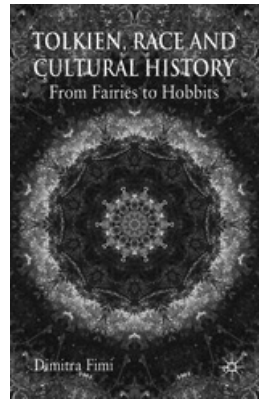
# Bring on the leprawns

Dimitra Fimi, *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History: From Fairies to Hobbits*. Palgrave Macmillan 2009. 252 pages. 9780230219519. Hardback £50.00

Reviewed by Nils-Lennart Johannesson, Stockholm University, Sweden




When J. R. R. Tolkien in an interview in 1966 was asked whether he approved of the writing of doctoral dissertations devoted to his works, he answered, "I do not while I am alive anyhow. I do not know why they should research without any reference to me; after all, I hold the key." (Fimi p. 7) What Fimi does in this book is approach Tolkien's *oeuvre* with a partly different set of keys from those commonly used in Tolkien studies, some of which Tolkien himself did his best to hide in his own comments on his work. The result is a rich study into Tolkien's creative impulses and the influences that worked on those impulses in the course of a long creative life.

The book is divided into three major parts. In the first part Fimi places the origins of Tolkien's writing in the Victorian and Edwardian literary and artistic predilection for fairies and goblins, as shown in the works of George Cruikshank, Edwin Landseer, George MacDonald and J. M. Barrie. Tolkien saw a performance of Barrie's play *Peter Pan* in Birmingham in the spring of 1910 when he was 18 years old, and apparently it made a strong impression on him. Fimi shows that Tolkien's early 'fairy poems' present precisely the Victorian/Edwardian image of fairies as small winged creatures associated with flowers, light and music, all of which he was later to denounce in his 1939 essay 'On Fairy-Stories' and to mock gently in the later story *Smith of Wootton Major*. The early poems, which may seem somewhat embarrassing to admirers of Tolkien's mature works, thus emerge as quite natural products of an immature poet who follows the conventions of his time. Fimi also discusses the relationship between Tolkien's Catholic faith and his writings about brownies, pixies, fays, and leprawns. Eventually, all this plethora of nature-related beings gave way to the Elves as presented (tall, sad, immortal) in Tolkien's mature writings, such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* (although the Elves of Rivendell as described in *The Hobbit* still retain some of the lightheartedness of the earlier fairies).

The second part is devoted to Tolkien's created languages. According to Fimi, the study of Tolkien's languages have followed two traditions: the scholarly tradition, adopting a philological approach to the available lexical material in especially Quenya and Sindarin during different stages of Tolkien's evolving perception of what these languages were like, and the practical tradition, in which groups of devotees have developed the languages as spoken languages for use in role-play of various kinds. Fimi strikes a third path: she sets out to explore the relationship between the invention of languages and the social context in which the language inventor was active. She sees Tolkien not as a loner with a unique hobby, but rather as a member of a tradition of language invention. Thus, one chapter in Part II is devoted to Tolkien's relationship to Esperanto and other artificial languages in vogue in the period between the World Wars. Tolkien apparently learnt some Esperanto as a teenager, and became a member of the Board of Honorary Advisers of the Educational Committee of the British Esperantist Association in 1932, although he claimed not to be a practising Esperantist. Tolkien's views on artificial primary world languages were, perhaps not surprisingly, sprung from the same principles of linguistic aestheticism as governed the creation of his own secondary world languages. What sets Tolkien apart from the inventors of languages like Esperanto and Volapük is that he did not invent languages for the use of speakers in the primary world; instead he invented speech communities and individual speakers to go with the languages in a fictive, secondary world.

More striking, however, than the discussion of Tolkien's actual invention of languages, whether related to Esperanto or not, is Fimi's account of Tolkien's views on linguistic aesthetics, more particularly as expressed in the lecture *English and Welsh* from 1956. Here Tolkien set out to explain why people may find various languages appealing and aesthetically pleasing, more so than their native tongue. He develops a theory which presupposes that linguistic impressions from, say, exposure to Welsh in the Middle Ages can be genetically

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transmitted over a number of generations until this dormant property one day comes to the surface as a predilection for modern Welsh sounds. This is of course nonsense — Tom Shippey has referred to this as "Tolkien's major linguistic heresy" (quoted in Fimi p. 76) — and it seems hard to believe that Tolkien intended this seriously. An alternative interpretation would be that this was intended as a joke, intended to be so absurd that no sensible person could be expected to take it seriously, but which somehow has not come across from Tolkien's lecture notes.

