

MIDDLE AMERICA MEETS MIDDLE-EARTH



American Discussion and Readership of J. R. R. Tolkien's
The Lord of the Rings, 1965–1969

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At one point during a 1997 episode of the NBC sitcom *Friends*, a conversation among the three male principals alludes to Gandalf, a character from J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Two of the men are surprised that the third has never heard of the character. "Didn't you read *Lord of the Rings* in high school?" one asks. To which the third responds, "No, I had sex in high school."¹

This exchange illustrates several interesting aspects of the popular attitude toward Tolkien's work. One is the simple fact that Tolkien is popular at all. *Friends* epitomized mainstream American television. The show's enduring popularity derived at least in part, over its long run, from not surprising its viewers; its pop culture references could be expected to be just that, recognizable parts of the popular culture. And yet widespread recognition of *The Lord of the Rings* could not always have been assumed. Since its publication in the mid-1950s, *The Lord of the Rings* has provoked a wide variety of reactions. A number of reasons for this exist: the book's

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length and ambition, its strange combination of extreme conservatism and mythic recasting of modern dilemmas, its downright peculiarity of content. Additionally, the book is unusual not just in terms of content, but physically as well, with its tripartite division and extensive scholarly apparatus.² For the average reader—and to the surprise of many observers who did not anticipate the sort of mainstream popularity *The Lord of the Rings* has subsequently attracted—these features have seldom proved particularly problematic. The book has, in fact, remained spectacularly and perennially popular.³ But while Tolkien's popularity is truly a global phenomenon, readers in the United States have always especially welcomed his fiction. Considering that Tolkien was extremely *English* (in any sense of the word) and never visited this country, the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* here does, in itself, constitute an interesting fact.

As Tolkien's bibliographer Wayne Hammond has noted, "even with an audience somewhere in the future, as Tolkien hoped, he did not tailor his work for anyone but himself, or for a select audience only: his son Christopher, and C. S. Lewis, both close to him in blood or sentiment."⁴ As a friend of Lewis's who was also acquainted with Tolkien later commented, neither was "writing to be avant-garde ... They merely wrote the sort of books that they liked which turns out to be the sort of books that many other people like."⁵ This unexpected coincidence of taste proves to be one of the most outstanding facts of the reception for *The Lord of the Rings*. But while the passage of time verified the accuracy of this statement, from the perspective of 1954, a book written to amuse Tolkien and his cronies—and even some of these, "the Inklings," demonstrated open hostility to the text—would hardly seem to promise big sales beyond Oxford, or perhaps even beyond Lewis's sitting room in Magdalen College. "Indeed, the hulking *Rings* saga ... looked at first like a sort of art-house anomaly."⁶

A second telling insight gleaned from *Friends* is the assumption that one reads *The Lord of the Rings* "in high school." Clearly, the perceived audience for Tolkien's work is young. However, this association of the book with a youthful readership has not always been self-evident. Although Tolkien began *The Lord of the Rings* as a sequel to his popular children's book, *The Hobbit*, he stated unequivocally that *The Lord of the Rings* was most certainly not written for children. As Sir Stanley Unwin (chairman of Tolkien's British publisher, George Allen & Unwin) later recalled, his firm was "longing for a sequel [after the success of *The Hobbit*], but when [the publisher] learnt that it was a work of enormous length, primarily intended for adults, upon which Tolkien had been engaged for over twenty years, [some staff were] rather aghast."⁷ Instead of a long-anticipated continuation of *The Hobbit*, written in similar style and clearly targeted at children, it was immediately apparent that something else altogether had

arrived at the Allen & Unwin offices in Ruskin House, Museum Street. Describing his new work in a letter to Unwin, Tolkien admitted that in response to requests for a "sequel" he had produced a book that could "not be regarded as such in any practical sense, or in the matter of atmosphere, tone, or audience addressed."⁸ Rather than being a second *Hobbit*, it was a typescript spectacularly totaling something like half a million words in length, unabashedly, willfully archaic in style, and thematically fixated on sacrifice and loss.

The surprise with which his publishers first viewed the book can be guessed at. *The Lord of the Rings* is, quite simply, unique. And long. Allen & Unwin was forced to make a crucial assessment: would anyone read it, or, more to the point, would anyone *pay* to read it? Similar doubts plagued Houghton Mifflin, the American publisher of *The Hobbit* to which *The Lord of the Rings* was offered.⁹ After some hesitation, Allen & Unwin agreed to publish it "as a prestige book,"¹⁰ with the understanding that this might result in "a loss of as much as £1,000."¹¹ While at the time these assumptions might have seemed reasonable, it is fascinating, now, to consider how entirely mistaken a view Tolkien's British publishers took of the book. *The Lord of the Rings* has frequently generated outright hostility from literary tastemakers (in Britain, in particular), but has enjoyed fabulous popular success. The question to be addressed concerns who would make the book a success. After reading a draft of Book I in 1947, Stanley Unwin's son Rayner had reported to his father: "Quite honestly, I don't know who is expected to read it: children will miss something of it, but if grown ups will not feel infra dig to read it many will undoubtedly enjoy themselves."¹² Tolkien's original audience of friends and intimates was eccentric, perhaps, or naive (or, in the famously less charitable estimation of Edmund Wilson, composed of "certain people" possessed of "a lifelong appetite for juvenile trash,")¹³ but it was not necessarily perceived to be youthful by the reckoning of the calendar. In addition to Lewis, a colossal but peculiarly marginalized figure in Oxford during the first half of the twentieth century, W. H. Auden was an early champion of the published book. In fact, an early American review related how Tolkien's "work [was] much admired by certain critics who have always practiced a highly conscious and proud intellectualism."¹⁴

With unexpected suddenness, however, these proud intellectuals were swept away before a tide of young readers, and have seldom been heard from again. From 1965 onward, and during a time when the focus of American culture generally became increasingly fixed on youth, masses of college-aged readers swelled the ranks of, and ultimately became entirely identified with, Tolkien's audience. Indeed, both the book's immense popularity and the association of *The Lord of the Rings* with young adults stem from a period during which it was frequently mentioned alongside the latter

stages of Beatlemania and the incipience of hallucinogenic culture. After a decade of modest success on both sides of the Atlantic, events in the United States during 1965 permanently altered the American public's awareness of Tolkien and *The Lord of the Rings*, when Ace Books took advantage of what Tolkien's biographer termed "the confused state of American copyright law at that time" to publish a mass-market paperback edition of the book without its author's knowledge or consent. While to Tolkien and his authorized publishers this was an act of piracy, Ace based its actions on the assumption that *The Lord of the Rings* had entered the American public domain for technical reasons. As the courts ultimately ruled in 1992, this was not in fact the case.¹⁵ But from the confused vantage of 1965, this was not apparent to any of the parties vitally interested in the outcome.

Because the subsequent history of *The Lord of the Rings* is so directly connected to its legal copyright status, the issue merits discussion at some length. As a result of the idiosyncrasies of American law discussed below, the United States was not signatory to the international Berne Convention,¹⁶ relying instead, to some extent, on bilateral agreements with various other nations and the fact that the desirability of access to the American market forced foreign publishers to adopt a conciliatory attitude toward the tenets of American law. The matter of copyright, seldom the most straightforward of issues, becomes particularly complex when discussing *The Lord of the Rings*. Still, some awareness of the issues, confused as they are, is necessary in order to understand why the book emerged as a popular phenomenon. First, there was the simple fact that its British edition had preceded American publication. Further, the decision by Allen & Unwin to divide the book into three volumes for publication (and that later editions have almost uniformly followed this initial division) additionally complicated matters.¹⁷ And finally, confusion arose because the Universal Copyright Convention was negotiated and eventually ratified almost simultaneously with the initial publication of *The Lord of the Rings*.

To begin, the existence of two distinct hardbound editions, first that of Allen & Unwin in the United Kingdom, followed by Houghton Mifflin's American edition, factored into the eventual confusion about the status of American copyright. Houghton Mifflin was forced to choose between printing the book itself or importing copies printed as part of the Allen & Unwin edition. Under the copyright law in effect during 1954, this decision had far-reaching significance for the duration of the copyright status of any English-language work written by a foreigner and originally published outside the United States. If a publisher imported physical copies of the book, limited copyright protection was obtained by providing a copy to the American Register of Copyrights within six months of publication, with an

application for *ad interim* copyright. The term of *ad interim* copyright was five years (extended as of 1949 by 63 Statute 154). To obtain full American copyright, the American publisher was required to print the book in the United States before this five year period ended.

In contrast to mere *ad interim* protection, full duration “American copy right in a British book could only be secured ... by its complete manufacture in the States,” as Stanley Unwin correctly observed in his standard guide to British publishing.¹⁸ And Section 16 of Title 17 of the United States Code was very specific about what constituted complete manufacture: copies

shall be printed from type set within the limits of the United States, either by hand or by the aid of any kind of typesetting machine, or from plates made within the limits of the United States from type set therein, or, if text be produced by lithographic process, or photoengraving process, then by a process wholly performed within the limits of the United States, and the printing of the text and binding of the said book shall be performed within the limits of the United States. (17 U.S.C. §16, 1952)

This so-called manufacturing clause resulted “from the fact that in 1891, the printing-trades unions succeeded in convincing the Congress of the United States that their livelihood might be endangered by the importation of English-language books produced in foreign countries by labor receiving lower wage rates.”¹⁹ Until the exacting conditions of the manufacturing clause were met, a publisher that imported “up to the number of fifteen hundred copies of each such book” was restricted to five-year *ad interim* status (17 U.S.C. §16, 1952).

Publishers were well aware of these restrictions. Writing of the challenges of preserving copyrights for British books sold in the United States, Unwin noted that, “irrespective of other considerations, the British publisher naturally endeavours to arrange for separate printing in the USA because that gives a book the best chance [by satisfying the manufacturing clause]; but the number of new books so printed ... is exceedingly small.” Instead, a British publisher more typically provided its American counterpart with printing plates or “an edition in sheets or bound copies with the American publisher’s imprint.” While some American houses of the period would “seldom, if ever, take a book if they [did] not feel it [was] worth while to print it [themselves],”²⁰ *The Lord of the Rings*, as shall be discussed below, was first published in the United States in the form of sheets printed for Allen & Unwin in Britain, but imported and cased by Houghton Mifflin in the United States. While this common method of publishing did not preserve American copyright for a British title over the long term, the arrangement

of an American edition did allow for immediate and exclusive distribution within the United States for the five years during which *ad interim* protection persisted. For the common run of books, a potential lapse of copyright after five years did not prove problematic for publishers simply because the value of the copyright did not extend beyond five years. But if a book did demonstrate any kind of enduring value to the backlist, copyright for the whole term provided by American law (a renewable twenty-eight years under the amended 1909 copyright act) could be acquired by adhering to the requirements of the manufacturing clause.

Houghton Mifflin published the three volumes of *The Lord of the Rings*—*The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers*, and *The Return of the King*—on 21 October 1954, 21 April 1955, and 5 January 1956, respectively. To a casual observer, however, Houghton Mifflin's relationship to the book might have appeared more as that of distributor than that of publisher. From printing to printing, a bewildering series of changes and inconsistencies appeared in the preliminary contents of each of the volumes. Some copies of the first edition bore an Allen & Unwin publisher's device ("St. George and the Dragon") on the half-title page, and at least some copies only (and obviously) featured a Houghton Mifflin title page attached to the stub of a cancelled leaf (presumably an original Allen & Unwin title). All copies for nearly a decade clearly stated that they were "printed in Great Britain" on the verso of the title leaf, while the title pages of copies printed around 1960 carried the imprints of both Allen & Unwin and Houghton Mifflin. Still, as noted above, the fact that the sheets of the book had been printed in England for Allen & Unwin did not constitute an unusual arrangement. "The importation of 'editions,' whether forming part of the English edition or separately printed, is the method adopted by American publishers in cases where a large sale is improbable."²¹ As has been mentioned in passing, the decision even to publish *The Lord of the Rings* was not made blithely by Houghton Mifflin; that it anticipated an eventual blockbuster seems extremely unlikely. Consequently, Tolkien's American publisher was following conventional wisdom in not printing the book itself. The impact that this decision potentially had on the integrity of Tolkien's American copyright, however, was substantial.

Houghton Mifflin duly registered *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *The Two Towers* for *ad interim* protection based on those volumes' original publication in the United Kingdom by Allen & Unwin.²² Hence the author's and publishers' exclusive rights to the first two volumes of the book would initially have appeared indisputable for five years from the date of British publication at the very least. For reasons that are not immediately apparent, however, Houghton Mifflin did not register the third volume, *The Return of the King*, for *ad interim* copyright.²³ It is possible, of course, that this omission was a mere oversight, although this seems unlikely. It is also

possible that Houghton Mifflin consciously chose not to register the third volume for *ad interim* copyright simply because, with its rights assured for the first two-thirds of the story, it felt that there was little risk in allowing the final third, which could in no way stand alone as a work of fiction, to go unprotected. Or finally, and most likely, Houghton Mifflin might have feared that legally it could not do so.

According to Wayne Hammond's *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Descriptive Bibliography*, the first Houghton Mifflin impression of the first volume included 1,500 sets, the second volume tallied 1,000,²⁴ while the order for the third, presumably enlarged as a readership had worked its way through the first two books and was eager for the delayed conclusion to the story, totaled 5,000 sets of unbound sheets.²⁵ This final total, which from the outset clearly exceeded the terms of the manufacturing clause delineated above, offers the most likely explanation for the fact that the third volume was not registered for copyright. Moreover, while exact sales figures are unavailable, the first two volumes were generally well received by the press and apparently sold briskly. *The Fellowship of the Ring* was reprinted in December 1954, again the next month, and again for a third time in November 1955, all before *The Return of the King* was published in the United States. Similarly, *The Two Towers* was reprinted twice during the same period. So while Hammond does not explicitly discuss later printings, it would appear certain that Houghton Mifflin must have imported more copies of the first two volumes before, or perhaps simultaneously with, the sheets for *The Return of the King* (it is otherwise difficult to explain an initial issue of 5,000 copies of the third volume).

