

Tolkien Behind the Iron Curtain and Beyond

Review of Janka Kascakova and David Levente Palatinus (eds.), *J. R. R. Tolkien in Central Europe. Context, Directions, and the Legacy*, Routledge Studies in Speculative Fiction (New York: Routledge, 2023)

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DOI: 10.53720/CZZC4684

Thanks to the book by Janka Kascakova and David Levente Palatinus, the vast landscape of Tolkien studies is enriched with a new territory. It adds the new dimension of three Central European countries, namely Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, to the exploration, detailing their efforts in translating, reading, and interpreting the works of the creator of Middle-earth. The volume entitled *J. R. R. Tolkien in Central Europe* offers a diachronic and synchronic mapping of the reception of Tolkien's works by academics, readers, and fandom under the communist regime and in the post-communist times up to the present day. The nuanced differences in the reception of Tolkien's *oeuvre* in these various countries become even more transparent against the backdrop of a rather unified historical-political background of the past and the similarly unified cultural background of the present, characterised by its globalised transmediality, hybridity, and its globalised audiences.

Kasciakova's and Palatinus's Introduction provides us with a theoreticised interpretation of the aims of articles contained in the volume. The authors present the numerous criteria along which the papers offer their diachronic survey of Tolkien

reception in Central Europe as well as the phenomena which define the multimedia hybridity with its reciprocal impacts of the present day. They claim that Tolkien studies were somewhat delayed due to a persevering mistrust in the genre of fantasy, resulting in a lack of systematic mapping of the origins and progress of Tolkien scholarship in Hungary and the countries of the former Czechoslovakia. Thus, the present volume intends to fill this need. The material of the volume is grouped into three main sections: the first focuses on the reception and translations of Tolkien in Hungary, the second contains the articles dealing with the Czech and Slovak scenes, and the third, entitled “Studying Fantasy after Tolkien: Legacies and Contemporary perspective,” contains papers about perceptions of Tolkien by the younger generations, along with fantasy literature in multimedia.

In the first section, Gergely Nagy offers a highly detailed overview of Tolkien scholarship in Hungary from its inception to the present day. His first article covers the period up until the twenty-first century, while the second delves into the contemporary scene. Tolkien’s introduction to Hungarian readers did not occur through samizdat manuscripts, as in Russia or other countries of the communist bloc, but rather began as early as 1975, with the publication of *The Hobbit*. As Nagy argues, Tolkien “was not seen as subversive, but he was not fully approved or appreciated either” (13), and initially faced criticism not for practicing a marginal genre but for being perceived as outmoded and too conservative.

Nagy describes the first translations, which paved the way for scholarly work, and continues by enumerating a plethora of criticisms levied against Tolkien. These critiques, for a time, maintained a slightly defamatory tone, with such delicacies of misinterpretation as Ferenc Mező’s review, which characterised *The Hobbit* as “the spot-on satirical representation of the American way of life” (17) and similarly portrayed *The Silmarillion*.

The author proceeds to discuss the challenges of defining the genre of Tolkien’s works during these early years, illustrating how Tolkien was initially connected to the science fiction scenery, with fantasy seen as a sub-genre of it. There were also struggles to position Tolkien’s works regarding the dichotomy between children’s literature and adult fairy tales.

Clear-cut academic articles began to appear only sporadically before the 1990s, a period that Nagy identifies as marking a new beginning in the Hungarian Tolkien reception. This era saw a surge in various platforms where Tolkien was discussed, disseminated, and enjoyed, including clubs, new publishing companies, role-playing

games. Importantly, this period also witnessed a new wave of publishing previously unknown works by the author, such as the *Unfinished Tales*. And, undoubtedly, this is the moment when the Peter Jackson film adaptations enhance the rising of a new fandom, in Hungary as in the other parts of the world.

Nagy argues that, while the first translations were brilliantly made, they contained less fortunate renderings of the proper names, leading to an eclecticism that necessitated urgent retranslation and standardisation of the Tolkienesque terminology, especially proper names. This need was addressed in the twenty-first century, which Nagy defines as the period of expansion in both popular fandom and sound, systematic, and academically based work on Tolkien.

