



Routledge Studies in Speculative Fiction

J.R.R. TOLKIEN IN CENTRAL EUROPE

CONTEXT, DIRECTIONS, AND THE LEGACY

Edited by
Janka Kascakova and David Levente Palatinus



J.R.R. Tolkien in Central Europe

This volume is a long overdue contribution to the dynamic, but unevenly distributed study of fantasy and J.R.R. Tolkien's legacy in Central Europe. The chapters move between and across theories of cultural and social history, reception, adaptation, and audience studies, and offer methodological reflections on the various cultural perceptions of Tolkien's oeuvre and its impact on twenty-first century manifestations. They analyse how discourses about fantasy are produced and mediated, and how processes of re-mediation shape our understanding of the historical coordinates and local peculiarities of fantasy in general, and Tolkien in particular, all that in Central Europe in an age of global fandom. The collection examines the entanglement of fantasy and Central European political and cultural shifts across the past 50 years and traces the ways in which its haunting legacy permeates and subverts different modes and aesthetics across different domains from communist times through today's media-saturated culture.

Janka Kascakova is Associate Professor in English at the Catholic University of Ružomberok, Slovakia and Palacký University Olomouc, the Czech Republic. Her research centers on modernism and the modernist short story, especially the works of Katherine Mansfield, and fantasy literature, chiefly the works of J.R.R. Tolkien.

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Contents

<i>List of Contributors</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>ix</i>
Introduction	1
DAVID LEVENTE PALATINUS, JANKA KASCAKOVA	
PART I	
Reception and Translations of Tolkien in Hungary	11
1 Reading Tolkien in Hungary, Part I: The 20th Century	13
GERGELY NAGY	
2 Reading Tolkien in Hungary, Part II: The 21st Century	34
GERGELY NAGY	
PART II	
Reception and Translations of Tolkien in Czechoslovakia and Its Succeeding Countries	59
3 Mythologia Non Grata: Tolkien and Socialist Czechoslovakia	61
JANKA KASCAKOVA	
4 “Through darkness you have come to your hope”: The Dynamics of J.R.R. Tolkien’s Work Reception in the Czech Context	74
TEREZA DĚDINOVÁ	

5	J.R.R. Tolkien in the Slovak Press: Situation After 1990	93
	JOZEFA PEVČÍKOVÁ, EVA URBANOVÁ TRANSLATED BY JELA KEHOE	
6	Unknotting the Translation Knots in <i>The Hobbit</i>: A Diachronic Analysis of Slovak Translations from 1973 and 2002	117
	JELA KEHOE	
PART III		
	Studying Fantasy after Tolkien: Legacies and Contemporary Perspectives	129
7	Growing Up in Fantasy: Inspecting the Convergences of Young Adult Literature and Fantastic Fiction	131
	MARTINA VRÁNOVÁ	
8	One Does Not Simply Teach Fantasy: How Students of English and American Studies in Hungary View the Genre and Tolkien's Legacy	150
	NIKOLETT SIPOS	
9	From Niche to Mainstream? Screen Culture's Impact on Contemporary Perceptions of Fantasy	161
	DAVID LEVENTE PALATINUS	
	<i>Index</i>	179

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Introduction

David Levente Palatinus, Janka Kascakova

Even a superficial look at contemporary cultural production shows that fantasy, especially in the aftermath of the adaptations of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, or J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*, was given a new impetus. This curious genre continues to maintain a pervasive presence in our historic present, whilst keeping the ability to garner an extremely wide and solid fan base. Its popularity and centrality in the cultural domain since the 1930s have been frequently attributed to its ability to channel, among other things, cultural perceptions and imaginaries of transgression, sublimity, instances of escapism and otherness, as well as the intricate relation between politics and power. Whilst maintaining its reliance on curiously formulaic patterns of plot, themes, characters, and, most importantly, a peculiar poetics of worldbuilding, it continues to resist rigid categorisation: demarcating its multiple different variations continues to be a challenge for scholarship – but this quality also allows fantasy to be one of the most versatile and heterogeneous forms: especially in its recent manifestations both in literary fiction and across converging media, it has become more and more conducive to (generic) subversion, transgression, and hybridisation. As is the case with other instances of genre fiction, it is the ability to adapt and to constantly reinvent itself, its ubiquity, and its reliance on participatory fandom that makes fantasy, as a genre as well as a mode, so powerful and capable of mobilising audiences across national and cultural boundaries (see Vránová, Vernyik and Palatinus).