Almost certainly, then, Houghton Mifflin had exceeded the protectionist limits established by Title 17 with respect to each component volume as early as 1956. Moreover, Houghton Mifflin also failed to set and print the book at its own Riverside Press within five years (the initial term of *ad interim* copyright) of publication.²⁶ But with what theoretical (at this point) result? The copyright authority Melville Nimmer clarified matters thus: "the Copyright Act is unclear as to whether failure to comply with the manufacturing clause results in a forfeiture of copyright, or merely renders nonprotectible those particular copies which were not manufactured in the prescribed manner." On the surface, it is difficult to distinguish between these two alternatives. The fact that at least some copies of a work could, with impunity, be reproduced, distributed, or otherwise manipulated by another party without regard for the copyright holder's normal exclusive rights would be of small comfort to the owner of that copyright. Regardless, Nimmer argues that the Copyright Office of the United States did in effect consider that a failure to adhere to the letter of the manufacturing clause resulted in forfeiture of copyright, to the extent that it considered "that with

respect to works eligible for *ad interim* protection, no American copyright [was] available unless deposit and American manufacture and publication occur[red] within the respective 6 months and five year periods prescribed for *ad interim* copyright.”²⁷

Another complication attached to the American copyright status of *The Lord of the Rings* involved a central feature of traditional American copyright law, the inclusion of formal copyright “notice” in copies of the work. So important was this concept to American law that the United States demanded a provision requiring inclusion of notice as a condition for its joining the Universal Copyright Convention. The significance of notice derived from the fact that, until the United States joined the Berne Convention in 1989, copyright terms under American law were fixed to a period originating on the date a work was initially published. Hence provision of copyright notice not only revealed who owned rights to a specific work, but also indicated their duration. At the time *The Lord of the Rings* was published, this period consisted of twenty-six years, renewable for an additional twenty-six more. In most other nations, however, copyrights existed for a term encompassing a set number of years beyond the life of the author, which obviously could not, in the case of living authors, be readily determined at the time of publication. As a consequence, notice was uniquely important to American law, to the extent that Stanley Unwin believed that “the American principle” was “that everything is in the *domaine public* unless there is a notice to the contrary.”²⁸

This was, in fact, not entirely the case. Generally, as Nimmer suggested, American courts were reluctant to declare copyrights entirely void on technical grounds. And specifically pertinent to Houghton Mifflin’s edition of Tolkien’s work, the version of the United States Code that was in force in 1956 seems to excuse books under “ad interim protection” from carrying notice (17 U.S.C. §10, 1952). However, to reiterate the apparently relevant (and contradictory) section of law incorporating the manufacturing clause, the demand for domestic production is excused for “copies of books ... of foreign origin, in the English language, imported into the United States within five years after first publication in a foreign state or nation up to the number of fifteen hundred copies of each such book ... *if said copies shall contain notice of copyright* in accordance with” the rest of Title 17 (17 U.S.C. §16, 1952, emphasis added). As Nimmer noted with some understatement, “the notice requirement for works eligible for *ad interim* copyright is most obscure under the language of the Act,” continuing on to analyze the “seemingly contradictory provisions” between Sections 10 and 16 before, in essence, shrugging and noting that whatever the intention of the law, “the Copyright Office appears to have concluded that notice is not required on *ad interim* works.”²⁹ But clearly there was the perception

among some in publishing—in this case, Tolkien's British publisher—that notice was absolutely essential.

Here, once again, Houghton Mifflin—rather surprisingly—allowed doubt over the American copyright to *The Lord of the Rings* to develop. The first printings of both *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *The Two Towers* carry a copyright statement that fulfilled the requirements of American law: "Copyright, 1954, by J. R. R. Tolkien." The third volume, however, was issued in the United States without a statement of copyright ownership, a fact that further suggests that Houghton Mifflin was justifiably concerned from the time that it published *The Return of the King* in the United States that the book was not legally protected. But in the case of immediate reprintings of the first two volumes, they too were printed without notice after their first publication. Approximately through the end of the 1950s, each of the volumes appears to have been consistently reprinted without copyright notice; it is a fact that Houghton Mifflin, regardless of how many copies of the book it finally imported from Allen & Unwin, sold many copies of the first edition in the United States with no copyright notice whatsoever.³⁰ Once again, this appears to signal that Houghton Mifflin's concerns about exceeding the importation limits stated in the manufacturing clause led the publisher to tread very lightly when asserting Tolkien's copyright in the United States.

One other element affecting contemporary copyright law further clouded the legitimacy of American copyright in *The Lord of the Rings*. This was the ongoing negotiation of the Universal Copyright Convention (UCC), which began in 1947 and culminated in thirty-six countries (including the United States and the United Kingdom) signing the convention on 6 September 1952. In Unwin's appraisal, the UCC was largely intended "to secure the adherence of the USA and various South American countries" to international copyright.³¹ In exchange for winning a requirement for standard copyright notice (the symbol © along with the name of the author or copyright holder and date of original publication), "the United States agreed to modify its manufacturing clause and make it inapplicable to nationals of other contracting countries."³² Hence, under the convention, importation of printed sheets, or even of complete books bound abroad, would no longer affect the validity of a book's American copyright as long as copies of the book carried the standard copyright notice.

The ratified treaty was not, however, signed by President Eisenhower until 5 November 1954, and only took effect in the United States (simultaneously with the enabling legislation) on 16 September 1955, after a twelfth signatory (Monaco) officially submitted its "instrument of ratification" with UNESCO in Geneva.³³ In the United Kingdom, however, the convention did not take effect until 1 June 1957 (the "Copyright Act" of 1956). These

dates become relevant when one considers the economic decision made by Allen & Unwin, and followed by Houghton Mifflin, to publish *The Lord of the Rings* in three volumes. Because *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *The Two Towers* were published in both Britain and the United States before the UCC took effect in either country, there appeared to be no reason to doubt its immediate inapplicability to those volumes. *The Return of the King*, meanwhile, was not published in the United States until after the convention had taken effect there, yet before its adoption under British law. Because the convention only operated mutually among the group of ratifying nations, the third volume of *The Lord of the Rings* still appeared to fall under the former version of American copyright law, and the original manufacturing clause still applied.

Still, there was, as is perhaps apparent at this stage of the discussion, ample room for confusion regarding each of the volumes. During 1955, most publishers would have been well aware that the provisions of the Universal Copyright Convention had already been accepted, even though they were not yet enforceable as law, before the first two volumes of Tolkien's book were published. However, one final twist to the law did, in the fullness of time, prove significant. The legislation that enabled adherence to the convention in the United States, Public Law 843 of the 83rd Congress, added a retroactivity clause to Section 9 of Title 17. Exactly what this meant for *The Lord of the Rings*, beneath its thorny tangle of verbiage and apparent self-contradiction, was not immediately apparent, but did in fact prove central when tested in court in the 1992 case mentioned above.

From the foregoing discussion of copyright law, it is apparent that the legal copyright status of *The Lord of the Rings* appeared confused from the perspective of 1965. In summation, the potential challenges to Houghton Mifflin's copyright of *The Lord of the Rings* rested on the interrelated issues of the publisher's importation of more than 1,500 copies of sheets printed in England, its failure to establish a distinct American edition of the book within five years, and its neglect (or caution) in providing notice of copyright consistently. Despite later commentators' frequent and careless assertions to the contrary, however, the argument concerning whether Houghton Mifflin had in fact surrendered Tolkien's exclusive rights was not actually introduced in the courts at this time. Of greater significance for the subsequent history of *The Lord of the Rings*, the conflict instead played out in the far more public venue of the American media. Had Houghton Mifflin been certain that *The Lord of the Rings* was still impenetrably copyrighted when a rival edition appeared, it seems likely that it would immediately have resorted to legal action. Hence it can reasonably be conjectured that Houghton Mifflin's hesitation to seek redress from the courts arose from its

own suspicions that it lacked legal protection. Rayner Unwin later supported this assertion, recalling that “Houghton Mifflin were not confident that they could enjoin Ace Books for breach of copyright, and from our general understanding of this complicated and untested branch of American law we agreed.”³⁴ Houghton Mifflin’s hesitation unexpectedly benefited Tolkien and his publishers in the long term.

In consequence, as a result of the methods by which Tolkien’s American publishers had introduced *The Lord of the Rings*, it was conceivable to all parties in 1965—and for many years afterward—that Houghton Mifflin had technically, if not intentionally, compromised its “perfect” copyright.³⁵ The *presumed* result was that the book might have entered the public domain. According to Hammond’s *Bibliography*, Allen & Unwin and Houghton Mifflin “were already aware that that a challenge could be made to [Tolkien’s] American copyrights. They thought it unlikely that any reputable publisher would take advantage, but in early 1965 began to take steps to secure U.S. copyright beyond question” by asking Tolkien to revise the text and provide new material that could be copyrighted as a new edition. Houghton Mifflin also began evaluating the possibility of authorizing a reprint in paperback.

It is, quite frankly, difficult to determine exactly how desirable a prize *The Lord of the Rings* would have appeared to an interloper at this juncture. Assessments of its success in boards vary widely. Perry Bramlett (the accuracy of whose work is inconsistent) notes that “the book continued to win approval and sold well (but not overwhelmingly) in hardcover.” In a history of the paperback in the United States, Kenneth Davis stated simply that “the hardcover editions had not sold well.” Ian Ballantine of Ballantine Books (whose direct involvement in subsequent events might have biased his recollections) asserted that his company “bid for Tolkien a couple of years before a paperback edition was published, but Houghton Mifflin wasn’t interested. The book was selling too well.” A recent account has it thus: “From 1954 to 1965, U.S. sales were okay, but miles away from the Heroic Plateau of Blockbuster. ‘Before the paperback came out, it probably sold in [the United States] maybe, *maybe* 15,000 copies,’” [Houghton Mifflin’s “Tolkien Projects Director” Clay] Harper said. “‘Not many. *The Hobbit* had been pretty successful, but *The Lord of the Rings* as a hardcover was a pretty big beast to tackle.’”³⁶ However actively the book sold, it must in any case have been sufficient to attract attention within the trade.

It was stated above that a casual observer might have questioned Houghton Mifflin’s proprietary rights to *The Lord of the Rings*. One such observer, with a more than casual interest, was Donald A. Wollheim, head editor at the well-known publisher of speculative fiction, Ace Books. Wollheim had a long history of involvement with science fiction (“fantasy” was yet to be established generically). He had done editorial work for early pulps and had

edited what was purportedly “the first science fiction paperback (Pocket Books, 1943), *The Pocket Book of Science Fiction*.”³⁷ In an obscure typescript science fiction fanzine called *Lighthouse*, Wollheim wrote in 1965 that he “had known from the moment [he had] first bought a copy of the Houghton Mifflin edition” that “the Tolkien saga had never been copyright in the United States.”³⁸ From the narrative that follows it is apparent that Wollheim’s grasp of copyright law was incomplete, but his doubts concerning the legal status of *The Lord of the Rings* induced Ace to publish its own paperback edition in a large run before Houghton Mifflin could conclude binding copyright. While Houghton Mifflin’s hardbound now sold at \$5.95 a volume, the new Ace edition, eschewing payment of royalties to Houghton Mifflin and, more significantly, to Tolkien,³⁹ cost only seventy-five cents. With little fanfare Ace issued 150,000 copies of *The Fellowship of the Ring* in the spring of 1965; it followed in July with *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King* in the same quantities.

As Wayne Hammond and others have observed, Ace produced a somewhat sloppy book. While it reset Tolkien’s texts, Ace simply photoreproduced the appendices from the Houghton Mifflin edition, with the result that page references referred to the original hardbound text rather than to the Ace edition. Ace also reprinted from Houghton Mifflin both the promise of an index of names in the first volume and the apology in the third for its omission. Still, the primary-colored wrappers were eye-catching and vaguely suggestive of the books’ content, and the Ace edition immediately became “the hottest-selling item in U.S. campus bookstores.”⁴⁰ From the perspective of Tolkien and his publishers, however, the publication of the Ace edition was tantamount to piracy; they quickly “authorized” Ballantine Books to issue the book in paperback containing new revisions and prefaces from the author.⁴¹

Houghton Mifflin had long been affiliated closely with Ballantine Books. Ian Ballantine, who had worked for Penguin and had more recently directed Bantam Books before a forced departure in 1952, founded his eponymous imprint in September of that year as “a new company that would simultaneously publish hardcover and paperback editions of selected books. ... The Ballantine notion was to publish a hardcover edition for the bookstore trade that would gain review attention while a paperback edition would reach the mass market.”⁴² From the beginning of this venture, Houghton Mifflin acted as one of Ballantine’s key supporters and partners, and the two had enjoyed remarkable success with Cameron Hawley’s *Executive Suite* in 1952.⁴³ During the first ten years of Ballantine Books’ existence, Houghton Mifflin had simultaneously published twenty-one of its partner’s titles in boards, far more than any other publishing house (apart from Ballantine’s own hardcover issues).⁴⁴ When Ballantine had faced a crisis of capital, Houghton Mifflin purchased a 25 percent share in the company.

