



BOOK REVIEW:
*Mapping Middle-earth:
Environmental and Political Narratives
in J.R.R. Tolkien's Cartographies*

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Behrooz, Anahit. *Mapping Middle-earth: Environmental and Political Narratives in J.R.R. Tolkien's Cartographies*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2024. ISBN: 9781350290808.

At the close of *Mapping Middle-earth*, Anahit Behrooz writes “I hope this book makes a case for the need to situate Tolkien within time; both [within] his own contemporary context – which was profoundly more political than certain imaginations often allow – and within our own contemporary literary discourses, in order to bring his oeuvre more seriously within the field of literary studies” (174). She is only partially successful. Behrooz convincingly demonstrates that Tolkien’s thinking about the costs of empire and the relations between humans and the non-human world extends far beyond what one might expect based upon the still frequently encountered caricature of the Oxford don nostalgic for a past that never was. However, this demonstration is overshadowed by Behrooz’s repeated attempts to show how Tolkien aligns with – and in so doing anticipates, at least chronologically– several influential theorists in literary studies, including Michel Foucault, Donna Haraway, and Edward Said.

I am not convinced that demonstrating the similarities between Tolkien’s work and that of these theorists is necessarily the best way to argue for Tolkien’s political significance, especially since he never appears to know more than – or think differently from – the more recent figures with whose work his oeuvre is being compared. That is, for Behrooz, the far-reaching qualities of, say, Tolkien’s incipient posthumanism are far-reaching precisely because they stake out a position supposedly akin to that staked out decades

later by the likes of Timothy Morton. This may legitimate the study of Tolkien in some circles, but it does not seem likely to further that study nearly as much as would be hoped.

However, before I get into the details of how Behrooz frames her argument and where I think it succeeds or goes astray, I should acknowledge that she clearly knows Tolkien's work inside out, and when she is not making these "see, he's just like X" moves, her interpretations, both of Tolkien's narratives and of his maps, are often insightful. Indeed, there is a marked difference, both in tone and success of execution, between her brief (and often a bit dated) summaries of various lines of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century academic inquiry and her frequently shrewd commentary on particular moments in *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and the other, less polished narratives of Middle-earth that were brought out toward the end of Tolkien's life and posthumously. As I will try to argue at the end of this review, Behrooz's close readings offer glimpses into how scholarship on Tolkien might be able to fit into literary studies as a genuinely equal partner. That is not ultimately the book we have, but perhaps Behrooz has pointed the way toward how we might get such a book.

First, though, let us consider what *Mapping Middle-earth* has to offer its readers. As its title suggests, Behrooz is interested in the maps that Tolkien and his son made, both those that were included in the published novels and others that were preserved by Christopher Tolkien's zeal to gather up the fragments of his father's study, that nothing be lost. She is also attentive to the landscape – both natural and built – that those maps claim to represent, positioning herself squarely in the tradition of "critical cartography" (a Foucault-inflected movement dating back to the 1980s that is dedicated to unmasking the operations of power in even the most seemingly transparent and innocuous of maps). By focusing on maps and the landscape in this way, she hopes to reveal the "power dynamics that are inherent between people and their surroundings" and "the politics of space within Tolkien's sub-creation" (3, 4). Behrooz divides her critique into three broad areas, each of which receives its own chapter: the environmental devastation wrought by humans over the past few centuries, the incommensurate time-scales on which humans and non-humans operate, and the ecological consequences of European imperialism.

Each chapter is structured in largely the same way: it opens with an overview of the dominant positions regarding the topic at hand (sometimes making it sound like there is more of a consensus than I think there is), which is then followed by a series of explorations of moments and recurrent issues in Tolkien's work that intersect with that topic. For example, chapter two, entitled "Environment," surveys ecocriticism, especially the strain that tries to theorize the Anthropocene and the post-human, and then analyzes the figure of Tom Bombadil; the instrumental use of maps by Bilbo Baggins, Aragorn, and Gandalf; different approaches to stewardship of the environment, especially those of Gandalf and Denethor; the destruction of trees in the expansion of Númenor; and the agency of the non-human, such as when the mountain Caradhras tries to block the fellowship of the ring from crossing. In some of these discussions, maps figure prominently. In others, they fade from view, and we only get a consideration of the landscape and its inhabitants. Throughout this chapter, though, Behrooz seeks to demonstrate how "Tolkien was dancing around many of [the] same ideas" as modern theorists: "a fundamental mistrust

of the separation between the human and the non-human,” “this separation’s proclivity towards hierarchy, [and] a fascination with decentring the Anthropos and recognizing nature as a kinetic force that begins to collapse the ontological and phenomenological boundaries between the human and the non-human” (68). By her account,

