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Review of Higgins, Anglo-Saxon Community in J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings

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Deborah Higgens. *Anglo-Saxon Community in J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings*. N.p.: Oloris Publishing, 2014. 120 pp. E-book. ISBN 978-1-940992-05-1. \$15.00

In a recent article, “The Problem of Transformation: The Use of Medieval Sources in Fantasy Literature,” Michael Drout states that “...fantasy literature [is] the way that the majority of the general public encounters medieval materials (albeit transformed medieval materials)” (2004, 17). Deborah Higgens, Director of the C.S. Lewis Study Center at The Kilns, makes two claims about J.R.R. Tolkien’s engagement with Anglo-Saxon literature in this short book. The first claim, that Tolkien entered an Anglo-Saxon community of writers through his scholarly and creative work (5-6), is questionable and in the end not an important issue for this work. The second, that Tolkien’s knowledge about the Anglo-Saxon community, derived from his professional study of Old English (OE) literature and his reading in history and archaeology, informed the writing of *The Lord of the Rings* (LOTR), is unquestionably true and the focus of this book. Higgens traces and explains Tolkien’s medievalism, enabling readers to understand how he transmitted and transformed medieval themes and concepts in his major work.

Higgens’ introduction provides both necessary background information, describing Tolkien’s lifelong involvement with OE literature and mythopoesis, and laying out the book’s argument in the form of short chapter summaries. Her second chapter, “On Fairy-Stories and Monsters,” treats Tolkien’s two important essays, “On Fairy-Stories” and “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics,” expanding upon the former work’s important themes, Sub-creation and the “Cauldron of Story,” to which storytellers contribute and from which they extract elements for their own creative use (6). From the Beowulf essay Higgens distills Tolkien’s

understanding of the Anglo-Saxon mindset and the “ancient modes, genres, and elements” that he utilized in his writings (6, 7). The analysis of the influence of OE literature on LOTR focuses on the mead-hall culture (Chapter 3, “Tolkien Enters the Anglo-Saxon Community Through the Mead-Hall Building”), the lord’s relationship with his thanes as established by the *comitatus* oath (an oath of allegiance and mutual protection), which was reinforced through the hall’s structure and activities, especially feasting, drinking, and gift-giving (Chapter 4, “The Role of the Lord, Comitatus, and Gift-Giving Within the Mead-Hall”); and the role of the lady in relationship with her husband and his thanes, focusing on her special duties as cup-bearer and giver of both gifts and advice during the mead-hall feast (Chapter 5, “Lady With a Mead Cup: The Lady and Her Role as Cup-Bearer, Ambassador, Wife, and Warrior”). In each chapter, Higgins describes the relevant constructs (i.e., the hall, the relationships among the male inhabitants, the role of the lady), as gleaned from OE texts, primarily *Beowulf*. A discussion of Tolkien’s application of the respective concepts in his writing of LOTR follows each account. The concluding chapter sums up the discussion, indicating similarities in tone and content between LOTR and the OE works discussed. Higgins attributes these similarities to an elegiac attitude, as both Tolkien and his models mourn the decline of a heroic culture and articulate the need to preserve some of its values in later times (92-93).

Most of Higgins’ discussion focuses on affinities between the OE *Beowulf* and the Rohirrim, Théoden and his thanes, and Éowyn as lady of Meduseld, all of which comprise only a portion of the totality of LOTR. Not only is Meduseld obviously modeled after *Beowulf*’s Heorot, but both Aragorn and his small company experience essentially the same view of the hall and treatment by the king’s retainers as Beowulf’s troop does upon approaching and entering Heorot (39-40). Both the relationships between the king and his retainers that result from the *comitatus* oath and the protocols of feasting, sharing of the mead cup, and gift-giving are

revealed in OE texts and LOTR (47-48, 59-60). Higgens focuses on Galadriel and Éowyn in her discussion of the lady and her role in supporting the *comitatus* oath, especially as cup-bearer during feasts, aligning LOTR's female characters' behavior with that of *Beowulf's* Wealhtheow and Hygd in confirming the authority of the king and the supporting roles of the thanes (73, 85-86, 87-89). Problematic in her discussion of the lady of the hall is Higgens' claim that Éowyn's disobedience in riding into battle with Théoden is an example of the *comitatus* oath in action (90). There is no evidence in OE literature or historical sources that Anglo-Saxon ladies entered into such oaths (beyond the marriage vow), and Higgens' only evidence of women engaged in direct combat for any reason comes from Celtic literature (75).