While Ballantine might not have carried the clout of the truly pervasive mass-market publishers, it had nevertheless become a notably successful firm, and one that served an audience that Houghton Mifflin necessarily desired to reach. Where Houghton Mifflin's respectability had been instrumental to *The Lord of the Rings* having received attention on the book pages a decade earlier, what Tolkien needed now was a publisher that could put a great number of books in a great number of outlets—and quickly. Ballantine had long enjoyed some measure of appeal to youth markets and to the nascent counterculture, publishing proto-environmental works and enjoying an early success with the *Mad Reader* (1954), which published selections from the iconoclastic *Mad Magazine* in book form.⁴⁵ But most important, “very quickly, the genre that became almost synonymous with Ballantine Books was science fiction.”⁴⁶ Hence by the time that Houghton Mifflin felt compelled to authorize a paperback version of *The Lord of the Rings*, Ballantine had become the natural choice to publish the mass-market edition. In October 1965, Ballantine's edition of *The Lord of the Rings* was published at ninety-five cents per volume, notably “with heavy promotion in the college market.”⁴⁷

As a *Publishers Weekly* profile about Ian Ballantine later recalled the situation, “a panicked Houghton Mifflin called Ballantine and asked what to do. Ballantine proceeded to publish an authorized version and [in Ballantine's words] ‘won because [it] did right [by working with the author and his publishers].’”⁴⁸ While Tolkien undertook a personal letter-writing campaign, advising his (by now numerous) American correspondents that Ace was operating entirely independently of his interests,⁴⁹ “Ian Ballantine picked up the ball and ran with it, as he was prone to do when something caught his fancy. In a grassroots publicity campaign, Ballantine produced maps of Middle-earth like travel posters, which said, ‘Come to Middle-earth.’”⁵⁰ Wollheim, who had been crowing about having received congratulations from rival publishers on his achievement of “the publishing coup of the year,”⁵¹ rapidly lost some of his bluster. The Ballantine paperback, after all, clearly carried Tolkien's endorsement, was technically more complete, and carried a copyright notice fulfilling the requirements of American law, the Universal Copyright Convention, and the Berne Convention.⁵² Rather unusually, the news of the conflict left the book pages and became *news* in earnest.

One of the first notices of the fracas appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* on 15 August 1965. The article mentioned the controversy as one of “about half a dozen” similar cases, and initiated a discussion of the conflict, advantageous to Tolkien, based on ethical grounds. Not only did the article quote in full Tolkien's statement, which would be printed on the back cover of the forthcoming Ballantine edition—“This paperback edition, and no other, has been published with my consent and co-operation. Those who approve of

courtesy (at least) to living authors will purchase it, and no other”⁵³—but it also quoted the statement that Houghton Mifflin sent to bookshops, which expressed the publisher’s expectation “that booksellers will prefer to sell authorized, royalty-paying editions if they exist.” Similar items appeared in the *Chicago Daily News* (7 August 1965) and the *National Observer* (30 August 1965), and the story generally “made national headlines in the United States.”⁵⁴

By fall, the *Saturday Review* (2 October 1965) had picked up the story as an example of the flaws in American copyright law, which threw copyright into question and failed to ensure payment of royalties to living authors who were first published abroad. This article elicited two responses on the letters page (23 October 1965), one from an angry supporter of Tolkien’s copyright, and the other from Donald Wollheim of Ace. The tone of Wollheim’s letter was entirely unrepentant, but he did allow that Ace was willing to pay “the author an honorarium for his work.” During October, copies of the authorized Ballantine edition of *The Lord of the Rings* appeared in bookshops and began to triumph in the marketplace even as bad publicity afflicted the Ace edition. By 14 March 1966, *Publishers Weekly* could report that things had gone badly enough for Ace that, in the words of its spokesman, it had arranged to pay “full royalties” to Tolkien (but not to Houghton Mifflin), and a Ballantine representative stated how once “the present stock of the Ace edition [was] exhausted, Ace [would] not be permitted to reprint without the consent of the author.” As Rayner Unwin (of Allen & Unwin) noted in a published response, it was “difficult to conceive such permission ever being possible.”⁵⁵

The controversy over the Ace edition influenced the history of *The Lord of the Rings* substantially. The most significant result, clearly, was the extent to which it focused attention on the book. According to Houghton Mifflin’s current Tolkien specialist, “The brouhaha over the whole thing helped bring it to the attention of a wider reading public that hadn’t stumbled upon it already, and it made for 100 percent name recognition among booksellers.”⁵⁶ *The Lord of the Rings* had already been in print for ten years by 1965, and it is extremely unlikely that the simple event of its publication in wraps would have generated anything like the attention that arose from the debate. An oft-quoted letter from Tolkien (dated 30 October 1965) illustrates his recognition of this fact: “I am getting such an advertisement from the rumpus that I expect my ‘authorized’ paper-back will in fact sell more copies than it would, if there had been no trouble or competition.”⁵⁷ Tolkien appears to have been right. The *New York Times* reported in its obituary of Tolkien that “a quarter of a million copies of the trilogy were sold in ten months.”⁵⁸ It took nearly a year for the Ballantine edition of *The Lord of the Rings* to appear on the *New York Times*’ recently introduced list of Paperback Bestsellers, but on 4 September 1966 it entered

the chart at number 3, and had climbed to the top position on 4 December, where it spent eight weeks. In total, *The Lord of the Rings* spent forty-nine weeks on the list, which ranked only five titles at that time. This total also includes a brief appearance a full eight years later (after the list had expanded to ten books), which suggests that the book was never truly far from being a bestseller.⁵⁹

But even beyond the fact that the conflict created publicity for the book, it is uncertain when *The Lord of the Rings* would have appeared in an affordable paperback edition without the impetus provided by Ace. When approached about licensing a UK paperback of *The Hobbit* as recently as December 1960, Tolkien had expressed his preference not “to cheapen the old Hobbit” by issuing the book in a softbound edition.⁶⁰ Indeed, Wollheim remained insistent that, in the final analysis, the Ace edition benefited both the reading public and Tolkien by placing the work of the latter in the hands of the former. As the initial conflict reached a pitch, Wollheim argued publicly that “if Ace Books had not published these works in soft covers ... there would not now or ever have been any other low-priced editions.”⁶¹ Two years later Ace placed an advertisement in number 24 of the *Tolkien Journal* (itself clearly a product of the mania for Tolkien that followed paperback publication) congratulating Tolkien on his seventy-fifth birthday, which reiterated that Ace had produced “the first mass breakthrough effort to bring a magnificent work to its eagerly waiting mass audience.” Later, in his 1971 book discussing contemporary science fiction, Wollheim claimed yet again that he was “guilty of having lit the spark that started the explosion for Tolkien, in so far as it was the [Ace] editions ... that first put Tolkien on the newsstands in low-priced paperback editions.”⁶² The language employed is instructive. Wollheim understood the significance of *mass* publishing. And where neither Tolkien nor his authorized publishers were prepared to venture, Wollheim speculated that an enormous, unsuspected audience would welcome *The Lord of the Rings*. Events proved him right. A sense of having suffered an injustice induced the desire in Tolkien to authorize a paperback reprint; an unofficial paperback edition selling well, Tolkien recognized the *necessity* of issuing a rival, comparably priced edition. The controversy with Ace Books, then, inadvertently “democratized” the book through both increased public awareness of *The Lord of the Rings* and the manufacture of an abundance of inexpensive pocket book copies.⁶³ As the publishing world was increasingly coming to recognize, paperback publication potentially revolutionized the interaction of readers with texts.⁶⁴

To the extent that mass-market softbound books have since achieved ubiquity, it is odd to consider that paperbacks were greeted with suspicion, even controversy, during the first decade after *The Lord of the Rings* was

published. In the preface to *Two-Bit Culture*, a book describing the role of softbound books in the United States, Kenneth Davis notes that “to many people, the paperback book has always been little more than second-rate trash.” As mentioned above, Tolkien appears to have thought of soft cover books as “cheap.” And yet the popularity of the paperback format was obviously increasing. The historian of publishing John Tebbel began his 1964 “pocket history” of softcovers by mentioning the latest sales figures for the industry: in 1963, “there were 277 publishers producing a total of 300 million paperbacks sold,” which, at roughly 10 percent of the total book market, was a record high.⁶⁵ Partly this was due to increasing respectability. As lurid wrappers enclosing questionable content began to yield the market to higher quality paperback originals and trade reprints, paperbacks began to lose their taint of soft-covered turpitude. The *New York Times* initiated its first paperback bestsellers list on 5 December 1965.⁶⁶ Other indications of the increasing prevalence of pocket books also appeared. For example, the 26 February 1967 “Book Week” supplement of the *Washington Post* (which featured a cover story about Tolkien) included an advertisement for the current issue of *Paperbound Books in Print*, directly aimed at those who felt “overwhelmed by the profusion of paperbacks.”

The tentative steps toward adoption of popular paperbacks for school use—especially for “free reading” periods—further enhanced their status.⁶⁷ And inevitably, the first generation that was likely to have been exposed to paperbacks in school was accustomed to reading paperbacks when it arrived in college. “The college field,” Tebbel enthused in 1964, “is booming.” Partly this was simply a matter of utility: pocket books were affordable and portable. But it was also a matter of design. “Publishers have been diligently developing the 1,800 college stores as a distinct market in themselves.”⁶⁸ The results were apparent. “College reading and the college audience soon became linked to the paperback. The notion of ‘cult books’ and ‘cult writers’ entered the realm of publishing.”⁶⁹ In his book about “60s reading and writing,” *Scriptures for a Generation*, Philip D. Beidler asserts that such a “scripture” would necessarily be paperback, “in its inexpensiveness and availability, its widespread dissemination especially among the young.”⁷⁰ It was into this environment that tens of thousands of copies of *The Lord of the Rings* were suddenly introduced in the second half of 1965.

Association of *The Lord of the Rings* with paperback format soon formed a central feature of the book’s public identity. As a general reflection on the importance of the paperback in the United States, Davis cites at length an anonymous child of the 1960s:

As a youngster, I borrowed the Ballantine edition of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* and was promptly transported to Middle-earth. I was

enthralled and proceeded to reread the trilogy at regular intervals. ... Such books as the trilogy cannot be properly savored during the day. No, I saved the trilogy for late-night perusal—something to curl up in bed with. This cannot be comfortably accomplished with a hardcover book. The wave of Tolkien's popularity crested during the late-sixties counterculture and was undoubtedly linked with it, since Tolkien's protagonists embraced idealistic causes and saw them through with perseverance and determination. Truly a myth for the times. A hardcover edition would never have attracted such a following, since it would seem too "Establishment," resembling the much-feared textbooks wielded by stodgy professors.⁷¹

Perhaps the appearance of the authorized Ballantine edition in the 1966 *Annual Paperbound Book Guide for Colleges* (a "selective" Publishers Weekly / Library Journal / Bowker publication) would also have smacked of the Establishment; by then, however, it was really too late. Tolkien and "fantasy" became concretely identified with Ballantine Books.⁷²

Without the sudden public awareness, not only of Tolkien, but of Tolkien in *paperback*, the most notable stage in the public history of *The Lord of the Rings*—the emergence of the book as the center of a popular "cult"—might never have occurred. Reporting on the tail end of the controversy, the *Times* (London) credited the Ace Books edition with "unleash[ing] a Tolkien craze on American university campuses" (12 February 1966). "The Tolkien boom cannot be said to have started on the grand, or cult-object, scale till the Spring of 1965, when the first of the paperback editions hit the market."⁷³ The importance of the flood of soft cover copies of *The Lord of the Rings* should not be underestimated. Not long before either Ace or Ballantine had printed *The Lord of the Rings*, the *New York Times Book Review* (10 January 1965) printed an oddly prophetic article by New York University English professor David Boroff that bemoaned the lack of any "Big Books" capturing the attention of the nation's colleges. A "Big Book" was, by definition, a "ubiquitous paperback," one "available in inexpensive, readily accessible paperbound form." The article describes, among a number of regional "minor cults," the popularity of "J.R. Tolkien" [*sic*] and "his major work, *The Fellowship of the Ring*," which was "not yet available in paperback but should be."⁷⁴ Despite his apparent lack of real familiarity with Tolkien, Boroff's implication that *The Lord of the Rings* represented an impending phenomenon predicted the results of the paperback controversy with uncanny accuracy. Suddenly, with a combined total of more than a million paperback copies of the three volumes of *The Lord of the Rings* in print by the end of 1966, the reach of the book had grown long.

At first, the attention brought by the publishing controversy manifested itself in renewed interest in the books themselves, as evinced by articles in the *New York Times Book Review* (31 October 1965) and the *Wall Street Journal* (2 January 1966). Each article, ostensibly a review of the recently issued Ballantine paperbacks, really was more of an “appreciation.” In the NYTBR review, Gerald Jonas became the first writer to contend publicly that the books admitted, or even demanded, multiple readings. And in an implicit acknowledgment of the most common criticism leveled at *The Lord of the Rings*, Jonas argued that “the only ‘escape’ in Tolkien is to a world where the struggle between Good and Evil is waged more fiercely and openly than our own, where the stakes are at least as great, and where the odds are, if anything, even more perilously balanced.” A more unmistakable foundation for the ensuing discussion of Tolkien’s book could scarcely have appeared at this juncture. For these two perceived elements of Tolkien’s audience—zealous commitment to the book and willingness to surrender to a world “much like our own, as mythical, but no more so” (as Peter Beagle later termed it)—underpinned the public discussion of the book in 1966 and 1967. During these years, Tolkien achieved a level of popularity that neither he nor his publishers nor his advocates and critics had thought possible. In the context of the publishing controversy, one writer noted that “the Tolkien fantasies” remained as yet “not widely known in this country,” but shrewdly predicted that “that situation [was] about to change. ... This war [between the Ace and Ballantine editions] seems fairly certain to make Professor Tolkien a household word.”⁷⁵ He was correct.

