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Review in Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Teaching of "Ents, Elves and Eriador: The Environmental Vision of J.R.R. Tolkien"

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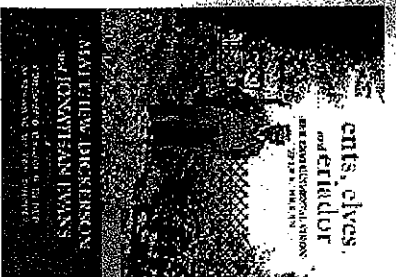


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history. Moreover, it is often difficult, even in a given chapter, to follow the line of argument. Sentences are overly complex and unnecessarily long, at least once extending to half a page (17). Rather than presenting his thesis, and marshalling his evidence, in a clear logical sequence, Gittes piles on assertions and examples. This leaves the overall impression that he is tailoring Boccaccio to fit a set of foregone theoretical conclusions. There is also a sense of the arbitrary nature of his examples, something especially notable in treating as various and prolific a writer as Boccaccio, whose work, like the Bible, might be used to defend any and all points of view.

Despite occasional flashes of insight, Gittes's effort to redefine Boccaccio's achievement is compromised by the conceptual and methodological difficulties presented above. Hence, I would not recommend *Boccaccio's Naked Muse* for assigned reading in college courses.



*Enns, Elves, and Eriador: The
Environmental Vision of J. R.
R. Tolkien*

By Matthew Dickerson and
Jonathan Evans

Culture of the Land Series
Lexington: University Press of
Kentucky, 2006

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Book Review

Alfred K. Siewers

Recently, after an environmental humanities colloquium on our campus, I found myself in the middle of a good-natured debate over whether rocks have souls. On my right was an eminent geologist touched by ecosophical teachings, arguing that they indeed do. On my left was a talented geomorphologist who also had pastored a local rural Anabaptist church, arguing that they did not (although noting at the end that Jesus had said that even the stones would cry out). Drawing on my own scholarly background in the study of nature in early medieval and patristic literature, I found myself somewhere in between and thinking that Tolkien might have been as well.

Not that the church fathers, desert ascetics, or early insular monastic literati who wrote texts that Tolkien drew upon for his accounts of Middle-earth (let alone Tolkien himself) would ever have agreed that rocks have souls per se. But in the early literary cultures of the Atlantic archipelago and their sources, there was a keen Christian sense of uncreated divine energies flowing through the natural world as theophanies, which ambiguate categories of human and non-human in certain respects.

Nowhere is this more apparent in Latin writings than in the Irish philosopher John Scottus Eriugena's study of nature, the *Periphyseon* and, in different form, distinctive tales of the so-called Celtic Otherworld, the Taliesin tradition of the Welsh, and early

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Celtic hagiography. The roots of all these texts in early Irish and Welsh monastic communities reached back to the deserts of the Middle East and to cosmic patristic writers such as Maximus the Confessor and the Cappadocians, as well as to transmitters of such traditional Christian cosmology to the West such as John Cassian and the oral and physical traditions of countless unnamed monastic scholars.

It was from this confluence of ascetic tradition and native cultures, including its ripples in early Icelandic and later Finnish cultural syncretism, that J. R. R. Tolkien largely drew for his Ents, Valar, enchanted elven realms, and figures such as Tom Bombadil and Goldberry, and Radagast the Brown. Michael Oleksa, in his writings on the syncretism of Russian Orthodox and Inuit cultures in Alaska, has noted similar overlappings in the Eastern Orthodox sense of *logoi* in Creation and the *inua* of the Inuits (similar to the *manitou* of the Great Lakes Indians, as a spiritual relation involving both human and non-human being).¹ This overlap is perhaps where we come closest to the creative middle-ground in the debate over "do rocks have souls?" Eringen's discussion of planets as beings, for example, perhaps can be seen to foreshadow the kinds of literary traditions that Tolkien's friend C. S. Lewis also drew upon in his own fantasy writings.²

