* p. 159.
  18. *Unfinished tales*, p.20
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## Commentary: **Demons, Choices, and Grace in *The Lord of the Rings***

Chad Chisholm

After Frodo, Sam, and Gollum climb the stairs of Cirith Ungol, Gollum disappears and Sam asks a metafictional question: "Don't the great tales never end?" Tolkien puts into Frodo's mouth a wonderful answer: "No, they never end as tales... But the people in them come, and go when their part's ended." Frodo's comments transcend Tolkien's sprawling invention of Middle-earth and speak towards an element that draws us to all the great tales: something that *transcends* the story itself.

In his lecture *On Sorcerers and Men*, Michael Drout suggests that the ascension of fantasy within popular literature is that fantasy is concerned largely with themes that are beyond the commonplace. Theologically, the transcendent lies beyond time and the universe; in Kant's 'theory of knowledge' it lies beyond the limits of human experience. Existential questions such as 'What is the meaning of life and death?' 'What duty does a society have to offer mercy to defeated and dangerous foes?' and 'How does a descent person coexist in a world of pain and suffering?' have existed since the time of Socrates, *transcending* every time and culture. Drout asserts that as modernist writers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century began to veer from these transcendent themes, Tolkien and other writers took them up, which led directly to the rise of George Orwell's political fables *Animal Farm* and *1984*, and to the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings*<sup>1</sup>.

Two transcendent themes in *Lord of the Rings* are the *diabolical* and *grace*. The scene inside Mount Doom at the end of *The Return of the King* contains both in the moment when Frodo refuses to toss the Ring of Power into the flames. Here Frodo and Sam are on the "brink of the chasm," and when Sam cries out to Frodo, Frodo turns and makes this speech in "a voice clearer and more powerful than Sam had ever heard" Frodo use:

I have come... But I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!

Tolkien chooses these words carefully, and "I choose not" and "I will not" convey the theme of *choice*. The themes of *diabolical* and *grace* transcend Frodo, Gollum, and all peoples of Middle-earth and the *choices* they make. The characters of Middle-earth cannot evade choice. When Éomer asks the trio of Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli, "What doom do you bring out of the North?" Aragorn answers with, "The doom of choice." The enemies of Middle-earth thrive on this ineluctability. Saruman tries to