Whilst Tolkien's work and legacy continues to be widely studied in the Western world, scholarly approaches to both fantasy and Tolkien's reception in Central Europe remain relatively underexposed. *The Lord of the Rings* was translated into Czech and Hungarian relatively early, still during communist times, although in the former case only as a samizdat available to few. Tolkien studies in the region saw an upsurge only after the millennium and was mostly driven by the film adaptations, which brought audiences back to the original trilogy, opened up Tolkien's universe to curious

2 *David Levente Palatinus, Janka Kasčakova*

would-be fans, and launched a peculiar form of participatory culture and fandom in Central Europe.

When fantasy tackled the unresolved tension between rationality and more volatile, suggestible, mysterious conditions, the genre was infused with political and social significance, becoming a vehicle of escapism (see Hume). Fantasy questioned the nature of power and authority, notably in relation to an oppressive past, and the ways in which gender roles reinforced social norms in contemporary society. Tolkien and the cultural myth around his figure emerged as a major factor within this process as his stories often employed supernatural elements to self-reflexivity and to examine the fundamental conventions of the construction of gender roles.

These phenomena began to be contextualised recently within a broader media landscape, shedding light on the exchanges between literature, the press, the radio, and technologically inflected aesthetics. The focus is on an ever-changing, polymorphous fantasy imagination whose pervasiveness and power even seem able to mould reality into its own shape, as shown by the proliferation of contemporary fan art. The reactions of the contemporaneous press to Tolkien's trilogy provided a framework for the conceptualisation as well as the early iconography of the British high fantasy. Far from being tamed within an increasingly secularised, ideology-driven society, fantasy actually resurfaced within a peculiarly rational form. It retains its transgressive power despite the normative and restrictive theorisation it underwent. This project therefore attempts to add a new facet to the "hauntological" dimension of Tolkien, from literary fiction to cinema and fandom.

Due in part to the success of the film adaptations, Tolkien, and by extension, fantasy has recently been rediscovered as a trending genre paradigm in Western literary and media scholarship. It is perceived as a conduit for underlying cultural ideas about worldbuilding and historical nostalgia (Jameson), transmediality, fandom, and participatory culture as well as media convergence. Tolkien and the fantasy genre have seen an upsurge in post-socialist Central Europe as well, yet while the fandom is increasing, the scholarly study of Tolkien's Central European legacy has lagged behind, with fantasy is still being considered a niche genre situated on the popular end of the literary scale. This volume proposes to analyse the ways in which specific discourses (in academia and in the fandom) about Tolkien's legacy are produced and mediated and examine how processes of remediation and re-purposing shape our understanding of both the historical coordinates and local peculiarities of fantasy in Central Europe in an age of global fandom. The chapters in this book focus on Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary. This is partly due to the geographic distribution of the contributors and their expertise and partly was a result of a conscious decision: although Poland geographically belongs to the region, its own

burgeoning fantasy tradition prevented us from including it in the volume to avoid disproportionality.

To that end, this study also aspires to be both a historical investigation of the development of fantasy through national literatures of Central Europe and a methodological reflection on the metamorphoses that ensure the survival and dissemination of fantasy works.

The contributors bring together scholarship that explores various interconnected aspects of fantasy and Tolkien's legacy through the lens of converging critical and methodological approaches. We view high fantasy as a dynamic form that exceeds the concept of literary genre, proving able to renovate and adapt through constant processes of hybridisation. Starting from this interdisciplinary approach, the individual chapters focus on the domains of literary, filmic/televisual, and popular-cultural studies and mobilise texts from the second half of the 20th century to the present day in Central Europe that have come to constitute instances of local Tolkien fandom.

We offer this volume as a necessary and long overdue contribution to the dynamic but unevenly distributed field of the study of the fantasy genre in general and J.R.R. Tolkien's oeuvre and legacy in particular. While in the USA, Tolkien's work is respected as a relevant academic objective and scholars have been working on it since the 1960s, systematic and academic studies of the various permutations of fantasy in Central-Eastern Europe are only beginning to gain traction. There seems to be a great deal of reluctance for academics to be associated with the study of Tolkien, if not as a secondary interest, then certainly as the primary one. In the post-socialist Central European countries we are discussing here (Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia), this trend is even more obvious. For that reason, there has never been an attempt at systematically studying the origins and development of Tolkien's reception as groundwork for future academic discussion of fantasy. This volume's ambition is to redress this oversight by discussing the earliest reception of Tolkien's work in the geographical area indicated while it was still part of the Soviet bloc, demonstrating how the potential of fantasy for manifold interpretations and its appeal to general readers were perceived as a threat to the ideological foundations of the so-called socialist states. As this threat was taken very seriously by the authorities, the history of Tolkien's reception shows the tension between the censors' and publishers' effort to thwart the publications of his work and the individual scholars', translators', and enthusiasts' creative ways of sidestepping their obstacles. This also necessitates discussing the hidden influence of Tolkien on the dissident culture, the status of *The Lord of the Rings* as a manifest of freedom and fight against the regime.