Matthew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans have done a masterful job in their *Ents, Elves, and Eriador* of highlighting and celebrating some parts of this pixilated Christian perspective that Tolkien brings to his fantasy. Their book could be subtitled *Defending Tolkien's Christianity*, as a takeoff on the other preeminent book on Tolkien's environmentalism, *Defending Middle-earth*, by Patrick Curry. I in turn would defend the use of both books in any Tolkien course and in any environmental literary studies course, although in the latter I think the study by Dickerson and Evans would be most helpful in providing some balance to twentieth-century environmental writings that frequently blame Christianity for our modern environmental predicaments (ironically ignoring the emergence of such crisis during the rise of a more secular scientific and capitalist-consumer culture in the West). Foundational to this genre perhaps is Lynn White's famous essay "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis."³ Yet Dickerson and Evans have opened themselves to Curry's scathing criticism of their book in a recent issue of the journal *Tolkien Studies*, by failing fully to articulate and contextualize, as well as to celebrate and defend, the Christian

connections of Tolkien's fantasy. By writing their study primarily from a perspective of the predominantly modern Protestant tradition of "creation care," they have downplayed or ignored the rich earlier Christian traditions and cultural syncretism in the understorey of Tolkien's fantasy.

Dickerson, a computer science professor who publishes on Tolkien and is in Middlebury College's environmental studies program, and Evans, a medievalist involved with environmental studies at the University of Georgia, perform a stunning interdisciplinary feat in mapping landscapes of sustainable agriculture, horticulture, and what they call *feraculture* (engagement with wilderness) in close readings of nature in Tolkien's fiction. They engage in an important and insightful discussion of ecotones or areas of liminal "thick margins" overlapping between those three zones of landscape in Tolkien's fantasy. They describe the model for an ecologically restored Shire at the end of *The Lord of the Rings* as "agriculture, horticulture, and feraculture" mixed together. In doing so, they model for students how to engage in close reading of texts in light of particular theoretical concerns (in this case, those of ecocriticism). They describe Middle-earth ecologically as a "land of edges." In the final section of the book, they develop a kind of geophilosophy or *ecosophy* from their literary analysis, dealing with environmental action and suggesting to me the environmental function of narrative. And while providing a broad ecocritical approach to Tolkien's fantasy, their book can be used, as I have done, to illustrate for students different emphases and approaches in sources for research, through a comparison with Curry's more secular concerns.

It is especially appropriate that *Ents, Elves, and Eriador* appears in the Culture of the Land Series of the University Press of Kentucky, to which Wendell Berry is an advisor. The brief foreword by John Elder makes explicit the connection between the study and the New Agrarianism movement, the latter being largely a very productive glossing on and application of the important work of Berry, a beloved Kentucky farmer, essayist, poet, conservationist, and traditionalist-with-a-subversive-streak philosopher. It thus seems doubly surprising that the book does not mention what would have been a very relevant connection to its own discussions of sustainable agriculture and communitarianism in the Shire, namely Kentucky essayist Guy Davenport's explication (in the essay "Hobbitry" in his collection *The Geography of the Imagination*) of how Tolkien

himself drew on eastern Kentucky farming communities as a partial model for the Shire and a source for the very names of many of the hobbits in his works.

That apparent lack of attention to background detail and contextualization is a problem with the study, which purposely eschews heavy engagement in the back-story of Tolkien's work in order to give us what it does well, an environmental reading of his published fictional texts. Yet in the process, this apparent lack of attention to some important details goes further than the Kentucky-Shire connection mentioned above and can limit the value of the book's textual readings. The authors don't examine carefully enough how Tolkien's Edwardian Catholicism connected with his study of early medieval insular literatures in ways that go beyond what many Western readers today would consider to be familiar Christianity. They write, "What will be obvious to attentive readers is that Tolkien's environmental vision is a profoundly meaningful outgrowth of his Catholicism and is, therefore, at bottom, Christian"—as if subtly implying the Christian nature of Catholicism is slightly surprising from their standpoint or an addition to the essence of Tolkien's own worldview. And the absence in their index of Mary, the Mother of God from medieval Christian tradition, central to Tolkien's worldview and having many traditional associations with the earth, with only one reference to the Marian figure of Elbereth in Tolkien's *legendarium*, central to his mythology, reflects a similar dearth in the text, mirroring a potentially limiting if not overtly sectarian framework. Dickerson and Evans could have enriched their environmental paralleling of Tolkien's *legendarium* with the biblical creation account if they had drawn on Celtic and non-Augustinian patristic and desert-ascetic sources.

