

## An interview with Tom Shippey

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Tom Shippey was born in Calcutta in 1943. His father was an engineer and bridge-builder, his mother (also born in Calcutta) was the daughter of the Harbourmaster. Both stayed on for some years after Indian independence in 1947, and Tom was sent to boarding school in Scotland at the age of seven. He often remarks that it was a proper boarding school, not like Hogwarts, where the children go home for holidays! Inmates of his school, with parents abroad and as yet little air travel, were there 365 days a year and saw their parents at three-year intervals.

His parents did however eventually return to Britain and in 1954 Tom won a scholarship to King Edward's School, Birmingham, where Tolkien had been a pupil fifty years before. He went on to Cambridge in 1961, and in 1965, with only a BA in English, became Assistant Lecturer, coincidentally, at Birmingham University opposite his old school – which meant that for seven years he could play rugby for the Old Edwardians club. His first book came out in 1972 with the title *Old English Verse*, and on the strength of this he gained a Fellowship at St John's College, Oxford, a major and unexpected promotion. Other publications on Old English led to appointment in 1979 as Chair of English Language and Medieval English Literature at the University of Leeds – the Chair Tolkien had held, again some fifty years before.

Up till then, his publications had almost all been in orthodox areas of medieval studies – there is a very long list of his publications at <http://www.slu.edu/english-department/faculty/thomas-shippey-phd> – but meeting Tolkien in Oxford before Tolkien's death in 1973 had given Tom a strong sense of fellow-feeling with another Anglo-Saxonist, Old Edwardian, and rugby player, and he decided to write a book about Tolkien's fiction (to use Tolkien's own phrase from the *Sir Gawain* edition) “of the sort which its author may be supposed to have desired”. This came out in 1982 as *The Road*

Alexandra Guglieri, *Selima* 21 (2015–2016): 193–204.  
ISSN 1132-631X

to *Middle-earth*, which has since appeared in successive expanded editions up to 2005. The burden of this was that Tolkien could and should be seen diachronically, as inspired by the discoveries of the Grimmian discipline of comparative philology – Jacob Grimm being, so to speak, the nineteenth-century Darwin of the humanities. Some years later Tom reflected further that Tolkien could also be seen synchronically, in the context of his own time, though it was a very different context from that normally noticed by literary critics (sc. “modernism”). This insight appeared first at a conference and then in a volume organised by SELIM-attendee Keith Battarbee, and led to the provocatively-titled *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (2001). In 2007 *Walking Tree Press* brought out a collection of Tom’s papers on Tolkien, titled *Roots and Branches*.

In 1993, meanwhile, and after Visiting Professorships at Harvard and the University of Texas, Tom had taken up the Walter J. Ong Chair of Humanities at Saint Louis University, where he remained till his retirement in 2008. During this period he continued to publish in the areas both of medieval studies and of modern fantasy, but he began to take an interest as well in the then-neglected topic of “medievalism”, that is to say the way the Middle Ages have been viewed and exploited in the modern world. He edited several volumes of *Studies in Medievalism*, as well as the 2005 collection *The Shadow-walkers: Jacob Grimm’s Mythology of the Monstrous*. Another very time-consuming task was the survey of early reactions to *Beowulf* (most of them written in German or Scandinavian languages) begun with Professor Andreas Haarder of Odense University, but devolving on Tom after Professor Haarder suffered an untimely and serious stroke. This appeared eventually as *The Critical Heritage: Beowulf* (1998), a work which has kept many scholarly opinions alive – even though most of them had been amusingly dismissed by Tolkien in his influential lecture of 1936.

Tom had, however, had a secret passion ever since 1958 (secret in the sense that it had had to be concealed from academic circles, in which it was regarded as sub-literary). This was for science fiction. He attended and spoke at science-fiction fan conventions, became a judge of the John Campbell Award for Year’s Best Novel almost from the award’s inception in 1974, and collaborated with the famous author Harry Harrison on two “alternate history” trilogies (*West of Eden* and *The Hammer and the Cross*) in the 1980s and 1990s. Fifteen of his occasional essays have now been collected and published in 2016 by Liverpool University Press as *Hard Reading: Learning from Science Fiction*.