The third part of the book (chapters 8–11) deals with the far-reaching consequences for Tolkien's mythology writing of the fact that *The Hobbit* was published in 1937. This created a demand for more non-mythological writing (*The Silmarillion*, in the shape it then had, was rejected by Allen & Unwin) which was met, eventually, by the writing of *The Lord of the Rings*. But all this novelistic writing encroached on the world described in the legendarium, and made it much more difficult to revise the mythology as Tolkien's thoughts and ideas evolved over the decades, once characters and episodes from the mythology had been mentioned, if only in passing, in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. This led, in the end, to Tolkien's inability to complete his legendarium before his death in 1973, since there were too many incompatible versions around, some of them actually having appeared in print so that they could no longer be modified as needed.

As regards the notion of race in the primary world, Tolkien is reported to have used racialist terminology in a school-boy debate on Shakespeare's works at King Edward's School, Birmingham; as an adult he spoke out very strongly against the racism in Nazi Germany, and explicitly related prehistoric linguistic developments to "peoples, not races" (Fimi p. 139).

In Tolkien's secondary world, Elves and Men are classified in different ways. The 'races' of Elves are recognised on the basis of choice: the distinction between the Lesser Elves and the High Elves depends on the choice they made when called to Valinor. The three Houses of Men by contrast were identified by means of physical and mental attributes: of physical stature, colour of hair and eyes, quickness or slowness of thought etc. Here Fimi sees similarities with the account of 'the three races of Europe', the Nordic, the Alpine, and the Mediterranean races, in William Ripley's *The Races of Europe* from 1899.

By the time of the Third Age as described in *The Lord of the Rings*, the Men of Middle-Earth are characterised by a basic dichotomy: they were either fair-skinned and more or less actively opposed to Mordor (i.e. 'good' people), or swarthy Easterlings siding with Mordor (i.e. 'evil' people). The only people falling outside this classification system were the Woses, the Wild Men represented by Ghân-buri-Ghân, physically ungainly and linguistically characterised by simple syntax and lexis. Fimi sees the Woses as embodying "another commonplace idea of Victorian anthropology: the equation of the mental development of the primitive 'savage' man with that of 'civilized' children … According to this view, the mental development in 'lower', 'uncivilized' races halted in early adolescence and so their character remained more automatic and instinctive." (Fimi p. 150) Nevertheless, Tolkien does not portray them as an inferior race: "Tolkien seems to view them as 'noble savages' … [t]heir primitiveness is respected rather than despised." (Fimi p. 151)

In chapter 10 Fimi discusses the material culture of Middle-Earth, and takes up such matters as ship burials and tomb building, the Crown of Gondor (based on Egyptian or Norse models?), the windows of Meduseld, and the material culture of the Shire. In her discussion of the relationship between the Sarehole Mill of Tolkien's childhood and the Old Mill of Hobbiton Fimi clears up a few misconceptions.

The book under review has been produced as an attractive volume which is a pleasure to handle. It would have been even more pleasant to look into if the publishers had invested in colour reproductions of the many oil paintings that provide important evidence for various points the author is making, rather than the rather dark and dull greyscale illustrations used. What is most painfully missing from the volume, however, is proper proofreading. The book is liberally sprinkled with the kind of typos that spell checkers would not notice, but which irritate the human eye. Slightly more entertaining than the occurrences of "it" for "is", however, is when Fimi claims that Tolkien in the story *Farmer Giles of Ham* provides an explanation of the place-name "Thames" (p. 108), when the name really is "Thame", the name of a town in Oxfordshire.

But any reader interested in the work of J. R. R. Tolkien who is willing to put up with the typos is in for a treat. The book is intelligently argued and full of interesting ideas and approaches, offering fresh insights into Tolkien's authorship. Even if you do not agree with all of Fimi's conclusions, you will find plenty of stimulating and thought-provoking material to make the book well worth reading.



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