

THE JOURNAL OF INKLINGS STUDIES

Author, Title.

Review by Nelson Goering

The Journal of Inklings Studies Vol. 5, No. 1, April 2015

Deborah H. Higgins, *Anglo-Saxon Community in J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings*. Toronto: Oloris Publishing, 2014. 212 pp. ISBN (UK): 978-1940992037.

2014 was an excellent year for those interested in both Tolkien and Old English literature. The highlight of the year was, of course, the publication of Tolkien's translation and commentary of *Beowulf*, but also very welcome was this book-length discussion of Tolkien's literary debt to Anglo-Saxon. Deborah Higgins is to be commended for giving us a very clear, not to mention beautifully produced and illustrated, introduction to this well worked-over field.

Higgins structures her book to highlight certain thematic links between Old English poetic practice (above all that of the *Beowulf* poet) and *The Lord of the Rings* (focusing, though by no means exclusively, on the Riders of Rohan). After a forward by Colin Duriez and a brief introduction, the four central chapters take on, in turn, two of Tolkien's academic essays ('On Fairy Stories' and '*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics'), mead-halls, feasting and social bonds, and cup-bearing women. Within each chapter alternating sections first deal with a

given topic in wide perspective and then attempt to make links with *The Lord of the Rings*. A conclusion, works cited, bibliography (two distinct sections), and an index round out the book.

The sections on Tolkien's essays and Old English poetic culture serve as general introductions to these subjects. Those unfamiliar with Old English literature should find much of value and interest, particularly in the wide-ranging fourth chapter – the longest in the book – which very effectively characterizes the 'comitatus' (the Germanic war-band bound together by bonds of loyalty and gifts of treasure and mead) and the role of feasting in consolidating positive relationships (Higgins has a very Hobbitish interest in food throughout the book). Along with effectively employing some judicious, though occasionally repetitive, quotations from Tacitus, Higgins is to be especially commended in this chapter for keeping historical Anglo-Saxon society distinct from the culture depicted in surviving poetry – a

distinction possibly at the heart of Tolkien's infamous comment in Appendix F denying any close resemblance between the Rohirrim and the Anglo-Saxons – although she does not maintain this distinction carefully elsewhere in the book.

In linking her analysis of Tolkien's essays or of Anglo-Saxon culture to *The Lord of the Rings*, Higgins not infrequently weakens her case somewhat by overstating it. With 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics', for instance, she often says that Tolkien could as well be describing his own work as *Beowulf* (pp. 21, 27, 35). Yet, while Tolkien does indeed use monsters in his fiction, these bear little resemblance to those in *Beowulf* in terms of their structural roles. Nor does Frodo's career much match that of *Beowulf*, whose sharply drawn contrast between youth and old age gives shape to the whole Old English poem.

Many links do hold more weight, such as those concerning feasting, gift-giving, and cup-bearing women. Still, the atmosphere and narrative function of the rushed meal at Edoras before riding out to attack Saruman seems a far cry from the elaborate feasts at Heorot, despite the common elements between the two. And the cup-rituals in *The Lord of the Rings* serve a wider range of purposes than do those in *Beowulf*: these are used in Tolkien most often for the 'cup of parting',

something not strictly paralleled in Old English. It may be mere pedantry to note that most of the 'mead cups' in Tolkien actually hold wine (Galadriel's farewell being the only scene in which mead explicitly features).

Speaking of pedantry, there are a number of philological quibbles one might make (and perhaps should make with regards to a work dealing so heavily with Old English), which I have attempted to quarantine into one paragraph. The attempt to connect the name *Rohan* to the Old English verb *rōwan* 'to row' is unphilological and un-Tolkienian. Furthermore, Old English poetry is quoted in a strange format, with each half-line in its own column instead of being separated by the traditional caesura. Macrons are employed very inconsistently throughout, and three half-lines are left untranslated in the passage on p. 123 (though these are translated on p. 118). In addition, *diernan* is not the citation form of this adjective in Old English and to call the heroic legends the *Beowulf* poet drew upon as 'old Norse traditions' (p. 24) is at best misleading – I do not think that Higgins means to imply acceptance of the controversial idea that the stories in *Beowulf* were brought to England by Vikings. *Éowyn* should perhaps be compared to a Norse *skjaldmær*, which Tolkien's 'shieldmaiden' actually translates, in preference to a Valkyrie, *valkyrja* (p.

136). Finally, two more general corrections might also be noted: the venerable Bede wrote his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* c. 726, not 627 (p. 49), and Tolkien was professor of Anglo-Saxon at Pembroke, with his later post at Merton being in English Language and Literature (p. 32).

Pedantry aside, I suspect that many in the Tolkien community will enjoy this book, and it should serve as a clear and

engaging guide to the Anglo-Saxon poetic world, undoubtedly a foreign country for many of Tolkien's readers. Many may find it fruitful to read Higgens's book in conjunction with Tolkien's new translation of *Beowulf*, for which it can stand as a sort of contextualizing primer. I suspect that Higgens would consider her job well done if she helps lead new readers to this greatest work of Old English literature, which she, like Tolkien, clearly loves.

Nelson Goering
University of Oxford