The Hungarian Tolkien Society, founded in this period, played a pivotal role in promoting both popular and scholarly engagement with Tolkien's works. They facilitated new translations, including the *History of Middle-earth* series, and contributed to the solidification and expansion of Tolkien criticism, with such great achievements as Tamás Bényei's survey *Az ártatlan ország*, situating Tolkien into the context of post-1945 English novel and thus contributing also to the canonisation of Tolkien for the Hungarian readership as well. The Society was instrumental in cultivating a new readership and fandom through events such as summer camps and other social occasions which enjoyed a growing popularity, while also infiltrating Tolkien studies into university education, thereby paving the way for young Hungarian scholars to engage in international academic discourse on Tolkien.

After discussing the Hungarian scene, the reader is introduced to the Tolkien reception in Czechoslovakia and its successor states. Janka Kascakova's study provides insight into the phases of encountering Tolkien in socialist Czechoslovakia. Kascakova informs us that this period was characterised by a scarcity of material due to the communist regime's reaction to a Western author deemed problematic for several reasons. Following a detailed overview of the historical context, which might serve as an introduction into the political-ideological background of these years for the subsequent essays on the Slovak and Czech cases, we learn about the initial positive criticism from Viktor Krupa. Krupa acknowledged the merits of Tolkien's work, introducing him to Czech readership through partial translations of *The Lord of the Rings*. However, the full translation was postponed due to the hardening of censorship following the suppression of the "Prague Spring." The first edition of the work in Slovak language occurred in the early 2000s.

Among the ideological objections, there was a persistent notion on the part of communist censors that Tolkien intentionally positioned the realm of the evil, Mordor, to the East, alluding thus to the Stalinist regime. There were also fears that Saruman's ill-treatment of the Shire could be paralleled with the collectivisation of lands under the communists. Additionally, Tolkien's Catholicism was feared as an incitement to religiosity, seen as a threat to the system. Consequently, Tolkien's works were read and disseminated as samizdat. Kascakova recounts the case when Vaclav Havel, later prime minister, was advised to read *The Lord of the Rings* upon leaving prison in 1983. Although many testimonies are lost, surviving ones testify to the enthusiasm and encouragement these texts provided to clandestine readers in communist Czechoslovakia.

The following studies by Tereza Dědinová and the joint article by Jozefa Pevčíková and Eva Urbanová offer surveys of the Czech and Slovak receptions after the 1990s. Dědinová explores the shifts in Tolkien's reception after the communist era, particularly focusing on how new generations encountered Jackson's adaptations before reading the texts themselves, if at all. These generations were indoctrinated into new cultural sensitivities as gender issues, otherness, and environmentalism.

The shift in reception practices is highlighted by first presenting the beginnings, thus the efforts of the communist reviews to interpret *The Hobbit* as anti-capitalist propaganda which obviously failed: during the "Prague Spring" days leaflets with the inscription "Gandalf na Hrad" (meaning Gandalf for president) attest to the clandestine interpretation of the masses and to the encouragement they drew from the work in their fight for freedom and a righteous social and political order. The same attitude is reflected in the reviews of the 1990s, when the country freshly found its independence from communist totalitarianism. Such themes as freedom, personal responsibility, moral choices, hope, and the necessity to stop evil were the ones which resonated with the reader.

Dědinová highlights the emergence of numerous fandom clubs and fanzines, and the appearance of other products of fantasy literature, with *The Lord of the Rings* standing out as a narrative that resonates deeply with contemporary societal issues. The emergence of the digital era and the widespread popularity of Jackson's adaptations have altered the landscape of reception. The article raises the question of whether contemporary audiences delve into the profound meaning embedded within the text or merely scratch the surface. To address this, a questionnaire survey was conducted to glean insights. The findings seem to confirm the hypothesis

that while the digital age may impact reading habits, with some perceiving Middle-earth as merely superficial entertainment, there remains a significant cohort captivated by the inner artistic coherence and relevance of Tolkien's works. Reading about themes such as friendship, courage, resilience against evil, self-sacrifice, and hope evokes a profound sense of inspiration, encouragement, and a peculiar yet enriching feeling of "coming home."

Pevčíková and Urbanová's article, titled "Tolkien in the Slovak Press: Situation after 1990," examines Tolkien's reception in scholarly magazines, fanzines, and in the daily press, as well as internet magazine portals. Following a delayed translation of *The Hobbit* (the first translation was published in 1973, in the year of Tolkien's death, and the complete translation of *The Lord of the Rings* came out only in 2002), a proliferation of reviews and articles followed, primarily focusing on critiques of the translations themselves, in both academic and popular circles.