Our collection also aims to investigate the post-socialist era's approach to and reception of Tolkien, arguing that fantasy, and Tolkien's work in

particular, became an integral part of the democratisation process in the studied countries, one of the manifestations of freedom of speech and expression. The publications of not only Tolkien but fantasy in general soared right after the change of regimes in the first wave; the second wave came after Peter Jackson's popular film adaptations gained traction globally as well as in a more local context, kick-starting a gradually accelerating process of the proliferation of occurrences of the fantastic (and more broadly, speculative) modes and discourses in literary fiction, screen media (including film, television, and video games) – but more importantly, and also as a necessary result, in scholarship as well. Our research, however, indicates that this immense popularity for the general public created a still existing rift between the “fans” and “serious” academics who were, for a long time, seen as polar opposites. Academic research in the field has, for a long time, been sporadic and very cautious. However, what applies to Tolkien is not entirely the case of fantasy in general, as research in the recent years has increasingly begun to adopt new approaches that dispose of the dismissal of views that popular culture is irrelevant to academic study, and opened new avenues to our understanding of the importance of fantasy – especially in regard to the central position that this mode and form occupies on a number of visual media platforms as well as in their respective scholarly studies, be it from the point of view of the genre, audiences, or that of production cultures within a Central European context.

Combining cultural theory, literary studies, and media studies, we seek to explore (1) the ways Tolkien's work has been perceived, disseminated, studied and, most recently, taught at universities in Central Europe; (2) what the shifting focus of literary scholarship towards popular genres reveals about forms of cultural import from Anglophone contexts; (3) what role Tolkien's legacy plays in perpetuating stereotypical perceptions of Britain's past and present; and (4) how fantasy's worldbuilding helps circulate ideas about racial, political, and geographic otherness, femininity and masculinity, domination and equity, practices of exclusion, and, finally, mythological conceptions of good vs. evil, from communist times through to today's media-saturated culture. To that end, we ask the following questions: (1) What is the relationship between discourses of Tolkien's work, our attempts to depoliticise fantasy, and the pervasiveness of our political, economic, and cultural anxieties in Central Europe, especially in our present historic times? (2) Do conceptualisations of fantasy have a history of their own – especially a Central European one? and (3) What does this history reveal about the ways in which we negotiate local cultural legacies in relation to global ones? In order to trace this multifarious legacy, the contributions in this volume attempt to challenge and expand on previous conceptualisations of fantasy itself by suggesting that it returns in times of cultural crisis. This transgressive, experimental

mode is actually conducive to alternative experiences of the intricacies of our present historical condition, as shown by the proliferation of Tolkien's paratextual universe, fan art, online communities, and scholarly interest.

(Re-)Conceptualising Fantasy? A Convergence of Perspectives

Although literary-historical, genre-based, popular-cultural, or adaptation studies-focused discourses, as well as research into the various cultural forms and modes of speculative fiction and fantasy are well-established in Slovakia (Nagy; Keserű; Nagy and Keserű), the critical re-assessment of Tolkien's legacy and its centrality in the interrelations of Anglophone cultural import and Central European fantasy writing and the academic study of Tolkien fandom is somewhat underrepresented. Therefore, this volume proposes to fill in a void in critical thinking in four interconnected aspects: (1) it reconfigures problems of demarcation (global and local, national and transnational trends in fandom as part of the history of reception, political allergisation vs. attempts to depoliticise fantasy) and repositions questions of agency and participation from the perspective of global and local trends (Dhoest; Risse; Fraille-Marcos; Roudometof). (2) By combining cultural theory, literary scholarship, and media research, the project maps out the underlying processes and cultural forms through which these concepts are produced and mediated. (3) It calls attention to so far underrepresented literary and media texts and offers new, Central European perspectives on well-known literary and media genres to enrich their reception (Dubs and Kascakova). (4) By identifying political, cultural, and historical factors underlying the perception of Tolkien as a niche author from communist times through to the present, it bridges the gap between fandom-based and scholarly approaches to his legacy (Barker; Duits).

