

## **BINDING THEM ALL: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES ON J.R.R. TOLKIEN AND HIS WORKS**

Review by Nancy Bunting

Binding Them All: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on J.R.R. Tolkien and His Works, ed. Monika Kimer-Ludwig, Stephan Köser, Sebastian Streitberger; Walking Tree Publications, 2017. Paper, \$29.15 from Amazon.com.

This is a collection of articles stemming from 22 lectures delivered over two semesters at the University of Augsburg (Germany). (9) In what is essentially a preface, "The Tolkien Journey at the University of Augsburg", Stephan Köser, the main organizer, indicates these were probably delivered in 2015-2016. (2) The results were published in 2017. This suggests that a publication was planned, particularly since Thomas Honegger, one of the senior editors at Walking Tree Press, was one of the presenters. Consequently, these articles were originally aimed at a student audience and were probably delivered in German. The English translations are generally fluent.

The lead article, "Meet the Professor", by Professor Thomas Honegger clarifies what to expect. Honegger's opening statement is: "I can imagine that" Tolkien saw being an academic and a professional philologist as his primary identity. (17) (Honegger teaches English Medieval Studies and has a degree in Old and Middle English.) Honegger states that people who best understand Tolkien are medievalist-philologists like himself including JS Ryan, Tom Shippey, Michael DC Drout, Verlyn Flieger, Jane Chance, and Mark Atherton. (29)

Accordingly, of the eleven papers published in this collection, six, including Honegger's, have a medieval/ philology focus. Magdalena Spachmann's paper explores Tolkien's theory of phonetic fitness. The remaining four articles are papers that use Tolkien as a teaching device, i.e. to make subjects more interesting to students. These papers appear to be the basis of the subtitle of "Interdisciplinary Perspectives". These are not papers about Tolkien and his writings. Sebastian Streitberger's and Sabine Timps' papers are about teaching geography using Tolkien, one is Heike Krebs' linguistics paper on Lord of the Rings trailers that appears suitable for a marketing audience, and one is Heike Schwarz's presentation using Tolkien to promote ecopsychology. Written by a non-psychologist, this last paper lumps together research published in peer-review journals with German *volk* psychology as seen in references to Jung and Haeckel, and philosophical views of psychopathology by Thomas Szass and Karl Jasper. While I do not know how this presentation would be received in Augsburg where there may still be a sweet spot for German *volk* psychology (including *bodenbeschaffenheit*, the belief in the formative forces of the soil), this conceptual *mélange* is not acceptable in the United States.

Köser lists papers that did not "make the final cut", including ones on the writing systems of invented languages, religion, Father Christmas Letters, comparisons of the wizards Gandalf, Dumbledore, and Harry Potter, and the historical context of the Victorian era. These were not consistent with Honegger's focus as the collection's editor.

Special mention should be made of Christine Vogt-William's "Tolkien's Green Man: The Racialised Cultural Other Within and Green Spaces in The Lord of the Rings". This an up-to-date, gender and post-colonial studies piece written in the typically dense style of this genre and with moral certainty. This paper depends on the assumptions of the "Roland-Barthes-Death-of-the-Author" view of literature. A quick cheat peak at Wikipedia and an authoritative reference from Dale Nelson (a familiar figure to "Beyond Bree" readers) shows Barthes asserted that the "text" should be interpreted independent of any constraints intended by or linked to the author or its historical context. That means: anything goes: it is free association time with any and all responses being valid and correct. That is strictly analogous to the responses to a Rorschach Inkblot. Herr Köser introduces this Inkblot theory explicitly in his opening contribution and uses it under the rubric of "applicability" to give historical-political interpretations (his specialty) of Tolkien. I learned a lot about Herr Köser's and Ms. Vogt-William's political views.

This book will be useful for people looking for material to teach Tolkien/ medieval language studies. I thought Monica Kimer-Ludwig's paper on Beowulf was interesting. The other three "medieval" papers appear suitable for student lectures as they mostly rehash known points. Magdalena Spachmann's paper on phonetic fitness raised some new points, and Vogt-William's essay is an up-to-date gender studies/post-colonialism/Tolkien paper.