Regarding criticism of Tolkien himself, surprisingly, it was the popular media, such as *Fantázia* and *Athelas*, along with other internet magazines, some even with a confessional profile, that aired their views on the works, while academic circles remained silent. The authors argue that this silence was partly due to difficulties in categorising the genre itself: either showing disinterest or harbouring a deep mistrust in the literary quality of speculative genres. This led to repeated attempts to redefine the genre of Tolkien's works as a "fairy-tale heroic epic" (106) or as "modern heroic fantasy literature" (107). Particularly noteworthy are cases of over-interpretation, such as allegorical readings linking the work to WWII, and even to "anthrax," the "aviation apocalypse," or to genetic research on aggression (107). Jozef Bobok's criticism of *The Lord of the Rings* as kitsch due to its escapism is also striking.

The Slovak reception by Tolkien-favouring scholarly circles is also peculiar as it focused on the biographical aspect of the Tolkien phenomenon and tried to gain acceptance for him by emphasising not only his academic achievements but also his Catholicism. It is not surprising, then, as the authors demonstrate, that the most vehement campaign to ensure Tolkien a positive appreciation was conducted in Catholic academic periodicals such as *Impulz (A Review Magazine for Modern Catholic Culture)*. These were the platforms where the comparison of *Harry Potter* with *The Hobbit* took place, to the detriment of the former, with Tolkien receiving higher praise. The article concludes by mapping the fandom with fan fiction, fan art, fan vids, and fan music, along with organising social events such as summer camps, etc. It also

demonstrates how the competition between non-professional magazines and academic publications is neutralised by the presence of “aca-fandom,” a term denoting academics who are also fans of popular cultural aspects of the Tolkien universe.

Finally, the last paper of the second section by Jela Kehoe offers a survey of the problems and challenges of translating *The Hobbit*. The author compares two translations, one by Viktor Krupa in 1973 and the other by Otakar Kořínek from 2002, placing them into the context of the Czech translations of both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. These translations could be equally read by the Slovak readership and therefore had an undeniable impact on both translators and the audience. Kehoe focuses her analysis on the “knots” or challenges that translators face due to culture-specific phenomena, which manifest in translating proper names of persons and beings, inanimate objects, or place names. Finding acceptable solutions is essential in forming a consistent nomenclature that ensures a smooth and enjoyable reception of the works by several generations.

The author of the paper identifies another challenge faced by Slovak translators, namely, the richness of the original text and the relatively recent development of the Slovak literary tradition. This challenge is evident in aspects such as lexis, grammar, and pronunciation, as well as in the efforts to render the speech of the different races by dialectal variants in Slovak or by using different registers of colloquial speech.

The last part of the volume bears the title “Studying Fantasy after Tolkien” and focuses on the reception of fantasy among teenagers and young adults. In one of the most intriguing papers from the volume, Martina Vránová explores young adult literature and fantastic fiction, examining how the two genres merge in young adult fantasy. The author begins by defining the terms of the genres, highlighting the recent rise in popularity of young adult literature, which has become one of the most successful categories in book publishing, television, film, and computer games since the early 2000s. Vránová draws on concepts from Jungian psychology, cognitive narratology, and Foucault’s ideas on heterotopic places as she compares John Green’s realist young adult novel, *Looking for Alaska*, with Andrzej Sapkowski’s fantasy series, *The Witcher*, and Ransom Riggs’ *Miss Peregrine* series, which blends both genres into young adult fantasy. Despite their differences, all three works acknowledge their indebtedness to Tolkien and share essential similarities that contribute to their continued appeal among adolescent audiences.

Vránová refers to Jonathan Stephens' five criteria for defining the characteristics of Young Adult Literature (YAL), emphasising the inherent connection between YAL and fantasy. She writes, "The strong, indeed heroic, characters undergoing an ordeal in a fantastic world in order to emerge as changed individuals make up the most common themes of fantasy" (133), these are also prevalent in YAL. By applying Erik Erikson's developmental psychology to the narrative patterns found in both YAL and fantasy, Vránová suggests that the challenges faced by characters in these stories mirror the challenges encountered by adolescents on their path toward adulthood. Thus, reading becomes a formative experience that aids readers in confronting the challenges of their own lives, while following a parallel path with the protagonists of traditional fantasy, acquiring mental, emotional, and moral maturation. This is fostered by the shared underlying narrative structure of consecutive rites of passage: separation, initiation, and return. As Vránová puts it, "Resolving each of Erikson's life crisis is a reenactment of the archetype of the self as a hero on a quest, which is particularly pronounced in the adolescence" (135).