The early signs of the incipient Tolkien “cult” were subtle. Nat Hentoff recommended *The Hobbit* and *The Ring Cycle* [sic] (along with such books as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*) among his “Critics’ Choices for Christmas” in *Commonweal* (12 December 1965). Soon afterward, the “Talk of the Town” section of the *New Yorker* described an early meeting of the Tolkien Society of America, “a group dedicated to the discussion and promulgation of ... *The Lord of the Rings*,” which “shows signs of becoming a modern classic” (15 January 1966). With patronizing good humor, the article describes the mostly high-school-aged group’s passion for Tolkien. “‘I was *living* in *The Lord of the Rings* all last year,’” one gushed. “‘It was my world. I wrote my notes in Elvish. Even now, I doodle in Elvish. It’s my means of expression.’” Even the Society’s founder, Dick Plotz, was a high school senior on his way to Harvard.⁷⁶ The appearance of the book in paperback had gained considerable attention during 1965; soon, however, media attention on *The Lord of the Rings* shifted from paperback books to paperback readers, and there was no doubt that the emerging craze for *The Lord of the Rings* would be a youth movement.

The first major article to address “the Hobbit-Forming World of J. R. R. Tolkien” appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* (2 July 1966). Apart from some anecdotal evidence supporting Ian Ballantine’s statement that “‘college kids have managed to get word to each other that this is the thing,’” the piece was really a sort of primer on Middle-earth Studies. Appearing as it did quite early in the public awareness of *The Lord of the Rings*, much of the article concerned itself with summarizing the plots of Tolkien’s books and noting the emergence of what it termed the “Tolkien people.” Soon afterward, *Time* described in a passage in its “Education” section how *The Lord of the Rings*, which had “languished largely unread until it was reprinted ... in two paperback editions,” was “this year’s ‘In’ book” (15 July 1966). One indulgent mother who “bought the trilogy for her freshman daughter” said, “‘Going to college without Tolkien is like going without sneakers.’” A *New York Post* article penned by “Susan” was reprinted in the “Teen Talk” section of the *Los Angeles Times*, headlined “Wacky World of Tolkien Catching on with Youth” (31 August 1966).

For the September 1966 “College Issue” of *Esquire*, Joseph Mathewson wrote a substantial four-page article about “the Hobbit Habit.” Apart from the familiar talk of “Elvish” graffiti in the subways of New York, this piece was the first really to examine both the origins and extent of the “cult.” Tolkien’s popularity began “slowly, with a few copies making the rounds at a handful of colleges. ... There was, at the outset, something cliquish about the reading of Tolkien, a hint of the secret society.”⁷⁷ However, once copies of the books became common, “Tolkien’s remarkable gossip value may [have been] one of the major reasons why his books ... ceased to be the province of cliques—or rather, why they [became] the province of cliques so widely spread as to form a cult.” The *San Francisco Examiner* devoted the cover story of its “This World” magazine supplement to an examination of this cult in December 1966, and other articles followed regularly in the first half of 1967. In January the *New York Times Magazine* offered five pages of heavily illustrated text describing the mania for *The Lord of the Rings*. While this was one of the only articles to appear in the American press that included conversation with Tolkien, the magazine editors apparently found a Berkeley bookshop owner’s characterization of the Tolkien fad—“this is more than a campus craze; it’s like a drug dream”—more eye-catching, and added it as a supertitle. Media attention for the phenomenon culminated with articles in *Life*, *Ladies’ Home Journal*, *America*, *Commentary*, and the *Nation* (which ran two).

The essential feature that marked most of the writing about *The Lord of the Rings* as a “cult object” was the fact that the articles spent very little time (apart from brief synopses) discussing the book at all. During 1966, the press was most interested in describing the simple fact of Tolkien’s

sudden popularity. Very frequently, magazine writers reported the “news” of Tolkien’s displacement of Salinger and Golding (and the contrast was virtually always with these two writers) as “campus favorites.” When actually discussing *The Lord of the Rings* and readers’ ardent response to it, the tone of these pieces was generally mildly condescending. Journalists never tired of describing the “Frodo Lives” lapel buttons and “May the hair on your feet grow ever longer” greetings, and all of the other various trappings that were thought to be endemic to Tolkien fandom.

Of course, endorsement of the “cult”—or belief that it even existed—was not universal. A letter to *Esquire*, referring not only to Mathewson’s lengthy feature article but also to a brief mention elsewhere in *Esquire*’s same college issue that an inability to “get past the first chapter of *The Hobbit*” was a sign of lost youth, complained that “the trends and fads covered in [the] September issue [were] really apparent only on the big campuses. That [left] a hell of a lot of kids who [had] never heard of Tolkien” (November 1966). One of two letters responding to the *Time* article angrily complained that “now, everywhere one turns, gushing overenthusiasts are to be found turning Tolkien into a common cult” (29 July 1966). Similarly, in his article for *Life* (February 24, 1967), Charles Elliott reported that *The Lord of the Rings* was “spoiled” for him now that Tolkien had “become the literary darling of an entire generation of ... students, who have made him a flagrant best-seller.” While one letter writer applauded these sentiments, averring that “a true Tolkien lover would never discuss [*The Lord of the Rings*]” publicly, three others disparaged Elliott (17 March 1967). And finally, there was Tolkien himself, opinionated as ever, who eventually referred to the “deplorable cultus” that had developed around his books. In time, writers in the popular print media began to comment indirectly on the media attention itself; repeated references to *The Lord of the Rings* as something that “everyone now knows,”⁷⁸ for example, demonstrate an awareness that “the latest fad of the nation’s teen-agers” was no longer restricted to campus but had entered the American mainstream.⁷⁹ “The books took off suddenly and became an overnight campus sensation, quickly spreading to larger segments of the mass market.”⁸⁰

Just as sales of the book in paperback began to alter the extent of Tolkien’s audience irreversibly, the author (in all sincerity, it would seem) stated that “nothing has astonished [him] more (and ... [his] publishers) than the welcome given to *The Lord of the Rings*.” That “wonderful people still *buy* the book” was “a constant source of consolation and pleasure.”⁸¹ The answer to the core question confronting Tolkien and his publishers from the beginning—who is the audience for *The Lord of the Rings*?—was becoming objectively less difficult to determine, and had quickly acquired an entirely different cast. Suddenly, sympathy with Tolkien’s intellectual or

artistic bent was no longer prerequisite to joining the book's readership, originally academic and anglophilic. In fact, this new audience was composed of people most patently *unlike* Tolkien by virtually any measure. As a recent account (a 2001 *Entertainment Weekly* teaser to provide context for the release of the first of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* films) put it in trying to approximate Tolkien's befuddlement:

Who *were* these people? They tracked you down, they sent you presents, they asked silly questions. Here Professor Tolkien had spent 12 years on *The Lord of the Rings*, mapping out every mountain and glen of Middle-earth as if he were raising a cathedral in the clouds, and now a throng was passing through his private sanctuary for a gawk. Tourists, TV crews, drug freaks, scholars with their wild-goose theories and pontifications.

Tolkien enjoyed success long enough to become frustrated by the demands it placed on him. Stories about being awakened by transatlantic phone calls placed by young and/or mentally altered Americans to whom the concept of time zones was alien recur again and again in accounts of the effects of popularity on Tolkien. "He felt a responsibility to his readers, and tried to accommodate them as best he could—though surely he could not have imagined such a demanding audience when he wrote his book."⁸²

Referring to his young American audience in the *New York Times Magazine* article, Tolkien noted that "art moves them and they don't know what they've been moved by and they get quite drunk on it. Many young Americans are involved in the stories in a way that I am not."⁸³ An accompanying photograph showed Tolkien looking very English, very tweedy, and every one of his seventy-five years. Certainly, Tolkien's age is of some real interest to this discussion of *The Lord of the Rings* and its readership. Richard Plotz (the teenage founder of the American Tolkien Society) had said that Tolkien in fact looked young for his age when Plotz interviewed his idol for *Seventeen* (January 1967). Perhaps so. But what Tolkien very clearly was *not* was anything like *seventeen*. It is intriguing, really, that the editors of *Seventeen* decided that an interview with (not to put too fine a point on it) an old man would appeal to their audience. What is more intriguing yet is the fact that it almost certainly did. Tolkien, an elderly, devoutly Roman Catholic Oxford professor, would seem to be, on reflection, quite an unlikely hero for the militant college generation of the 1960s. Which raises the question that various commentators attempted to address during the latter stages of discussion of the Tolkien cult: why *were* the youth of the United States so besotted with *The Lord of the Rings*? What

was the source of their “uninhobbed, joyous passion?”⁸⁴ How did the book relate to its rapidly expanding, almost uniformly youthful readership?

The greatest concern over Tolkien’s popularity with students—what with bizarre and hyperbolic descriptions of *The Lord of the Rings* being “as catching as LSD” (*Time*) or rivaling the Beatles in “popular acclaim” (*Commentary*)*—centered on what this popularity said about the young people involved. “Rightly or wrongly, contemporary accounts of [Tolkien’s] sales surge handcuffed it to the collegiate counter-culture.”⁸⁵ *Something* was attracting a large college readership to *The Lord of the Rings*, and the popular media spent considerable energy in the attempt to ascertain *what*. Just as Edmund Wilson and other hostile critics during the period between 1954 and 1956 struggled with how *The Lord of the Rings* fit into their ideas of “literature,” writers in the popular press during 1966 and 1967 tried to ascertain what function the book served for its young readers.⁸⁶ Writing in *Holiday* (June 1966, reprinted in *The Tolkien Reader*), Peter S. Beagle offered one of Tolkien’s better early defenses. With a tacit nod to Holden Caulfield (whom Frodo Baggins was generally said to have supplanted in the affections of college readers), Beagle contended that young people were attracted to Tolkien’s writing because they could “sense the difference between the real and the phony.” Because Tolkien himself was so obviously dedicated to the creation he had “made with love and pride and a little madness,” to enter the world of *The Lord of the Rings* was not to leave “reality” at all. It was, instead, a world no more “mythical” than our own. To visit Middle-earth, he suggested, was simply to view reality from a different angle. The validity of this assertion was, however, continuously debated.

Eventually, the argument over whether *The Lord of the Rings* was merely “escapist” entertainment—and if so, to what extent this served a valuable purpose—formed the crux of the public discussion over the book. Charles Elliott argued in *Life* (24 February 1967) that “*The Lord of the Rings* is innocent. It is even innocent of ideas, which doubtless helps recommend it to those aggressive searchers for sincerity, the opt-out crowd.” In *America*, Raymond Schroth claimed that “Tolkien glories in his irrelevancy,” providing “a treasure of trivia for pseudoscholarly digging and sterile cultish chatter” (18 February 1967). For their opinions, both writers earned responses from readers describing them as “orcs” (*Life*, 17 March 1967; *America*, 25 March 1967). Further, Mathewson’s essay in *Esquire* characterized *The Lord of the Rings* as “nothing more than fairy tales, grown up and grown exceedingly lengthy, escapist and nonintellectual.”

* Long before “Revolution” was used to peddle sneakers for Nike, the Beatles were also controversial. John Lennon’s recognition that the Beatles were “more popular than Jesus” particularly exercised the nation’s outrage during the summer of 1966.

The book has attracted such criticism consistently since it was first published. The assumption, of course, is that “escape”—typically used to imply that Tolkien’s readers preferred “fantasy” to “reality”—inherently lacks value. Many writers wrote in Tolkien’s defense at the time,⁸⁷ and many have continued to do so over the ensuing decades. Often, their arguments actively (and persuasively) attempt to controvert the notion that the appeal of *The Lord of the Rings* consists exclusively in its otherworldliness. But perhaps Tolkien, whose voice was generally all but lost amid the clamor surrounding his book, should be allowed scope to defend his own work. In his essay “On Fairy Stories,” originally delivered as the Fritz Lang Lecture at St. Andrews in 1939 but first published in the United States in 1965, Tolkien had in fact argued that “Escape is one of the main functions of fairy-stories, and since I do not disapprove of them, it is plain that I do not accept the tone of scorn or pity with which ‘Escape’ is now so often used.” Critics who use the word in this fashion “are confusing, not always by sincere error, the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter.” The prison is the literal and the mundane; escape provides “sudden glimpse of the underlying reality of truth.” Tolkien’s essay also focused on “Joy,” a literary virtue as out of favor in 1939 as it was in 1965 (when the recently published essay began increasingly to be applied to *The Lord of the Rings*). Interviewed by the *Christian Science Monitor* in 1966, Tolkien confronted his literary opponents with a simple defense. Reporting on, and then transcribing, her conversation with Tolkien, Daphne Castell stated that “he believes that books nowadays, fictional works at any rate, are misused: ‘Isn’t it widely thought, because it is widely taught (in schools and colleges) that enjoyment is an illiterate reaction, and that a serious reader must at once begin to take the construction to pieces?’” In other words, the pleasure a book affords justifies the book’s existence. To Tolkien, at least, there was no inherent mystery to the simple fact of readers enjoying reading a book.