Meanwhile, in alleged retirement, Tom keeps all his interests alive. Listing them chiastically, he is currently the regular reviewer of science fiction and fantasy for *The Wall Street Journal*. His interest in medievalism, especially as it affects the creation of national identities, shows in his connections with the SPIN and ERNiE projects of Professor Joep Leerssen of Amsterdam (Study Program in Interlocking Nationalisms and Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe): he is a frequent speaker in Europe on such topics. On Old English, he contributed to the 2014 volume of *The Dating of Beowulf*, edited by Leonard Neidorf, and is co-editor, with Neidorf and Rafael J. Pascual of Granada, of *Old English Philology: Studies in Honour of R.D. Fulk*. He, Leonard, and Rafael have other projects in mind, all part of what Tom labelled at the SELIM conference in Granada 2015 as *La Reconquista de la Filología*, a goal of which Tolkien would heartily have approved.

Finally, completed or half-completed, but not as yet placed with publishers, are a book on Old Norse, which may in the end be titled *The Road to Valhalla: Death and the Vikings*, and another which builds on published articles and applies pragmatic linguistics to early poetry in several languages, *How the Heroes Talk*.

If there is a consistent element in these many activities, it is a conviction that, in the English-speaking academic world, critics have been neglecting, ignoring, or misprising vital developments, both intellectual (comparative philology and medievalism) and popular (the rise of fantasy and science fiction as literary genres). Attention has been disproportionately focused on classical canons – such as “the Great Tradition” of F.R. Leavis, which ruled Cambridge in Tom’s youth, and the now-outdated notion of “modernism” – and in the last forty years on the philosophical notions of “literary theory” which have driven many British and American students out of the humanities altogether.

Tom knows he is a *Neinsager*, who finds it easy to disagree with established opinion. Some would say – in line with the current veneration for those who claim victim status – that this may be connected with old feelings of being an “outsider.” Tom, however, characteristically thinks he is an “insider” and it is the administrators of established literary opinion who are culturally marginal.

This is, of course, a minority opinion. At the moment. But time will tell.

The following interview was conducted via e-mail by Alexandra Guglieri, of the Universidad de Granada, during October 2015.

1. Your association with SELIM goes back quite a few years, and you've delivered the keynote address at two different conferences. How would you describe your connection to SELIM? What do you enjoy most about presenting your work at SELIM?

For the whole fifty years of my professional career (1965–2015, so far), departments of English studies in Britain and America have set their faces against any form of serious language study. Students graduating with degrees in 'English Language and Literature' usually know nothing about the structure of their own language, and have a diminishingly small awareness of its history.<sup>1</sup> The discipline has been controlled by the literary critics, many of whom were and are what Tolkien, in his Oxford "Valedictory Address", called "misologists". I spent many of my fifty years, accordingly, fighting what one of Tolkien's characters called "the long defeat" – trying to keep some part of the old philological discipline on the syllabus of successive universities.

I had some success at Leeds in the 1980s (though that success has now been reversed), and it was at this time that I came into contact with Patricia Shaw, a Leeds graduate and one of the founders of SELIM. Briefly, SELIM has always been a great relief to me because none of what I said in the paragraph above applies to it. Just a few days ago, a young American working for a PhD in philology at Oxford said to me, looking at the 2015 SELIM programme, "[t]here are more philological papers offered at SELIM [which had seventy delegates] than at the whole of Kalamazoo [the annual International medieval Congress, which has more than 4000 attendees]". That's correct. SELIM never turned its face away from philology, and has continued to develop philological methods and results.