Tolkien’s writing touches on some of the foundations of deep ecology in his dislike of instrumentalism, his fervent belief in the value of nature beyond human need. But ... he also goes beyond this towards philosophical queries into the boundaries between the human and non-human, stressing a non-human intentionality and a wild, chthonic vibrancy that disrupts the boundary that cartography, among other things, attempts to fix around the human and the non-human (69).

I quote so extensively in order to convey a sense of what Behrooz regards as the stakes of her inquiry in this chapter and to offer a taste of her prose, which is not always as fluid as would be helpful to readers trying to follow her argument. She sees Tolkien as offering “a radical approach that goes far beyond the love of trees with which he is so associated” and it is in that unexpected radicalism that the value of his work apparently lies (69).

I am not persuaded that this is the most productive way in which “to bring [Tolkien’s] oeuvre more seriously within the field of literary studies” (174). For one thing, it downplays what I would regard as one of Behrooz’s real strengths: her insight into particular moments in Tolkien’s work. For example, I had never considered the parallels between the Hobbits clearing trees for farming in the Shire and the Orcs doing so as part of the fortification of Isengard (82–83). Yet now that Behrooz, following Verlyn Flieger, has pointed out those parallels, it is hard not to see the Hobbits as more aggressive and reckless than their general reputation would suggest. Similarly, her insistence that maps attempt to “freez[e] the deep time of the landscape” (114) sets up an interesting discussion of Lothlórien as “an act of embalming, a ‘corner of the Elder Days’ that ought to be relegated to the ancient depths of deep time but is not” (123). Accordingly, it has “the same stagnation” that is to be found in “the artificial fixity of the map as object”: “nestled” at the center of the map that is included in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, “between the Drimrill Dale and the Field of Celebrant, the Nimrodel running neatly through it in ink, Lórien is preserved forever, a cluster of trees that – much like the mallorn themselves – can never wither or fade” (125).

However, the intriguing implications of what Behrooz is drawing out of these passages are unnecessarily curtailed by her repeated insistence that what lends them significance is the way in which they anticipate the positions of more recent theorists. I am completely open to the possibility that Tolkien “was a man, in many ways, ahead of his time” (133). But being Said or J.B. Harley *avant la lettre* is hardly the only way to be ahead of one’s time and many of the most provocative aspects of Tolkien’s work are ones that do not wholly align with the theorists that Behrooz is holding up as the gold standard. Consider, for example, her claim that the impossibility of adequately mapping a dynamic process like the Huorns forming a wood around Isengard helps us understand the measures they are taking as “the ultimate act of non-human incomppliance” (96). This strikes me as an idea that has the potential to take recent thinking

about non-human agency in an interesting new direction – one that focuses less on the somewhat spatialized concepts of networks and assemblages and more on how the will of non-human actors works over both space and time. Unfortunately, Behrooz declines the opportunity to consider Tolkien as a theorist in his own right whose work might challenge and extend that of recent post-humanism. Rather, what she sees as important about Tolkien's work in this regard is that it "reform[s] and resist[s] the easy fantasy soundbite of the legendarium – a moral, binary battle between good and evil – into something much more radical and ambivalent: a troubling of our automatic centering of human concerns" akin to the challenges laid down by Morton, Haraway, et al. with which we are already familiar (96). That is, Behrooz seems far more concerned with legitimating the study of Tolkien by showing that it could lead to the same conclusions as recent theorists than with using his work to push their theories in new, more sophisticated and nuanced directions. Perhaps the latter is not how she conceives of the task of literary studies, but I think not pursuing it is a missed opportunity.

