

## *J.R.R. Tolkien: Oxford's creator of other worlds*

### **Dr Emma Plaskitt**

Oxford has been a centre of scholarship for centuries, and since the nineteenth century it has also boasted a considerable number of acclaimed and popular writers of what has come to be known as fantasy literature. Nonetheless, by the early twentieth century, the philologist and literature professor J.R.R. Tolkien felt that such fiction had fallen out of fashion and been handed over to children — 'relegated to the nursery'. He set out to reclaim high fantasy for adults, believing that it had major literary merit and should not be dismissed as escapist or childish. In fact, he argued that fantasy can fulfil humanity's 'profounder wishes', providing readers with a fresh perspective and a world stripped of its dull familiarity. Tolkien continues to dominate the genre in prose and film, setting the standard not only in fiction with *The Lord of the Rings*, but also in critical commentary with his 1939 lecture 'On fairy-stories', which remains a definitive piece of criticism.

In this course we will examine Tolkien's life, his literary influences and source materials, the major works of fantasy, and selected critical responses, both positive and negative. For example, though Middle-earth was his attempt to create an authentic mythology for England, it has been criticized for its seeming lack of ethnic and gender diversity. Tolkien was shaped by his education, his traumatic experiences in the First World War, and a life spent in what was then the predominantly white, upper-class, male environment of Oxford. Sessions will therefore include discussion of the biographical, historical, and cultural contexts of his writings and their effect on the racial, gendered, regional, and socio-economic elements in his characterization and created world.

Notwithstanding, why does the Middle-earth legendarium continue to fascinate readers and to inspire new generations of fantasy writers? Are the wildly successful film adaptations of these books a testament to Tolkien's vision or is Christopher Tolkien correct when he claims that the 'commercialisation has reduced the aesthetic and philosophical impact of the creation to nothing'? These are some of the questions we will consider.

Students will also have the opportunity to explore Tolkien's invented languages.

### **Additional student learning outcomes**

Students who have taken this seminar will:

- be able to place the readings in historical, cultural, philological, and literary context
- be able to assess the literary value of the fantasy genre
- have considered the effects of gender, race, class, and nationality on the acts of writing and reading fantasy
- have an appreciation of fantasy literature for the adult and well as the child reader

### **Required reading (listed in the order in which the material will be considered in discussion classes)**

J.R.R. Tolkien, 'On fairy-stories' (1939)

— *The Hobbit* (1937)

— trans., *Gawain and the Green Knight* (1975)\*

J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–6)

\*Please note that this is the 1975 translation into modern English, published in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), and not to be confused with Tolkien's 1925 scholarly edition of the poem in its original Middle English.

### Recommended reading list

- E. Archibald and A. Putter, eds., *The Cambridge companion to Arthurian legend* (2009)
- H. Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: a biography* (1977, 2000)
- and C. Tolkien, eds., *The letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (1981, 2006)
- J. Chance, *The Lord of the Rings: the mythology of power* (1992)
- ‘Tolkien and the other: race and gender in Middle-earth’, in *Tolkien’s modern Middle Ages*, ed. J. Chance and A. Siewers (2005), 171–88
- G. Clark and D. Timmons, eds., *J.R.R. Tolkien and his literary resonances* (2000)
- K. Crossley-Holland, *The Penguin book of Norse myths: gods of the Vikings* (1980, 2011)
- C. Duriez, *Tolkien and The Lord of the Rings: a guide to Middle-earth* (2001)
- R. Eaglestone, ed., *The Lord of the Rings: new writings on Tolkien’s classic* (2006)
- K. Filmer, *Twentieth-century fantasists: culture, society and belief in twentieth-century fantasy literature* (1992)
- D. Fimi, *Tolkien, race and cultural history: from fairies to Hobbits* (2009)
- J. Finlayson, ‘Definitions of Middle English romance’, *The Chaucer Review*, 16/1 (Summer 1980), 44–62
- V. Flieger, *Splintered light: logos and language in Tolkien’s world* (2002)
- J. Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War: the threshold of Middle-earth* (2003)
- P. Gilliger et al., *The ring of words: Tolkien and the Oxford English dictionary* (2006)
- N. Isaacs and R. Zimbardo, eds., *Tolkien: new critical perspectives* (1981)
- *Understanding The Lord of the Rings: the best of Tolkien criticism* (2004)
- T. Shippey, *The road to Middle-earth* (1982)
- *J.R.R. Tolkien: author of the century* (2001)
- J.R.R. Tolkien, *Beowulf: a translation and commentary*, ed. C. Tolkien (2014)

© Image copyright Oxford University Press This image may not be reproduced in part or in whole without the express written permission of Oxford University Press. Following his work on the OED, Tolkien of course went on to publish widely in the field of philology, beginning with his substantial glossary to Kenneth Sisam's anthology *Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose* (1921). At this time the second volume (H to N) of the Supplement was in preparation, and the word *hobbit* came up for consideration, as the evidence in the OED's files showed that it had achieved currency. The editor of the Supplement, Robert Burchfield, had studied Tolkien at Oxford Tolkien spent the rest of his career at Oxford, retiring in 1959. Although he produced little by today's "publish or perish" standards, his scholarly writings were of the highest caliber. One of his most influential works is his lecture "Beowulf, the Monsters and the Critics." At Oxford Tolkien became a founding member of a loose group of like-minded Oxford friends "The Inklings" who met for conversation, drinks, and readings from their works-in-progress. Another prominent member was C. S. Lewis, who became one of Tolkien's closest friends