Higgens extends her identification of the Anglo-Saxon elements beyond the Rohirric episodes in LOTR to Northern Courage as exemplified by the various characters who persevere despite despair, danger, and imminent death (22). Descriptions of battles, "battle joy," and "sword play" throughout LOTR also encompass the Anglo-Saxon warrior ethos that supports the *comitatus* oath (45). Higgens additionally examines feasting and gift-giving as acts that maintain the social structure in Lothlórien and the Shire (68-70, 72). However, the location of Galadriel and Celeborn's feasts outdoors suggests the liminal spaces of Faërie (which readers also encounter in the Wood-Elves' feasts in *The Hobbit* [Tolkien 137-139, 151]) rather than a mead hall.

This book is recommended for general readers who wish to enhance their understanding of Tolkien's medievalisms in LOTR. The author presents aspects of Anglo-Saxon mead-hall culture reflected in OE literature, primarily *Beowulf*, and demonstrates how Tolkien utilized, or as Drout claims, transformed, these elements in his writings (2014, 10-11). However, readers need to be careful not to accept Higgens' assumptions and statements about Tolkien's use of medieval sources uncritically. For instance, her focus on OE literature and, to a lesser extent,

Celtic sources, suggests to the uninitiated that these are the primary or only sources from which Tolkien drew medieval material. However, as an expert in Germanic philology, Tolkien was fluent in Old Norse and Gothic language and literature, from which he also derived inspiration. For instance, Higgins could have found a possible Germanic parallel to Éowyn's gender-defiant foray into battle in Signy of the Old Norse *Volsungasaga*.

Higgins also makes problematic statements about the context of Anglo-Saxon literature. She discusses the OE texts in terms of "writers" and how such texts were "meant to be read" (4, 25-26). While the texts under discussion were eventually written down, they were mostly products of pre-Christian, oral culture. Modern audiences can read the texts in question, but the experience of a reader is different from that of a (mostly) illiterate Anglo-Saxon mead-hall audience listening to a recitation by a *scop*.

Another problem is Higgins' assumption that similarities in the representation of *Beowulf's* Heorot and LOTR's Meduseld and the similarity of the Rohirric language to an OE dialect identify the Rohirrim as members of an Anglo-Saxon "equestrian community" (42). Tolkien himself denied this identification, and in fact made the Rohirrim something of a cross between Mercian-speaking Anglo Saxons and equestrian Goths, as Drout points out in "The Problem of Transformation" (2014, 10). Tom Shippey proposes that the Rohirrim are the ancestors of the Anglo Saxons or, alternatively, the Anglo Saxons before they left Continental Europe (*The Road to Middle-earth* 94, 97-98). Arden Smith, in his essay "Tolkienian Gothic," identifies Rohirric ancestors' names as Gothic (268), which could support Drout's and Shippey's suggestions. In any case, Tolkien used Gothic, an older East Germanic language, in order to provide historical and cultural depth for the Rohirrim, thus creating a different linguistic and cultural history for them than that established for the West Germanic Anglo Saxons (demonstrated by Drout in his essay, "The Rohirrim, the Anglo-Saxons, and the Problem of

Appendix F: Ambiguity, Analogy and Reference in Tolkien's Books and Jackson's Films" [2011, 253]).

Academic readers will notice some gaps in this book. For one thing, Higgs has published her dissertation of 2007 without updating it to include relevant scholarship published since then. (The only post-2007 entry in both the Works Cited and the additional Bibliography is a telephone interview with Priscilla Tolkien from 2012.) The contents are not new for those who study and teach Germanic philology, medieval literature, or Tolkien and his works. Both academic and lay readers might wonder why the analysis is limited to LOTR, since Tolkien's professional work in OE literature, especially his study of *Beowulf*, also informed his writing of *The Hobbit*. Including an analysis of Anglo-Saxon elements in the latter work would be both appropriate and timely, as 2012 marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of its publication.

In conclusion, Higgs has produced an interesting work for lay readers, which can enhance their enjoyment and understanding of LOTR, especially its cultural and historical depth. This book might motivate some to read Anglo-Saxon literature in translation or perhaps to venture to engage with OE texts like *Beowulf* or "The Wanderer," of which Tolkien was an acknowledged expert, in the original Old English.

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