The main strength of the volume lies in its interdisciplinary character which allows for substantial methodological reflections on the various cultural perceptions of both Tolkien and the fantasy genre. The volume charts the generic and political diversity of fantasy across five decades, arguing for the striking proliferation of Tolkien's tropes across a range of different media, whilst accounting for the discrepancies in the reception of his works: as some texts were picked up for adaptation and translation more easily than others. Unearthing reasons beyond political or aesthetic preferences both in scholarship and fandom, the primary purpose is to map out the underlying complexity of the historical legacy of fantasy that warrants attention for its ability to survive and adapt to different cultural contexts and ages. The chapters in this book therefore expand the concept of fantasy beyond a literary genre or a single interpretation. They emphasise the aggressive pervasiveness of fantasy as a mode and trace the ways in

which Tolkien's haunting legacy permeates and subverts different modes and aesthetics across different cultural and national domains.

We admittedly and purposefully appraise fantasy in its range of manifestations. It is not by chance that the chapters of this volume move between and across the fields of genre and reception theories, historiography, literary fiction, and finally film and television. Besides covering a wide range of formats, the volume also offers an overview of the metamorphoses and reception of fantasy from the legacy of Tolkien's oeuvre to 21st-century manifestations in popular media. The main strength of the volume lies in its interdisciplinary character, enhanced by the international scope of its contributors, which allows for substantial methodological reflections on the various cultural perceptions of (Tolkienian) fantasy. Taken as a whole, the chapters chart the generic and political diversity of the fantastic across Central European countries, arguing as they do so for the striking proliferation of fantasy tropes across a range of different forms and media. Whilst accounting for the discrepancies in the reception of fantasy and unearthing reasons beyond political or aesthetic preferences both in scholarship and fandom, our collection seeks to map out the underlying entanglement of fantasy as a mode and Central European political and cultural shifts across the past 50 years. We argue that fantasy warrants attention for its ability to survive and adapt to different cultural contexts and ages.

Methodology and Organising Principle

We opted to consider mixed methods, including qualitative and quantitative research. The volume seeks to explore the ways in which we negotiate fantasy across various media and national contexts – not just from the perspective of our present historical time but also through analyses of the history of Tolkien studies itself. Our method builds on the combination of cultural theory, literary scholarship, and media research in order to map out the processes and practices through which fictional and non-fictional renditions of fantasy are produced and circulated in a Central European milieu. The volume intends to fill in a void in regard to systematic scholarly studies of Tolkien's impact on the literary landscape of popular literature in Central Europe, and the apparent disconnect between contemporary audiences' responses and intense engagement with fantasy across media, and the apparent lag that Central European scholarship needs to work off in regard to the subject matter.

The chapters of the collection are arranged into three sections: the first two adopt a combination of diachronic and synchronic approaches in their discussion of Tolkien's reception and translations of his works in specific Central European cultural (and political) contexts over the past half a century. The third section looks at contemporary formations and opens up

the discussion to adaptation and transmediality via analyses of cognitive narratology in young adult contexts, the teachability of fantasy in contemporary curricula, and screen culture's impact on fantasy's evolution from niche to mainstream.

Section 1: Reception and Translations of Tolkien in Hungary

In this first section, Gergely Nagy offers a two-chapter comprehensive overview and analysis of the reception of Tolkien in Hungary. The first chapter focuses on pre-2000 translations, and comments on what the author calls the first fantasy boom, that, interestingly, wasn't the product but rather the catalyst for the subsequent interest in the works of Tolkien and instigated a first wave of their translation. The chapter argues that at that time, Tolkien was "comfortably slotted into children's literature and science fiction" (14) – as attested by the author's extensive survey of the Hungarian press and literature that discussed Tolkien in this period.

The second part of Nagy's survey of the reception of Tolkien in Hungary then proceeds to focus on the years between 2000 and today and examines how Peter Jackson's film production energised the already existing, yet somewhat less visible fan base. He traces the gradual shift in the dynamics of fan communities facilitated by the Internet. He then offers a historical overview of the founding and development of the Hungarian Tolkien Society, which played a very important role in organising Tolkien Studies in Hungary and was instrumental in shaping the academic discourse on Tolkien and the fantasy mode in more general terms. The chapter concludes with Tolkien's changing cultural role and the proliferation of ways in which he is now approached. It also offers an overview of the scholarly literature published in Hungarian.