Behrooz seems to unnecessarily limit the force of her argument in another way as well. She repeatedly acknowledges the existence of other ways of thinking about the material on which she is working, only to immediately discount them or set them aside as having been covered by someone else. Yet often those other ways of thinking could intersect with Behrooz's in intriguing and important ways. For example, she is rather dismissive toward considering maps as a form of paratext or something that readers would engage with as part of following the narrative or understanding a fictional world, except in the case of Thrór's map, which has a clear function within the storyworld of *The Hobbit*. Yet it seems highly probable that many readers, especially lay readers, have engaged in just that sort of map-use in order to grasp, for example, how difficult it would be to get from the Shire to Mordor. Moreover, surely it makes a difference whether they are doing so with a black-and-white map printed as its own double-page spread early in the text itself (as it appears, for example, in the 1965 Ballantine paperback edition of *The Fellowship of the Ring*) or as a slightly different fold-out map printed in color and attached to the rear endpapers, as it is in a 1987 Houghton Mifflin hardcover edition. Behrooz seems to regard these ways of approaching maps as both naïve and already sufficiently treated by scholars like Ricardo Padrón. But surely things remain to be said about how the paratextual positioning of maps, or their use by readers as narrative assistants or guides to world-building, could intersect with the kinds of critique that she is teasing out.

Similarly, Behrooz acknowledges that Gerard Hynes has argued that "the Vale Ossë drag[ging] an island across the sea" in *The Book of Lost Tales* is probably a nod to "an episode in the *Prose Edda*, in which the giantess Gefjon pulls Zealand out into the ocean" (105). However, she immediately pivots away from a consideration of the consequences of this nod, effectively suggesting that the only context that matters for Tolkien's engagement with different time scales is the discrediting of the creation story in Genesis brought about by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century geology. However, since Tolkien was a medievalist by trade, it seems likely that we could learn something useful by considering how the semi-mythic time of the sagas resembles or departs from the deep time of geology (not to mention the compressed time of Church doctrine). All of which is to say that by only permitting her argument to include

what she regards as new, Behrooz prevents her ideas from going as far as they could, had they engaged more with some of the traditional concerns of Tolkien scholarship. Perhaps she is working from a premise that those traditional concerns have kept Tolkien from being taken sufficiently “seriously within the field of literary studies” (174), but I would propose that the best way to bring about the latter would be to treat Tolkien’s work as something that is good to think with, rather than as merely an object on which to bring recent theory to bear, and to consider previous Tolkien scholarship, no matter how seemingly old-fashioned, as a potential interlocutor for other modes of inquiry, instead of a closed body of work to accept or reject.

Two final things should be noted. One is big and the other fairly small. The big thing is that Behrooz gives equal weight to the published novels and to all of the subsequently gathered material. This has the potential advantage of positioning them all as necessary components of the legendarium as a whole, but if Behrooz is interested in Tolkien’s work as a prescient critique of some important aspects of our own time, then I should think it would matter that several thousand times more readers have plunged into *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* than into any of the other material, not all of which is even finished. The small thing is that the copyediting process seems to have broken down in the production of this book. Several of the works cited in the text are not in the bibliography and there are a number of small errors that should have been caught before publication: for example, there is an allusion to Haraway as “her of cyborg fame” (68), a claim that Bilbo’s close attention to maps has “worked to give him skills thatch none of the other characters possess” (73), a reference to the “principle narrative tension” across Tolkien’s oeuvre (134), and a dating of “the genocide of Indigenous populations in the colonization of the Americas” to 1452 (139).

Ultimately, *Mapping Middle-earth* does not take us as far as it could or as I wish it would. But it is nonetheless a useful counter to the still far too common caricature of Tolkien as a nostalgic, largely apolitical conservative. Behrooz’s book is also a helpful guide to the ways in which Tolkien responds to some of the questions posed by what she calls “our own collective mistake-making” (175). While the book probably will not do all that Behrooz apparently hopes it will do, it is worth engaging with nonetheless, both as a collection of interesting observations about different moments in Tolkien’s oeuvre and as a cautionary example of how too narrow a definition of significance can get in the way of demonstrating the actual importance of one’s work.

Biography: David A. Brewer is Associate Professor of English at The Ohio State University. After a quarter-century of writing about eighteenth-century literature, the history of the book, and the complexities of fictionality, he is now turning his attention to fantasy and the history of magic, the first fruits of which will be a short book on Susanna Clarke’s *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*.