But why did so many readers enjoy reading this particular book so fervently? It is impossible to say with absolute certainty; the taste of a generation remains as subjective as that of an individual. But certainly a few core reasons can be derived from both the criticism and the praise directed at *The Lord of the Rings* over the last fifty years. In fact, both are often of a piece, only viewed from opposite perspectives. One can objectively state that *The Lord of the Rings* is essentially “innocent” in its world view: innocent in the sense of presenting a polarized view of good and evil, or in the sense of ignoring earthy topics, or in the sense of absolutely shunning irony in favor of bald-faced earnestness. And hostile critics of the book perceive this innocence as simplistic, immature, and ingenuous. (Indeed, far more extreme terms than these have been employed to express the same fundamental criticism.) For professional readers who cut their critical teeth on the serious

literature of the twentieth century, these are damning faults all. Perhaps the surprising fact to the contrary is that a substantial number of intelligent reviewers have reacted positively to the book. For those hostile to the book, however, their criticisms very frequently have had less to do with *The Lord of the Rings* itself than with their aversion to the *type* of book they think it to be, and equally to the *type* of reader attracted to such books.⁸⁸ Such critics did indeed point out many of the reasonable grounds on which to criticize *The Lord of the Rings*, but in many instances they also did not even seem to be reading the same book as Tolkien's proponents and steadily increasing audience. One result is that they manifested their confusion in dismissal.⁸⁹

One hesitates to speak for Tolkien—especially after reading many of his letters, in which he displays a constant tendency to contradict any attempt to interpret his ideas, even when this also results in his contradicting himself. But perhaps Tolkien would not debate the point that *The Lord of the Rings* illustrates an innocence absent from the world in which its readers reside. In the terms of the book, what others perceive as simplicity in the presentation of good and evil might instead be viewed as a truer purity of motive. *The Lord of the Rings* describes a mythical prehistory of this world that we inhabit. Middle-earth is this earth. But to use a term that Tolkien might have employed to distinguish between them, the world he describes remains in places “unstained.” Middle-earth was postlapsarian, certainly, but also nearer a state of true innocence. And it was a world not yet completely drained of wonder. For young readers inured to witnessing the effects of harsh reality all around them—whether war abroad or social conflict at home—it is fundamentally predictable that they should have flocked by the millions to Tolkien's fantastic vision of a world not simpler, but more pure and more mysterious. A world in which Tolkien's own experience of World War I was translated into a high valuation of “fellowship,” deep satisfaction in simple pleasures, a hatred of mechanization, and a delight in untainted natural and artistic beauty. It is indeed perfectly logical that Tolkien's values would resonate with the college generation of the 1960s.

In a strange sense, *The Lord of the Rings* is almost beyond criticism. Its faults are so readily apparent that there is little point in drawing attention to them. A single passage removed from context will generally sound silly. But the ear of the reader who has read from the beginning, meanwhile, will have become attuned to Tolkien's steadily increasing archaism, and the reader's eye will perceive how each episode is integrally related to the greater construction. These facts help explain Tolkien's appeal to his young audience during the 1960s. The simple momentum of the story itself, the constant invention that its author brought to bear, tends to sweep the reader forward. But imagination is not the sole attraction. Ironically, one can actually read Tolkien for his “realism.” Tolkien diligently worked out

logical details, and obsessively sought to maintain an internal consistency within his fiction. An unintended result noted by some reviewers is that large sections of the book read more as travelogue than as narrative. But the sense of reality in Tolkien's work was historical and cultural as well as natural and geographical. There is truly a profound sense of depth to his fictive world. Because he had literally invested decades of his life working on a body of mythology that the reader only glimpses in *The Lord of the Rings*, the book inspires in the receptive reader a sense of discovery that is as much metaphysical as physical. One result of the book's comprehensive strangeness is that all readers are forced to approach it from a perspective of innocence, because it has no obvious analog outside of itself. In other words, the book was simply new. This was not something handed down by gray-haired men in gray suits, but was instead a work that a generation of young readers discovered for itself—with the natural result that these readers felt that they owned it for themselves.⁹⁰

Viewed from the reverse perspective, these elements no doubt underlay some of the hostility more sophisticated readers have displayed toward *The Lord of the Rings*. Their iconological experience did not prepare them for the book, and it unabashedly contravened their training in taste. Also, that Tolkien's publishers were baffled at how to market the book resulted in a chaotic assemblage of extreme prepublication notices being attached to it, an acute case of "hyblurbole," if you will. Hence when the book reached American reviewers and critics, they responded with some confusion. At the present time, most members of the reading public have *some* preconception of *The Lord of the Rings* (although frequently wildly inaccurate), even if they have never actually undertaken the long slog through. But when early readers opened *The Fellowship of the Ring*, essentially no context existed in which to place the book.⁹¹ It must indeed have seemed, to allude to one of those grandiloquent prepublication notices (by C. S. Lewis), "like lightning from a clear sky; as sharply different, as unpredictable in our age as *Songs of Innocence* were in theirs." In consequence, Tolkien's early readers were obligated not just to judge the merits of the book, but to some extent to establish a schema by which to judge those merits (or deficiencies). One way to resolve the difficulty was to focus attention away from the book and onto its audience. As time passed, it became quite apparent that discussion of Tolkien was conducted less by *readers* of the book, than by *observers* of those readers.

Although the latter stage of attention to the book bore out one critic's opinion that "there are always a lot of people who would rather talk about books than read them,"⁹² a few critiques concerned with discussing the book, rather than the sensational phenomenon surrounding it, nonetheless appeared. The authors of these reviews occupied themselves less with issues of genre and

literary form than had those writing a decade before, and more with thematic elements. Academic journals had occasionally featured articles about Tolkien's academic work—his theories about Beowulf, his translations of, and essays about, Middle English literature—simultaneously with the considerable attention he received in the popular press. Interestingly, there was virtually no acknowledgment of the public discussion in these articles, just as the American popular press continued, essentially, to ignore Tolkien's scholarship.

The single noteworthy exception to this intellectual segregation was the essay "On Fairy Stories" mentioned above, which could be applied directly by popular reviewers attempting to explain *The Lord of the Rings*, even as it informed Tolkien's academic approach to literature for his fellow scholars. An expanded form of Tolkien's original lecture was published in the festschrift *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* in 1947, but Allen & Unwin, casting about for more publishable works from Tolkien, reissued the essay with the story "Leaf by Niggle" in a small volume titled *Tree and Leaf* in May 1964. Houghton Mifflin published an American edition on 3 March 1965, conveniently just before the paperback publication controversy focused public attention on *The Lord of the Rings*. While earlier critics had occasionally demonstrated an awareness of "On Fairy Stories" [e.g. Michael Straight, in the *New Republic* (16 January 1956)], those writing during the mid-1960s were far more likely to assess *The Lord of the Rings* with the essay in mind.

Acknowledging Tolkien's theory of "subcreation," Matthew Hodgart suggested in the *New York Review of Books* (4 May 1967) that Tolkien sought nothing less than to create a "secondary world" to rival our own. To this critic, who clearly read *The Lord of the Rings* carefully and appreciatively, Tolkien nevertheless lacked the artistry to realize these ambitions fully. In a response to this review (which he called "at once perceptive and wrongheaded") in the *National Review* (5 September 1967), Jared Lobdell accepted Hodgart's hypothesis but not his assessment. Instead, Tolkien was successful, and "the present high standing of *The Lord of the Rings* [was] fully justified, precisely because of its widespread success in this mediation of imaginative life." Hence the coincidental appearance of *Tree and Leaf* just as public awareness of *The Lord of the Rings* exploded not only provided popular reviewers with a "theory" to assist them in grappling with the latter book, but arguably also led in time to longer and more "scholarly" reviews of Tolkien's popular works. For a time, the media's absorption with the "campus craze" obscured this fact, as at least some academics recognized. In the first edition of *Tolkien and the Critics* (1968), co-editor Neil D. Isaacs titled the introductory essay, "On the Possibility of Writing Tolkien Criticism," and questioned the practicability of seriously engaging with Tolkien's texts amid the din of the public attention. The

popular press stories discussed above—their mere existence—“to say nothing of the feverish activity of the fanzines, do not produce a climate for serious criticism.” Enthusiasm for *The Lord of the Rings*, however, did not entirely undermine thoughtful commentary. Tracing Tolkien’s treatment in more sober-minded circles suggests that the increasing seriousness of the popular press in assessing *The Lord of the Rings* ultimately facilitated meaningful discussion of the book and its audience.

Two useful examples of the increasingly sophisticated attention that *The Lord of the Rings* began to attract appeared as discussion of the Tolkien craze began to decline. First, the *Cimarron Review* published an essay about Tolkien in its first issue (September 1967). Even as the popular clamor was fading, the editors apparently perceived a discussion of Tolkien as being germane to its stated mission, “to illuminate the contemporary American Scene ... *in medias res*” while remaining unwilling to “consciously pursue any fad” (in the terms of the Foreword). Tolkien was, to use a word of the day, “relevant.” As had occurred previously in the popular press, Samuel Woods’s essay appeared interested largely in introducing Tolkien to a (presumably) academic readership. Consequently, it emphasized Tolkien’s scholarly credentials before seeking to discover what “attracts many readers, makes almost fanatic admirers out of many, and leads some to make Tolkien the object of cult-worship.”

Soon afterward, the second issue of the *New American Review* appeared, which contained Mary Ellmann’s sardonic appraisal of Tolkien and his young American audience. An unusual experiment in producing “literature” in a mass-market pocketbook format, the NAR itself faced the same tensions that *The Lord of the Rings* had in attempting to attract a popular audience while remaining “serious.” Hence it was a particularly appropriate outlet for an assessment of *The Lord of the Rings* at that juncture, and, moreover, “one of the magazine’s appeals ... was the refusal to accept blindly the new idols of the counterculture.”⁹³ As with Woods’s, Ellmann’s interest was in describing Tolkien’s appeal to his readers. But where Woods found a “narrative gift” and “fertility of imagination,” Ellmann saw a “gap in Tolkien’s writing between an intended sublimity and an actual absurdity” that “doubles the audience.” While each writer saw something radically different in the attraction of *The Lord of the Rings* for its readership, viewed in tandem their work reflected the fact that two previously distinct strands of writing about Tolkien—as serious and as popular author—eventually began to become reconciled.

It is noteworthy that for Tolkien, at least, no rift ever existed between the distinct roles he played in life, those of “Scholar and Storyteller” (as later crystallized in the title of a festschrift dedicated to him).⁹⁴ Assessing himself in 1966, Tolkien stated that his “work is all of a piece, and fundamentally

linguistic in inspiration.” He took pains to emphasize that his creative works spring from the same source, and serve the same ends, as his academic work. The ability (and desire) to feel at home in a world conjured up by Anglo-Saxon or Old Norse corresponds directly to the desire (and ability) to create a world based on his own created languages. It might be well for “the authorities of the university [to] consider it an aberration of an elderly professor of philology to write and publish fairy stories and romances, and call it a ‘hobby,’ pardonable because it has been (surprisingly to [Tolkien] as much as to anyone) successful.”⁹⁵ But such critics—and more broadly all of those who have found it so difficult to reconcile the nature of the *audience* of Tolkien’s works with Tolkien’s *authorship* of those works—fail to perceive the author’s unity of intent and execution.

One consequence is reflected in the publishing record for Tolkien during the late 1960s. His story “Smith of Wootton Major” (with its origins as a literary illustration to an introductory essay Tolkien was asked to submit to a new edition of George MacDonald) was published in the December 1967 issue of *Redbook*, Tolkien’s only literary work to appear in a popular American magazine. Meanwhile, *The Tolkien Reader*, a paperback original published by Ballantine in September 1966, included among other pieces Tolkien’s challenging alliterative poem, “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son,” a “sequel” to a late Old English text. In other words, a number of related strands were becoming intertwined to the “enrichment” (variously interpreted) of all. Tolkien himself became more willing to engage with the reading public at large in response to the unexpected attention paid to his works. His publishers introduced works of dubious popular appeal (apart from Tolkien’s name on the title page) in order to challenge (or to exploit, depending on the degree of the observer’s cynicism) Tolkien’s burgeoning audience. Critics and (increasingly) scholars learned to situate *The Lord of the Rings* in the broader context of Tolkien’s interests. And a wide body of works—which has in fact swollen since Tolkien’s death in 1973 with the publication of at least seventeen posthumous volumes⁹⁶—has become available to an audience ranging from the casual one-time reader of *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings* to the enthusiast who revels in the abundance of arcana that surrounds them.

Such trends reflected a new gravity in the public consideration of the content of *The Lord of the Rings*. A serious, if limited, discussion of Tolkien’s artistic ideology had begun to appear. Other noteworthy issues included both the seemingly anachronistic ideals (heroism, the virtues of patriarchy) and contemporary concerns (totalitarianism, the corrupting influence of power, ecology) that inform the book. But more important than the matters discussed was the discussion in itself. At a time when most of the popular media appeared uninterested in *The Lord of the Rings* except

as a youthful fad, the appearance of real criticism suggested that the book might in fact prove to be something more durable. Finally, a brief notice in the library journal *Choice* provides a telling comment on the book's life in the media of the 1960s. With a librarian's terseness, *Choice* validated the book's emerging respectability when it suggested that *The Lord of the Rings* would survive "present popularity as well as former neglect" (July/August 1967). The book was, additionally, "recommended to all libraries."

Demonstrations of the book's progression toward acceptability continued, in terms of both attention from educators⁹⁷ and inclusion in literary reference works.⁹⁸ Subsequent events have, of course, borne out this trend; today the book remains widely read and its merits and faults are still debated in popular and (increasingly) in academic arenas. In fact, the interests of the two previously distinct strands of discussion about Tolkien—social and literary—began to fuse in 1968. The momentum propelling the treatment of *The Lord of the Rings* fad by the popular press eventually spent itself; not long afterward the literary press began to consider seriously the literary qualities that preceded, inspired, and endured beyond the obsessive engagement of young America with the book. For *The Lord of the Rings*, finally, the 1960s were crowned with two distinct hints at future acceptance as an enduring literary object. Interestingly, both in some sense sought to debunk the Tolkien myth. First, the Columbia University Press discussed Tolkien in the forty-first number of its series of monographic "Columbia Essays on Modern Writers." Suddenly, here was Tolkien, rubbing shoulders with Dostoevsky and Brecht (the authors who immediately preceded and followed Tolkien in the series) and their ilk. Granted, the essay was analogous in tone to Wilson's earlier attack; its mere existence, however, vindicated discussion of Tolkien in the academy. And second, the Harvard Lampoon published its Tolkien parody, *Bored of the Rings* (Signet).⁹⁹ These two poles delineated a future where Tolkien could inspire both academic conferences and children's meals at Burger King. But this future remains ineluctably grounded in events of the late 1960s.