Section 2: Reception and Translations of Tolkien in Czechoslovakia and Its Succeeding Countries

While mainly discussing forms of reception, censorship, and translations within specific political milieus, this section contextualises these phenomena within a broader socio-political landscape, shedding light on the exchanges between literature, (post-)socialist power structures, and political activism and escapism. The focus is on an ever-changing, polymorphous fantasy imagination whose pervasiveness and power seem even able to mould reality into its own shape, as shown by the convoluted and imbalanced reception of Tolkien's specific texts. As convincingly argued here, the discrepancies between the reactions of general readership and the (reluctant) approval of the state apparatus provided a controversial framework for the conceptualisation of the status and cultural logic of fantasy, as well

as for early translations of Tolkien's works. Far from being tamed within an increasingly secularised society, fantasy gradually resurfaced after the fall of the Iron Curtain, retaining its transgressive power despite normative and restrictive theorisations and framing as a genre/form of lesser importance. The chapters in this section argue that the past continues to haunt the present in fantasy growing into and remaining a form of political allegory and escape. Janka Kascakova's chapter thus traces the development and particular instances of the reception of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, uncovering the origins of the important place Tolkien's work would gain behind the Iron Curtain. In the subsequent chapter offering a quantitative analysis of conceptualisations of good and evil, freedom, the representation of otherness, racism, and feminist and environmental themes, Tereza Dědinová focuses on the shifts in the reception of Tolkien's works over time, with particular attention to readers who read the novels as adults or teens in the 1990s and younger readers who only came to reading it in this millennium and in the aftermath of Jackson's adaptations. The third chapter in this section, by Jozefa Pevčíková and Eva Urbanová, examines critical commentaries and ongoing fan discourse published in the Slovak press, academic journals, and pop cultural publications (both official and fan-made) since the 1990s until the present in order to account for the shifting trends in the underlying ideological concerns of reception history that inform Tolkien discourse in contemporary Slovakia. The section is concluded by Jela Kehoe's chapter on the challenges emerging from the (un-)translatability of culturally (and linguistically) specific contents in relation to Tolkien's texts, especially in a situation where, on the one hand, the translator has to navigate a sensitive political context and where the lack of similar literary tradition in the native language creates extra challenge for a successful and relatable translation of elements central to fantasy worldbuilding.

Section 3: Studying Fantasy After Tolkien: Legacies and Contemporary Perspectives

The third section of the collection aims at mapping out specific traits of the manifestation of popular (urban) fantasy in contemporary literary, filmic, and television narratives. In recent years, specific fantasy scenarios have again become central to numerous forms of film and television. The chapters in this section operate on the understanding that the fantasy mode has proved to be particularly conducive to figurations of human and non-human otherness, and instances of worldbuilding. Through textual analyses of specific program texts, Martina Vránová's chapter focuses on YA worldbuilding and the ways in which patterns like the rite of passage facilitate the audience's search for identity. Nikolett Sipos's chapter investigates

questions of teachability in relation to fantasy by offering a case study of the ways Hungarian students of English and American studies consume and engage with fantasy via various converging media.

In a similar vein, David Palatinus' chapter comments on the technological shifts in filmmaking, and how the proliferation of streaming platforms played a role in moving fantasy from niche to mainstream, and argues that theories of adaptation, transmediality, and participatory agency have to be repositioned to better situate generic hybridity and the (de)convergence of platforms. The contributions in this section ask questions not only about fears and anxieties, attachment and aberration, repression and abuse, violence and control, and the subconscious and the transcendental, but they also ask questions about the broader political and cultural contexts in which these generic transformations unfold and about the complex ethical dilemmas they unmask. The chapters look at the roots of classic and lesser-known renditions of fantasy tropes by ascertaining the shifting dynamics of filmic and televisual adaptations.

Our findings will interest a large number of researchers whose work moves between and across areas of literary and cultural studies, genre theory, and adaptation as well as those whose scholarship focuses on one or more of the key themes in Tolkien's oeuvre. These themes are rapidly establishing themselves as reference points in ongoing critical discourses on fantasy within and beyond academic circles. These insights will also be of interest to Central European scholars who work on cultural representations in genres and who study the cultural impact and reception of Tolkien's legacy in their own countries. Since fantasy has established itself as a mainstream component of university curricula at all levels, outputs of the project will also be of interest to a variety of students. Undergraduate and MA readers will benefit from the innovative, comprehensive, and updated approach with which this project integrates mainstream approaches to Tolkien's works with their multifaceted re-emergences in a variety of arts and media from the 1950s to the present.

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