Another essential dimension of this journey is the transition from isolation to social inclusion. Vránová draws on Thomas Pavel's cognitive narratology to illustrate how fantasy fiction has the capacity to create worlds that are referential and mirror real-life experiences for readers. In doing so, Vránová incorporates Kripke's theory on the construction of possible or alternative worlds, which explains how adolescents can benefit from fictional worlds by safely exploring different constructions of their own identities within them. Vránová also examines the functioning of elements such as travel, the archetypal figures of the Father and the Mentor, and the significance of Foucault's heterotopia in this context. She concludes that "YAL, fantasy and their union in YA fantasy have taken up a role of the disappearing cultural phenomenon of ritual, which is possibly one of the reasons for their immense marketing success" (147).

Nikolett Sipos presents the findings of a survey conducted with Hungarian students from two universities regarding their preferences for Tolkien and his impact on fantasy literature. The survey, conducted online, is described by Sipos as offering an overview rather than being referential. It included both quantitative and qualitative criteria, seeking answers about students' views on the fantasy genre in general, their reading and media consumption habits related to fantasy fiction, and whether they believe Tolkien and other fantasy works should be included in university curricula. The conclusions reveal that *The Lord of the Rings* maintains a preferred

position among narratives such as *Harry Potter*, *The Witcher*, *Chronicles of Narnia*, or *Game of Thrones*. Despite a preference for films over books among the majority, 76% of respondents still read fantasy novels and support the inclusion of the genre in academic discourse.

Finally, David Levente Palatinus discusses the influence of transmediality on the reception and perception of fantasy. The article provides a detailed picture on how fantasy literature evolved into a mainstream cultural phenomenon in the multimedia universe. Palatinus begins with an impressive overview of how fantasy genres both shape and are shaped by the programming policies of various platforms, ranging from traditional ones to streaming platforms and transmedia franchises. These platforms face constraints such as budgetary considerations, a perpetual pursuit of high production quality, and challenges posed by technological innovations. Palatinus argues that these factors are of an ambiguous nature; while they offer a growing array of expressive possibilities, they can also hinder efforts to achieve greater artistic expressivity by prioritising technical brilliance at the expense of artistic quality.

Especially intriguing is Palatinus's exploration of the impacts of hybridity on the reception of fantasy works and the shifting expectations of audiences regarding adaptations. While fidelity to the original text was once the primary criterion for adaptations, recent developments prioritise relatability. Palatinus attributes this shift to the transmediatisation of fantasy works, which has intensified with the proliferation of franchises. According to Palatinus, "transmediality also implies one medium 'imprinting' on the other, in the sense that transmedia narratives encode the specificities of the multiple media through which they proliferate" (167). Participatory audience engagement is further fuelled by social media platforms, fostering fan communities that shape the content and form of fantasy, with streaming platforms playing a facilitating role. Thus, a permanently oscillating reciprocal influence is created. This dynamic results in a continuous transformation of the fantasy genre, reaching new heights of global and multimedia popularity.

The volume explores new territory by studying Tolkien's influence in three Central European countries, a topic previously overlooked. Their common historical past caused similar challenges in the first decades of Tolkien reception in these countries, with local specificities in resisting the ideologically fuelled attempts of blocking the influences of the Tolkienesque *oeuvre* on a readership avid of the encouragement and hope it could offer. It also paints a multicoloured picture

of the reception of the Tolkien legacy in all its forms within a society and cultural context increasingly unified with the rest of the world due to globalisation. Thus, the book is a resourceful reading for scholars interested in Tolkien's legacy behind the iron curtain and in the present states of the former communist bloc as well as for the common reader of general interest. The reading will further convince us of the validity of Dědinová's assertion: "Tolkien's Middle-earth's inner consistency and depth resist the flow of time and-like other classical works of literature-keeps its autonomy and stays relevant for new generations" (75).

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