To conclude, the public perception of *The Lord of the Rings* during the late 1960s was dominated by concerns over the nature of the work and how a book of its type could (and eventually *did*) find an audience. The early history of the book was relatively uneventful when compared with the furor that it generated a decade later. *The Lord of the Rings* was first published in the United States between 1954 and 1956. By the end of 1956, media attention for *The Lord of the Rings* had apparently run its course. Despite the range of reviews in the book pages—each volume had been critiqued upon publication, and another series of reviews had appeared upon the completion of the work—the book had essentially been ignored

by the *news* press. There had been some public disagreement about *The Lord of the Rings*, but this controversy was strictly limited to *literary* terms: what (in terms of genre) was the book, and was it successful at whatever it tried to do? And, who (if anyone) should read the book, and should it be read seriously? So while the book's peculiarities had perhaps sparked more controversy than did most works of fiction (considering that it flouted none of the standards of morality or decency of its day), it appeared likely to follow the common run of books into eventual respectability or obscurity. There seemed little else to say.

Reflecting the mood on both sides of the Atlantic, British critic Philip Toynbee was able to recall the brief controversy from the remote perspective of 1961:

There was a time when the Hobbit fantasies of Professor Tolkien were being taken very seriously indeed by a great many distinguished literary figures ... I had the sense that one side or other must be mad, for it seemed to me that these books were dull, ill-written, whimsical and childish. And for me this had a reassuring outcome, for ... today those books have passed into a merciful oblivion. (*Observer*, 6 August 1961)¹⁰⁰

Public silence did not, of course, indicate that these “literary figures” had in fact changed their views about *The Lord of the Rings* so much as it signified that the book's initial impetus as a public entity appeared to be spent. As with the vast majority of books published, this book attracted little attention five years after its appearance on the market. Despite its internal oddities, externally—as product of the publishing industry—the book appeared entirely typical. So, Toynbee was correct on one count: it seemed that public discussion about *The Lord of the Rings* was finished. Granted, the book did begin to attract some attention in more academic circles,¹⁰¹ but it appeared on its way to becoming a literary curiosity for the reading public, and, if sales for *The Hobbit* could be any guide, another modestly successful backlist item for its publishers.¹⁰² “Sales of ... *The Lord of the Rings* continued to rise steadily, but there was no drastic change in the pattern until 1965.”¹⁰³

The most significant stage of the public attention directed at *The Lord of the Rings*, however, took place ten years after the three volumes originally appeared. While Tolkien and his publishers gave every appearance of contentedness with his book's limited but dignified success in boards—viewing it as “literature”—others perceived an entirely different potential audience for *The Lord of the Rings*. Only when Ace Books took advantage

of the confusion over American copyright law to issue the book in an inexpensive mass-market format did the latent popularity of the book emerge. Within a year of paperback publication, several hundred thousand copies had been offered to the public. The treatment of *The Lord of the Rings* in soft covers suggests the existence of substantive differences between the ways hardback and paperback books are viewed. Bound in paper and mass marketed, the book underwent a popularizing transformation. In the United States, a small but distinguished readership was supplanted by an audience of millions of zealous American university students.

No one, and least of all Tolkien, was prepared for this development. *The Lord of the Rings* left the book pages to appear in the front sections of newspapers around the United States. The book became the focus not just of a widespread campus “cult,” but of print media attempting to describe that cult. Mainstream magazines discussed Tolkien’s popularity, attempted to assess what it said about American youth, and were generally bemused and occasionally troubled by what they “discovered.” Contentions were aired. Contributors to the controversy over *The Lord of the Rings* no longer simply involved themselves with matters of literary merit, but rather professed to investigate the fundamental issues underlying what the book said about its readers. The result, as described above, was a flurry of media attention to the *fact* that the book had become a cult object, with little attention actually paid to the book at the center of the maelstrom. In short order, confused ideas about Tolkien and his masterpiece became part of the general fabric of American popular culture. For some time, the attention of the mass print media naturally dissuaded serious appraisals of Tolkien, and only as its notoriety faded did critics begin once again to focus on the book itself, and begin to reconsider the book as a literary work rather than as a talisman of 1960s youth culture. Without the sudden explosion of attention, it seems doubtful that *The Lord of the Rings* would still attract such hostility in some circles.

In part, the later animosity manifested toward Tolkien is a demonstration of his enduring influence. While works that are now categorized as fantasy had preceded Tolkien’s, to some extent *The Lord of the Rings* “has created its own genre.”¹⁰⁴ Some interesting aspects of Tolkien’s influence are actually accidental. Concerns over the potential audience for *The Lord of the Rings* attached to the book even before it was published, substantially affecting the way it ultimately appeared for sale and how it has consequently been perceived by the reading public. The outstanding example is the division of *The Lord of the Rings*, perhaps the first “epic fantasy” (as some have described it), into three physical volumes. Dictated by economic prudence at Allen & Unwin, this division was in essence parallel to that of the triple-decker novels of the preceding century. The public perception of Tolkien’s

work as “the Lord of the Rings trilogy,” however, has subsequently inspired an entire subgenre of sprawling, multivolume fantasies gathered under collective titles. The reputation of *The Lord of the Rings* not only established fantasy as a viable mass market publishing genre, but set up Tolkien as the progenitor to two generations of novelists, however unlike his successors he might have been. In a very real sense, this result derives from the events that ensued from Tolkien’s sudden mid-1960s popularity rather than from any concrete resemblance between his literary ambitions and the efforts of those who wrote fantasy in his wake. Tolkien the popular phenomenon superseded Tolkien the literary artist.

To return briefly to the episode of *Friends* with which this discussion began, there remains a third inference that might be drawn from this amicable exchange: from the perspective of 1997, Tolkien was for geeks. However hip (or even revolutionary, depending on one’s perspective) *The Lord of the Rings* might have appeared circa 1966, three decades later the ability to quip in *Quenya*, or even to know that *Quenya* is one of Tolkien’s created Elvish languages, apparently could not be expected to fan the flames of passion in the breasts of most young women. At some juncture, the mass popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* appeared to wane, while only fanatics seemed left to carry the torch. In the polls that declared *The Lord of the Rings* the greatest book of the twentieth century, Tolkien’s book eclipsed the entire output of such writers as Joyce, Hemingway, Mann, Nabokov, Faulkner, Garcia Marquez, Rushdie, Eco, and the like. A British journalist reporting on Tolkien’s success in a poll there registered the reaction of Humphrey Carpenter, Tolkien’s biographer, who absurdly attributed the result to the concerted activity of what are termed his subject’s “anorak-clad troops” (the anorak being the British uniform by which trainspotters and other obsessives can be recognized).¹⁰⁵ In fact, Tolkien’s work has clearly remained more broadly popular than generally supposed. But while the roots of the enormous popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* date from the radical 1960s, the book has subsequently shed any real sense of counterculture credibility.¹⁰⁶

As a result, allusions in the American press to *The Lord of the Rings* have frequently embraced an implicit degree of irony. This tendency can be noted over a period of some years; Tolkien might occasionally make news, but perhaps not of any real consequence. More recently, however, this attitude has begun to shift radically once again. The central reason behind this change lies in the massive popularity of Peter Jackson’s trilogy of film adaptations. One argument for renewed respectability for the source material will be strictly economic. Along with a few almost obligatory references to the film’s “geek-magnet story” and “little-boy allure,” the *New York Times* review of *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* was also compelled to note that “the first film took in enough cash to jump-start the

flagging United States economy single-handedly.”¹⁰⁷ A similar note sounded in the *Hollywood Reporter’s* assessment of the February 2003 American Film Market, at which Frodo Baggins was declared “the most important player,” capable of “rescu[ing] the annual event from the clutches of a global recession.”¹⁰⁸ In the new millennium, nothing commands respect as much as the billion dollar grosses that each film has generated in worldwide box office. But beyond economics, the movies have certainly returned *The Lord of the Rings* to the mainstream on some level. Whether the book’s audience, under the influence of action figures, fast food tie-ins, and video games, will become yet further juvenilized, or whether it will perceptibly broaden, it will be interesting to observe how public perception of the book changes in the wake of the films. Whatever the case, the longevity of *The Lord of the Rings*—a book that passed its fiftieth anniversary in October 2004 without ever having left print—can no longer reasonably be doubted.¹⁰⁹ Respectability, however, might need to wait for fifty years more.

Notes

1. “The one where they’re going to party,” *Friends*, NBC, 11 Dec. 1997.

2. This discussion will follow Tolkien’s assertion that *The Lord of the Rings* forms a single work, and will consequently use the term “book” rather than “trilogy.” Its component parts will typically be referred to as “volumes.” See, for example, information Tolkien provided to Houghton Mifflin in 1955: “The book is not of course a ‘trilogy.’ That and the titles of the volumes was a fudge thought necessary for publication, owing to length and cost. There is no real division into 3, nor is any one part intelligible alone. The story was conceived and written as a whole.” J. R. R. Tolkien to Houghton Mifflin, 30 June 1955, *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 221.

3. The reported popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* is truly staggering. According to an interview with Houghton Mifflin’s Tolkien Projects Director previously published on the HMCo. Website (<http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/features/lordoftheringstrilogy>, 7 March 2005), “lifetime global sales of ... *The Lord of the Rings*” total “more than 50 million copies,” and the book has been translated into “more than thirty-five [38, per the HarperCollins Website] languages” (<http://www.tolkien.co.uk>, 18 Feb. 2005). “If you say it is the biggest selling fiction creation of all time, you’ll find it difficult to find anyone able to say you’re wrong,” according to HarperCollins, the current holders of the book’s international copyright (*U.S. News and World Report*, 10 March 1997). According to the October–December 2004 newsletter of the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC), *The Lord of the Rings* is the third most commonly held work of fiction in the collections of its more than 50,000 member libraries.

The turning of the century was a time of lists: a poll conducted by Amazon.com concluded that *The Lord of the Rings* was the book of the millennium, while readers polled in Britain by Waterstone’s Books and Channel 4 were content with declaring that it was the “Greatest Book of the Twentieth Century” (*Salon.com*, 4 June 2001). And such attention from the reading public predated the recent series of three “major motion pictures.” Each of the films garnered approval in critical terms—respectively winning four, two, and eleven Academy Awards—popularly—in the form of American ticket receipts in excess of three hundred million dollars per film—and somewhere in between—winning numerous MTV Movie Awards (including

Best Movie for three years running). According to a news release on the Houghton Mifflin Website, “more than 25 million Tolkien books have been sold in the United States alone over the past three years,” covering the period during which the buzz for the films was at its loudest (http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/booksellers/press_release/lotr/, 7 March 2005).

4. Wayne G. Hammond, “Whose Lord of the Rings Is It, Anyway?” *Canadian C. S. Lewis Journal* (Spring 2000): 64.

5. Walter Hooper, “Tolkien and C. S. Lewis: An Interview with Walter Hooper,” in *Tolkien: A Celebration*, ed. Joseph Pearce (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001), 192–93.

6. Jeff Gordinier, “Elvish Lives,” *Entertainment Weekly* (14 Dec. 2001), 44.

7. Stanley Unwin, *The Truth about a Publisher* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1960), 300–301.

8. J. R. R. Tolkien to Stanley Unwin, 10 March 1950, in *Letters*, 364.

9. For the recollections of the former head of Houghton Mifflin’s trade division concerning HMC’s decision in 1954 to publish *The Lord of the Rings*, see Paul Brooks, *Two Park Street: A Publishing Memoir* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), 106–7.

10. Quoted in Humphrey Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 210.

11. S. Unwin, *Publisher*, 301.

12. Quoted in Carpenter, *Tolkien*, 202.

13. Edmund Wilson, “Oo, Those Awful Orcs!” *Nation* (14 April 1956), 312.

14. Donald Barr, “Shadowy World of Men and Hobbits,” *New York Times Book Review* (1 May 1955), 4.

15. In fact, the courts only became involved with *The Lord of the Rings* in 1992, when a reprint publisher sought a judgment that the book was indeed in the public domain (*Eisen, Durwood & Co. v. Christopher R. Tolkien*). In this case, the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York declared that Houghton Mifflin’s American copyright had indeed been valid all along. This decision, upheld on appeal, stated that the legislation (Public Law 743, enacted during the second term of the 83rd Congress) enabling the United States to join the Universal Copyright Convention included a retroactivity clause. Hence, because *The Lord of the Rings* was protected (in the court’s opinion) by valid *ad interim* copyright when the UCC took effect between the United States and Britain, it was subsequently granted full term American copyright. See George D. Cary, “The United States and Universal Copyright: An Analysis of Public Law 743,” in *Universal Copyright Convention Analyzed*, ed. Theodore R. Kupferman and Mathew Foner (New York: Federal Legal Publications, 1955), 97, for an applicable hypothetical discussion. Also, despite the apparent convictions of all parties involved in the original dispute and, indeed, the view expounded by Stanley Unwin in his *Truth about Publishing* (7th ed. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1960), the court noted that the result of violation of the provisions of Title 17 never had been surrender of copyright, which it characterized as “draconian.” Nowhere, the court opined, did Title 17 explicitly state that loss of copyright would result from noncompliance, a point made by Nimmer below. However, because this section of law—which deals exclusively with *copyright*—never mentions *any* penalty, it hardly seems an unreasonable assumption that forfeiture of copyright would in fact have resulted from failure to adhere to its restrictions.

16. The Berne Convention governed international copyright for many nations, most importantly excepting the United States, the USSR, China, and most of Latin America. The first version of the Convention had been signed in 1886; it had subsequently undergone several revisions. Melville B. Nimmer, *Nimmer on Copyright: A Treatise on the Law of Literary, Musical and Artistic Property, and the Protection of Ideas* (Albany: Matthew Bender & Company, 1966), §65.64.