Such limited focus provides a valuable teachable moment, comparing the book with other sources in productive discussion of the necessarily anachronistic frameworks of all modern scholarship. Yet the book nonetheless provides far more in terms of a positive exemplum of scholarship, contra Curry's acerbic if partially justified critique. In addition to the examples mentioned above, Dickerson and Evans provide a valuable discussion of concepts of stewardship as figured by Gandalf, Treebeard, Sam, Galadriel, and various kings and leaders, and how such examples bridge the inner world of fantasy and what we think of as the outer world of reality. In the process, they cite a famous discussion by Tolkien with Lewis about

myth and trees, as reconstructed by Humphrey Carpenter from Lewis's remembrances:

"You look at trees," Tolkien said, "and call them 'trees,' and probably you do not think twice about the word. . . . To you a tree is simply a vegetable organism, and a star simply a ball of inanimate matter moving along a mathematical course. But the first men to talk of 'trees' and 'stars' saw things very differently. To them the world was alive with mythological. . . . Christianity is exactly the same thing—with the enormous difference that the poet who invented it was God Himself, and the images He used were real men and actual history."⁵

Still, in many ways, Tolkien's work relates more to the transpersonality of Arne Naess's deep ecology (also not referenced by Dickerson and Evans) and today's developing field of environmental phenomenology and its interest in ecopoetics (as in the work of Toronto philosopher Evan Thompson) than it does to modern Euro-American Catholicism and Protestantism. That is not to deny Middle-earth's deeply Catholic and Christian underpinnings but rather to say that Tolkien makes early medieval connections that partly elude the study of nature in his work by Dickerson and Evans.

It is perhaps a relevant digression to note, in this context, that Wendell Berry not only sits on the advisory board of the series that published this valuable book but also is a fellow at Prince Charles's Tenenos Academy, which is concerned with issues of how various traditions globally (not just Christian) relate to environmental and other quality-of-life concerns in a modern world desperately needing narratives rooted in the earth. One of Berry's colleagues among the fellows of Tenenos is the most eminent younger medieval Celticist of our day, John Carey. The connections symbolized in that organizational coincidence, between New Agrarianism, non-Western traditions, and early medieval Celtic scholarship, suggest the rich multicultural potential for scholarly discussions of nature and tradition (even for broader audiences) that the study by Dickerson and Evans does not fulfill. In this they might have taken a leaf from the earlier and deeper contextualizing of mythopoetic concerns from a Protestant perspective by Tolkien's friend C. S. Lewis, who articulated a common "Tao" of concerns related to humanity, community, and the earth in cultures around the world (Christian,

Jewish, Daoist, Hindu, Buddhist), which he described as resisting the seeming triumph of totalitarianism in the first part of World War II in his booklet *The Abolition of Man*. Even given varieties of Christian experience, it would have been worthwhile in a study such as *Ents, Elves, and Eriador* to have explored (if only briefly) the Christian environmental fantasy of Tolkien comparatively in relation to Dostoevsky's "fantastic realism" and the latter's parallel concern with the earth, as well as providing a more nuanced comparison with Lewis's related fantasy in relation to nature.⁶

To sum up again, Dickerson and Evans have done in parts of this book a great work for both Tolkien studies and environmental humanities more generally. It is an enjoyable and intellectually valuable read for its detailed examination of the landscape cultures of Middle-earth and their liminal overlapping of one another. But it is perhaps most valuable in the classroom, not only as a work to which students respond well because of its clearly written environmental focus but even more because it can be used in relation to Curry's book and other writings to engage students with the differences and partial visions of particular scholarly viewpoints. Such limitations apply also to the criticism found in this brief review. That a book does not go far enough is a critic's frequent lament. But that the authors in this case did do some of what they did so well ultimately transcends criticism.

Notes

¹Michael Oleksa, *Alaskan Missionary Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 27–28.

²See Michael Ward, *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C. S. Lewis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

³Science 155 (March 1967). White, in a follow-up essay, however, somewhat emended this position by focusing more particularly on Augustinian Western Christianity (rather than Christian tradition generally) as helping to form "anti-nature" cultural views. Also see Lynn White, "Continuing the Conversation," in *Western Man and Environmental Ethics: Attitudes Toward Nature and Technology*, ed. Ian G. Barbour (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1973), 55–65.

⁴Guy Davenport, *The Geography of the Imagination: Forty Essays by Guy Davenport* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1997).

⁵Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), 43–44.

⁶Dickerson with David O'Hara thankfully do address Lewis's environmental fantasy in their new book in the same series, *Narnia and the Fields of Arbol: The Environmental Vision of C. S. Lewis* (Louisville: University of Kentucky Press, 2008).