17. Because of its length (nearly 1,200 pages as published in the first edition) and the high degree of uncertainty with which the project was viewed, Allen & Unwin decided to publish

The Lord of the Rings in three volumes, each containing two “books” of the story. Hence, the recurring concern over who (if anyone) might actually buy the book directly and persistently influenced the manner in which it finally reached the public. One potential benefit of this plan would be the possibility of garnering three notices in each reviewing organ instead of only one. Tolkien, however, frequently took great pains to correct the notion that his work formed a “trilogy”; *The Lord of the Rings* was not originally intended to appear in three parts (it has subsequently occasionally appeared in a single volume), but the decision to divide it was an economic one, a “mere practical necessity of publication.” Tolkien, quoted in Perry Bramlett, *I Am in Fact a Hobbit: An Introduction to the Life and Work of J. R. R. Tolkien* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2003). By publishing the book one volume at a time, not only did Allen & Unwin limit its initial financial outlay in terms of production costs, but it would also have allowed the publisher to cut its losses in the absence of demand by declining to publish the second and third volumes. In fact, *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King* were published as soon as they were ready for press. Stanley Unwin reported that readers eagerly badgered Allen & Unwin for the delayed third volume.

18. S. Unwin, *Publishing*, 268.

19. George D. Cary, “The United States and Universal Copyright: An Analysis of Public Law 743,” in *Universal Copyright Convention Analyzed*, ed. Theodore R. Kupferman and Mathew Foner (New York: Federal Legal Publications, 1955), 95.

20. S. Unwin, *Publishing*, 269ff.

21. *Ibid.*, 272.

22. *The Fellowship of the Ring* was registered under number AI-4273 in the *Catalog of Copyright Entries* for July to December 1954. *The Two Towers* was registered as AI-4465 for the next issue of the *Catalog*, that covering January to June 1955.

23. The first time *The Return of the King* appears in the *Catalog of Copyright Entries* is in the issue for July to December 1965, where the three volumes constituting the Ballantine Books edition mentioned below are registered collectively. The registration of the original Allen & Unwin edition was “renewed” on 19 December 1983. This renewal notes the original registration date as the date the volume was first published in Britain (as is customary), but the “original registration number” (TX-1-237-761) that the renewal references was actually registered a mere three months before, on 20 September 1983. The “TX” prefix was not used by the Register of Copyrights until 1978.

The fact that the third volume was not originally listed in the *Catalog* is significant; as the official record of copyright registrations in the United States, an appearance therein constituted *prima facie* evidence that a work was protected by copyright under the old copyright regime.

24. On page 108 of his *George Allen & Unwin: A Remembrancer* (London: privately printed for the author by Merlin Unwin Books, 1999), Rayner Unwin states that 1,500 copies of an initial 3,250 printed were intended for Houghton Mifflin.

25. Wayne G. Hammond, *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Descriptive Bibliography* (New Castle, Del.: Oak Knoll, 1993), 100–101.

26. The thirteenth printing of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, dated 1963, was still printed in Britain, as was the tenth printing of *The Return of the King* from the same year. The undated fourteenth printing of *The Fellowship of the Ring* was the first impression to be printed in the United States.

27. Nimmer, *Nimmer on Copyright*, §96.4.

28. S. Unwin, *Publishing*, 263–64.

29. Nimmer, *Nimmer on Copyright*, §97.2

30. E.g., early copies of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, determined from evidence presented in *The Tolkien Collector* to be third and fourth impressions, as well as copies of the second, third, fourth, and sixth printings of *The Two Towers*. First edition copies of each volume printed from about 1960 onward carried a statement indicating that “This book is copyright under

the Berne Convention. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of private study, research, criticism, or review, as permitted under the Copyright Act 1956, no portion may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Enquiry should be made to the publisher." Notably, this statement did not meet the requirements pertaining to American copyright notice.

31. S. Unwin, *Publishing*, 263.
32. Abraham L. Kaminstein, "©: Key to Universal Copyright Protection," in *Universal Copyright Convention Analyzed*, ed. Theodore R. Kupferman and Mathew Foner (New York: Federal Legal Publications, 1955), 28.
33. Arpad Bogsch, *Universal Copyright Convention: An Analysis and Commentary* (New York: R. R. Bowker in association with The Copyright Society of the U.S.A., 1958), 106.
34. R. Unwin, *Remembrancer*, 118.
35. Thomas Weyr, "Ballantine Books at Quarter Century," *Publishers Weekly* (12 Dec. 1977): 33.
36. Bramlett, *I Am in Fact a Hobbit*, 63; Kenneth C. Davis, *Two-Bit Culture: The Paperbacking of America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 328; Weyr, "Ballantine Books," 33.
37. Quoted in Gordinier, "Elvish Lives!" 44.
38. Davis, *Two-Bit Culture*, 166.
39. Donald Wollheim, "The Ace Tolkiens," *Lighthouse* 13 (1965): 16–17.
40. According to the edition of Stanley Unwin's guide to the business of publishing in print at the time of the conflict, "royalties are often paid on books not legally copyright in the USA" (S. Unwin, *Publishing*, 272).
41. Henry Resnick, "The Hobbit-forming World of J. R. R. Tolkien," *Saturday Evening Post* (2 July 1966), 90.
42. The Ballantine edition was announced in *Publishers Weekly* on 2 August 1965. On the eve of the publishing controversy, the *New York Times* listed the Ace edition as a "recommended new title," calling the book "a modern classic of imaginative fiction" (1 Aug. 1965). A week later, Lewis Nichols's "In and Out of Books" column cast the conflict as one between Ace the energetic upstart and "leisurely" Houghton Mifflin.
43. Davis, *Two-Bit Culture*, 160–61.
44. George Kelley, "Ballantine Books," in *Mass Market Publishing in America*, ed. Allen Billy Crider (Boston: G. K. Crider, 1982), 30.
45. David Aronovitz, *Ballantine Books: The First Decade* (Rochester, Mich.: Bailiwick Books, 1987), 106.
46. Eventually *The Lord of the Rings* itself reached a new plateau of success by receiving a send-up in *Mad*, no. 210 (Oct. 1979).
47. Davis, *Two-Bit Culture*, 166.
48. *Publishers Weekly* (2 Aug. 1965).
49. Weyr, "Ballantine Books," 33.
50. In a recollection perhaps colored by emotion, Rayner Unwin told how "a groundswell of public opinion began to develop the like of which I have never seen before or since in any publishing context" as a result of Tolkien's correspondence with his readers. R. Unwin, *Remembrancer*, 119.
51. Davis, *Two-Bit Culture*, 328. The *Christian Science Monitor* (18 April 1967) reported that "the connoisseur ... can now hang items like a 30-by-40-inch map of Tolkien's Middle Earth to guide his way through 'Lord of the Rings.'" "One California specialist claims he is selling 10,000 posters [on all literary themes] a month, mostly to bookstores in the San Francisco area."
52. Wollheim, "Ace Tolkiens," 16.
53. Copyright © 1965 by J. R. R. Tolkien

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The Ace edition carried no mention of copyright.

53. Tolkien's statement continued to adorn the back wrapper of Ballantine paperbacks prominently throughout the 1960s and 1970s, long after the Ace edition had disappeared from bookshops.

54. Bramlett, *I Am in Fact a Hobbit*, 64.

55. *Publishers Weekly* (9 May 1966).

56. Clay Harper, as quoted in Gordinier, "Elvish Lives!" 44.

57. J. R. R. Tolkien to Michael George Tolkien, 30 Oct. 1965, in *Letters*, 364.

58. In an unusual publishing alliance that says much about Tolkien's contemporary popularity in the United States, *Rolling Stone* reprinted the *New York Times* obituary for Tolkien in its issue for 11 Oct. 1973.

59. Keith L. Justice, *Bestseller Index* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1998), 305. The 1975 appearance of *The Lord of the Rings* on the *New York Times* bestseller list probably reflects a late peak in renewed interest in the book after its author's death on 2 September 1973. The fact that Tolkien's works enjoyed steady—perhaps growing—popularity over the years is borne out by the reception for *The Silmarillion* when it was finally published posthumously. The book was the bestselling work of fiction during 1977, selling over two million copies in hardcovers (as well as being widely distributed through the Book-of-the-Month Club).

60. He did, however, relent on this occasion (a Penguin-Puffin edition set to coincide with a BBC serialization of the book) for financial reasons. Ballantine published the first U.S. paperback edition, just prior to its issue of *The Lord of the Rings*, as a preemptive move against another "pirate" edition.

61. Letter to the *Saturday Review*, 23 Oct. 1965.

62. Donald Wollheim, *Universe Makers: Science Fiction Today* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 109. Such a statement was not simple self-aggrandizement. After Tolkien himself and perhaps Rayner Unwin, Wollheim could probably claim to have played the most important role in the public career of *The Lord of the Rings*.

63. The assumption that Tolkien's readership had some "right" to *The Lord of the Rings* did not end with Ace's concessions in 1966. During the mid-1990s, there was a brief resurgence of interest in the Ace edition on Internet discussion lists, positing the idea of posting the "public domain" Ace text on the World Wide Web.

64. In a letter to the editor of the *English Journal* (Feb. 1968), Ruth M. Stein observed that "the invasion of Middle-earth by twentieth century American youngsters would have been impossible without the paperback revolution. These paperbacks mean cheap books, portable books, books easily destroyed and discarded. In other words, the sanctity accorded to hard-covered volumes gathering dust ... is gone" (253).

65. John Tebbel, *Paperback Books: A Pocket History* (New York: Pocket Books, 1964), 1.

66. Justice, *Bestseller Index*, 8–9.

67. See, for example, a complementary pair of articles two years apart. The first, appearing in the *Wilson Library Bulletin* (Nov. 1960) and titled "High School Students LIKE Paperbacks," appears mildly uncomfortable in describing the value of adding "popular editions" to school libraries, while the other, in *School Library Journal* (Jan. 1963), detailed a "Blueprint for Paperbacks in the High School Library" that stated plainly that "it no longer seems necessary to justify the use of paperbacks in the high school library." At least ten studies evaluating the use of popular paperbacks in schools were conducted between 1957 and 1965. See John T. Gillespie and Diana L. Spirt, *The Young Phenomenon: Paperbacks in our Schools* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1972). A lengthy report on the "Role of Paperback Books in Education" conference appeared in *Publishers Weekly* (1 Nov. 1965, 13–27). Among other assessments of the publishing industry's efforts to introduce paperback texts into schools, this article noted that "in 1961 there were some 21,000,000 copies of books in distribution for the educational market in [mass market] paperback editions. In 1964 the number of copies

of such books had risen to 42,000,000. In 1961 educational paperbacks made up 13% of the paperback market; in 1965 they represent[ed] over 30%, and the figure [was] rising" (24).

68. Tebbel, *Paperback Books*, 28.

69. Davis, *Two-Bit Culture*, 292.

70. Philip D. Beidler, *Scriptures for a Generation: What We Were Reading in the '60s* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 6.

71. Davis, *Two-Bit Culture*, xiv–xv.

72. As "*The Lord of the Rings* grew to be immensely successful in the late sixties and seventies" with the "help [of] a paperback edition," fantasy became an increasingly attractive genre to mass-market publishers. For example, "this success [of Tolkien's] created a demand for fantasy and revived popular interest in Mervyn Peake's earlier 'Titus Books.'" Randall Stevenson, *The British Novel since the Thirties: An Introduction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 106. But Peake was not the sole (deceased) beneficiary of Tolkien's success. Ballantine introduced what it dubbed its "Adult Fantasy" series (meaning works aimed at mature readers, rather than works requiring plain brown wrappers). Ballantine demonstrated considerable initiative, issuing works not only by Peake, but by such other authors as Lord Dunsany (*The Queen of Elfland's Daughter*), E. R. Eddison (*The Worm Ouroboros*), James Branch Cabell (*The Silver Stallion*), H. P. Lovecraft (*The Doom that Came to Sarnath*), George MacDonald (*Phantastes*), and William Morris (*The Wood beyond the World, The Well at the World's End*). These authors, many of whose works had never found prior paperback publication, represented an older, more idiosyncratic form of fantasy literature than that emerging in Tolkien's wake. And while none of the reissues—altogether the line included sixty-five titles (Kelley, "Ballantine Books," 36)—enjoyed anything like Tolkien's success, their presence enriched the emerging field of imaginative literature and provided some sense of context for Tolkien's sudden appearance. But, inevitably, Tolkien's success at Ballantine also inspired the house to seek a "new Tolkien," and, in fact, Tolkien's identification with his publisher helped bring one of the best-respected series of the next generation to print. Stephen R. Donaldson, a fan of Tolkien's whose "Chronicles of Thomas Covenant" had been rejected by "every publisher listed in *Literary Market Place*," realized that "Ballantine Books must be 'getting rich' from the rage for *The Lord of the Rings*" and resubmitted his work, to acceptance and to eventual commercial and critical success. Roy Walters, "Lord of the Land: Stephen R. Donaldson," in *Paperback Talk* (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1985), 69. In the end, Tolkien's success resulted in "fantasy" emerging as a viable—if (even within the boundaries of mass-market publishing) never quite respectable—genre in its own right, not just for the many imitative "epics" that followed *The Lord of the Rings*, but for an increasing range of works, from the pulpy to the literary. As a figure who has ultimately sold "some 100 million books," Tolkien "ignited the whole fantasy genre in publishing" (Gordinier, "Elvish Lives!" 42).

73. Joseph Mathewson, "The Hobbit Habit," *Esquire* (Sept. 1966).

74. David Boroff, "No Big Books on Campus," *New York Times Book Review* (10 Jan. 1965).

75. Haskell Frankel, "Two Publishers Vie for Gold from Middle-Earth," *National Observer* (30 Aug. 1965), 19.

76. Apparently, Auden (who featured as guest of honor at the meeting described in the *New Yorker*) wrote to Tolkien of his fear that the members would be "lunatics." Tolkien responded that "such things" as the formation of the Society filled him "alarm and despondency" (J. R. R. Tolkien to W. H. Auden, 4 Aug. 1965, *Letters*, 359).

77. Tolkien's burgeoning college popularity was not necessarily a well-kept secret. There was, of course, Boroff's assessment of *The Lord of the Rings* as a potential "big book," along with another mention in his previous article, "The College Intellectual, 1965 Model" (*New York Times Book Review*, 6 Dec. 1964). And just as the Ace edition was hitting college

bookshops, the *New York Times* (along with other papers) reported that “during the past year or so” *The Lord of the Rings* had “become popular on college campuses” (8 Aug. 1965). Donald Wollheim claimed to have recognized Tolkien’s growing popularity: “as a fan and an sf [science fiction] editor I became aware early that the Tolkien Rings books were becoming a sort of underground cult among college students—without the aid of any publicity or advertising by Houghton-Mifflin or anyone else” (quoted in Billy C. Lee, “The War over Middle Earth,” *Paperback Quarterly* (Winter 1978)).

78. Raymond A. Schroth, “Lord of the Rings,” *America* (18 Feb. 1967).

79. Judith Crist, “Why Frodo Lives,” *Ladies’ Home Journal* (Feb. 1967).

80. Davis, *Two-Bit Culture*, 328.

81. J. R. R. Tolkien, “Tolkien on Tolkien” *Observer* (Oct. 1966).

82. Hammond, “Whose Lord of the Rings,” 64.

83. A long quotation attributed to Ian Ballantine (who reportedly enjoyed a good working relationship with Tolkien) typifies this perspective, so alien to Tolkien’s own understanding: “Tolkien had that property that is so important in communicating any book that is pivotal or influential in changing people’s thinking; he drew the audience into the work. They became participants. They added to the story. We soon saw paintings, maps, stained glass, songs, and poetry that had been inspired by Tolkien. People learned the language of *The Lord of the Rings*. In this time, young people could be observed stretching their skills much more so than my generation of young people had. The individuals who were attracted to Tolkien were in one way or another finding dissatisfaction in their own time. Tolkien was a catalyst” (quoted in Davis, *Two-Bit Culture*, 329–30).

84. Resnick, “Hobbit-forming World,” 91.

85. Michael Foster, “An Unexpected Party,” *Christian History* 78 (Spring 2003): 42. An inaccurate and simply odd entry for Tolkien even exists in Neil Hamilton, *ABC-CLIO Companion to the 1960s Counterculture in America* (Santa Barbara, Ca.: ABC-CLIO, 1997), which relates how *The Lord of the Rings* was a book “that counterculture youths read avidly” (306). One can imagine Professor Tolkien’s consternation at his inclusion, and more precisely, at the exact situation of the Tolkien entry, between *toke* and *topless bathing suit*.

86. With a nod to the frequently voiced criticism that Tolkien depicted Good and Evil simplistically and statically, Mathewson pointed out (in *Esquire*, Sept. 1966) that for increasingly political young people, the “real world” did indeed appear morally Black and White. In Tolkien, “the lines [between good and evil] are as clearly drawn as they ever were in Selma, Alabama.” Similarly, the *Nation* (8 May 1967) ran an article maintaining that in *The Lord of the Rings*, “above all, what matters is the act of choosing to take part.” The author, Robert Sklar, felt that “the fantasy and imagination and other-worldliness of Tolkien’s world [were] all important, but what [was] most important [was] not that it serve[d] as an escape, . . . but that it provide[d] a paradigm for action.” This point was not universally conceded. Douglas J. Stewart later argued in the same magazine (9 Oct. 1967) that the arrangement of diametric opposites was dangerous; he claimed to “dislike fairy tales in general and hate Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy with passionate particularity” because its simplistic black/white schema results in Frodo’s, “remarkably like a modern GI” shipping out to Vietnam, being “sent, for reasons he doesn’t understand (and isn’t supposed to understand).” Writing in the *New York Review of Books* (May 4, 1967), Matthew Hodgart suggested that Tolkien’s hobbits resembled young British gentlemen, going “straight from school and university to the slaughter of the 1914–18 war.” The hobbits were similarly unprepared for what they faced; the problem from Tolkien’s vantage was that they were called to face it at all. This idea grew from hints mentioned by Tolkien about the horrors of the Great War in his foreword to the revised edition, and helps explain much of the author’s “reactionary” idealization of preindustrial England. But *The Lord of the Rings* was clearly intended to be more than a statement about war.

87. Notable among these was Loren Eiseley, a professional scientific writer. In the *New York Herald Tribune* of 9 May 1965 (and reprinted in *Horn Book*, Aug. 1965), Eiseley characterized those who disdain escapist literature as individuals who “have a prejudice or fear of being transported out of time even momentarily, of ‘meddling’ with reality.” This forms a “sorry phobia.”

88. In his positive review of the third volume, W. H. Auden had earlier recognized that “some people object to Heroic Quests and Imaginary Worlds on principle. Such, they feel, cannot be anything but light ‘escapist’ reading” (*New York Times Book Review*, 22 Jan. 1956).

89. It has become prevalent among serious Tolkien scholars, with some justification, to note how many of Tolkien’s harshest critics seem incapable even of reading the book. It is shocking how frequently fundamental factual error—for example, an inability even to spell the names of characters correctly—creeps into the body of hostile criticism.

The existence of the gulf between Tolkien’s readers and critics had received notice earlier, however. For example, in his *National Review* obituary of Tolkien (28 Sept. 1973), Guy Davenport observed that “nothing written about [*The Lord of the Rings*] seems to be about the same book that people begin again as soon as they reach the end, or read for days without sleep, or can allude to like a Puritan quoting scripture.”

90. The self-evidence of this final point could not necessarily be assumed. When a well-meaning college English instructor argued that teachers who had not yet introduced *The Lord of the Rings* into their course reading lists were “fumbling away a rare opportunity,” he was emphatically advised by a letter-writer to “keep his sticky pedagogical fingers AWAY from Middle-earth and all of its inhabitants.” The important thing—that young people were actually reading—was characterized as a fragile thing. “Most adults not only have NOT read Tolkien, they are just beginning to hear of him. ... Students will not read ... books assigned, books recommended by adults, or books called ‘classics.’ They WILL read what their best friends recommend or what they have picked up on their own.” William L. Taylor, “Frodo Lives,” *English Journal* (Sept. 1967, 819) and Ruth M. Stein, letter to the editor, *English Journal* (Feb. 1968, 252–53).

91. The notion of “fantasy” as a popular literary genre was novel at this point in time. When *The Lord of the Rings* won the “International Fantasy Award” in 1957 (the last of six such prizes given), it was the first title that would now be described as *fantasy* (rather than as *science fiction*) to win the prize. This helps explain in part why *The Lord of the Rings* was greeted with such surprise when it first appeared. Critics lacked (or ignored) an immediate context into which to place the book. As Douglass Parker noted, “fantasy suffers a general deprecation as a genre, a serious genre, with the resultant corollary that anything good emerging from it is immediately recategorized.” Douglass Parker, “Hwaet We Holbytla ...,” *Hudson Review* 9, no. 4 (1957): 601. It should not be surprising, then, that Parker was perhaps the only reviewer to use the term generically when discussing Tolkien’s work during the 1950s.

92. Robert Kiely, “Middle Earth,” *Commentary* (Feb. 1967), 93.

93. Davis, *Two-Bit Culture*, 326.

94. A fact that has been little mentioned in discussions of *The Lord of the Rings* is that Tolkien’s professional familiarity with literary scholarship—as an editor and textual critic—actually influenced the manner in which the book was introduced to readers. Within the book, Tolkien maintained the fiction that he was not the author of the book, per se, but rather the translator and editor of the ancient records from which he drew the narrative. The “scholarly” apparatus that accompanies the book—appendices containing historical annals, linguistic notes, genealogical tables, and so forth—complements this fiction. What *has* received comment is the extent to which Tolkien appears to have internalized this perspective; one frequently reads of his desire to “find out” what fills a perceived gap behind the fabric of the story, rather than to “make it up.”

95. "Tolkien on Tolkien."

96. In addition to three children's titles—*The Father Christmas Letters* (1976), *Mr. Bliss* (1983), and *Roverandom* (1998)—there are large volumes largely related to "Middle-earth"—*The Silmarillion* (1977), *Unfinished Tales* (1980), and the twelve volumes that make up "The History of Middle-earth" (1984–1996).

97. While the pedagogical *English Journal* had published a discussion of *The Lord of the Rings* as early as October 1966, articles more explicitly advising how the book could be taught effectively in the classroom appeared in September 1967 and again in November 1969.

98. A synopsis of *The Lord of the Rings* first appeared in the 4th Series of *Masterplots* in 1968. Inclusion in other references and series followed. However, recognition does not necessarily equate to acceptance. As Patrick Curry points out, entries pertaining to Tolkien in standard scholarly resources frequently remain cursory at best. For example *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, re-edited by Margaret Drabble in 1985, "gives Tolkien exactly thirteen lines out of 1154 [double column] pages." "Tolkien and His Critics: A Critique," in *Root and Branch: Approaches towards Understanding Tolkien*, ed. Thomas Honegger (Zurich and Bern: Walking Tree Publishers, 1999), 84. And Curry, a writer who has published on various topics but who clearly remains entrenched within the Tolkien camp, is not alone in denouncing the scant attention the academy is perceived to pay Tolkien. In his review of *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2001), R. V. Young ("Academic Suicide," *Modern Age* 44, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 254–61) decries the "scandalous" omission of both Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, "men of outstanding scholarly achievements, [who] have had arguably more influence on the general reading public than any other academics of the twentieth century. ... With their unabashed Christianity and genuine popular appeal, they are beneath the notice of the postmodernist coterie, which, for all its egalitarian rhetoric, is *elitist*—that is *snobbish*—in the worst sense of the term" (258).

99. The sexlessness of Tolkien's fiction that has annoyed many critics is amusingly sent up from the outset. Tolkien's work is not difficult to parody; in fact, many ostensible attempts at homage, such as the animated Rankin-Bass production of *The Hobbit* that aired in 1977, actually fall nearer unconscious parody.

100. This comment has become nearly as infamous among Tolkien's supporters as Edmund Wilson's earlier invective. The prominent Tolkien scholar Tom Shippey provides the fullest rejoinder. Shippey notes with some bemusement that Toynbee failed to recognize that Tolkien actually fulfilled the very definition of "the Good Writer" that Toynbee had promulgated in the *Observer* a mere two months earlier. Toynbee's ideal was one who (in Shippey's paraphrase) is "private and lonely" with "no heed of his public," who "can write about anything and make it relevant," whose works are (now in Toynbee's language) "'shocking and amazing ... unexpected by the public mind,'" and who, finally, engages in "'a personal struggle against the intractable medium of modern English.'" Tom Shippey, *Author of the Century* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 306–7. In all objectivity, it would be difficult to describe Tolkien and *The Lord of the Rings* any more accurately.

101. See, for example, R. J. Reilly's eighteen-page discussion in *Thought* (1963).

102. In 1955, a writer could state plainly that "*The Hobbit* was, and is, immensely successful" (Parker, "Hwaet We Holbytla," 602). Houghton Mifflin reportedly sold 3,500 hardback copies in 1964, twenty-seven years after it was first published. David Dempsey, "The Candy-covered Copyright," *Saturday Review* (2 Oct. 1965), 40.

103. Carpenter, *Tolkien*, 226.

104. Tom Shippey, *Author of the Century* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 221

105. Boyd Tonkin, "Enduring Spell of a Trilogy that Leaves Critics Cold," *Independent* (London), 20 Jan. 1997. For connotations of the word "anorak," see, for example, Ewart James, *NTC's Dictionary of British Slang and Colloquial Expressions* (Chicago: NTC Publishing Group, 1997).

106. That *The Lord of the Rings* was in fact controversial at one time is suggested by the fact that it ranked fortieth on the American Library Association's list of the one hundred books likely to be challenged or banned during the twentieth century. At one time, Tolkien, for all his social and religious conservatism, was clearly controversial. It is interesting to note, however, that *The Lord of the Rings* does not appear on the similar list compiled for the decade from 1990–2000. It seems apparent that the book is no longer identified with any “counterculture” that might still be perceived to exist, and moreover that it has, in fact, become unremarkably, even dully, mainstream. Despite considerable joint publicity as the respective releases of the film versions of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* and *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* neared, *The Lord of the Rings* avoided being sullied by any association with J. K. Rowling's Potter books, fantasy works that have consistently headed the lists of books challenged over the past several years. Indeed, articles have even appeared extolling the former at the expense of the latter. It seems apparent that, as the American book reading public has become accustomed to Tolkien, the book burning public has forgotten him. One reason might be the fact that mainstream American culture, to the extent that it demonstrates any interest in books or decency at all, has had the opportunity to discover Tolkien's shocking conventionality. Not to imply that all would-be book censors are motivated by religion or that all Christians have an interest in suppressing free expression, but this might result partly from the fact that a substantial proportion of recent books and favorable press devoted to Tolkien has appeared under the imprint of Christian publishers or in explicitly Christian media.

107. Elvis Mitchell, “Soldiering on in Epic Pursuit of Purity,” *New York Times* (18 Dec. 2002).

108. Stephen Galloway, “Hey, Big Spenders!” *Hollywood Reporter* (Feb. 2003).

109. Although doubters do persist. In the brief introduction to one of the two critical volumes on Tolkien that Harold Bloom has (grudgingly) edited, Bloom states his belief that “Tolkien met a need, particularly in the early days of the Counterculture, in the later 1960s. Whether he is an author for the coming century seems to me open to some doubt.” *J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings, Modern Critical Interpretations* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2000).

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