And in addition, its conferences have always been exceptionally genial, hospitable, and culturally valuable. I remember exploring Moorish hydraulics at Córdoba, marvelling at the clock collection in Coruña (clocks are one of the great medieval inventions), visiting Cervantes' house at Alcalá de Henares (one of only two pre-modern houses which I could see myself living in), and going to the flamenco in Granada: always accompanied by old friends and new ones.

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<sup>1</sup> To illustrate this, I have put a couple of my recent reviews – of books by a Mr Ritche and a Professor Watts – under my name on the website academia.edu. In different ways, they show what a situation English departments have reached.

2. How has the state of Old English scholarship changed since you delivered your first keynote address at SELIM?

My answer here goes on from the one above. In 1991 I gave a kind of “Recessional” speech at the Modern Language Association in San Francisco,<sup>2</sup> warning that the often self-congratulatory attitude of, for instance, the International Society of Anglo-Saxonists disguised disciplinary weaknesses, especially as regards student enrolments (true of course, in America, of the humanities generally).

But perhaps, without my recognizing it, the tide had already turned. As I now argue in my contribution to *Old English Philology* (see below), the high-point of “misology” may have been the 1980 Toronto conference on *The Dating of Beowulf*, which argued in effect that linguistic tests of date were valueless; that no chronology of Old English poetry could be recovered; that literary history was accordingly impossible; and that literary speculation could continue unchecked. Yet this act of hubris perhaps produced its own nemesis, in the form of severe criticism by one bold junior scholar, Robert D. Fulk, and a growing chorus of dissent from those outside departments of English, including historians like Patrick Wormald and scholars of Norse and German like Theodore Andersson.

Those dissentient voices were orchestrated by another then-junior scholar, Leonard Neidorf, at that time a post-graduate student at Harvard, into a further conference on dating, held in 2011, with a follow-up volume of essays edited by Neidorf in 2014. Neidorf has since attended SELIM, and published with SELIM, for, as he points out, editors in US journals are still reluctant to publish material too fiercely critical of what has become the comfortable post-1980 consensus – which also explains why the 2014 volume, based on a US conference, had to find a courageous publisher in the UK! Neidorf has furthermore been joined and supported in their metrical studies by Rafael J. Pascual, of the University of Granada, another SELIM member, a pairing which may prove to be a further turning-point in the history of medieval linguistic and literary studies.

Indeed, at the SELIM conference in Granada, I suggested that the Neidorf-Pascual conjunction might well be the start of *La Reconquista de la*

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<sup>2</sup> “Recessional” is a poem by Rudyard Kipling, written in 1897 (Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee) warning of the future decline of the British Empire. I have put the MLA lecture on academia.edu as well.

*Filología*. One “Reconquista” culminated in Granada, so it would be fitting for another “Reconquista” to begin there. In which case SELIM will have played an important role, which I am sure my old friend Patricia Shaw would be delighted to see.

3. You collaborated with Leonard Neidorf and Rafael J. Pascual in *The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment*, and you’re now editing with them *Old English Philology: Studies in Honour of R.D. Fulk*. What impact do you think these books will have?

I hope that the most immediate response to the *Dating* volume will be to undo the damage caused by the 1981 volume on *Dating*, and its spin-offs. This damage has been considerable. I’ve remarked elsewhere (see my short article on Jacob Grimm online at academia.edu) that there is a clear parallel between the theory of evolution and the development of comparative philology, two of the great intellectual achievements of the nineteenth century. In both cases one man, Charles Darwin or Jacob Grimm, was the instigator, but in both cases someone else would have got there if they hadn’t: Alfred Wallace or Rasmus Rask. Both Grimm and Darwin addressed very evident questions – what made animals different, what made languages different – and ignored the old mythical explanations (Noah’s Ark and the Tower of Babel). Both men were followed by whole armies of investigators, who developed, extended and corroborated their ideas until they became rationally unchallengeable.

Here the parallels diverge. While the claim that Darwinism is “only a theory” is now confined only to Creationists, and is no longer intellectually respectable, rejecting the evidence of philology has (especially since 1981) become normal rather than exceptional in British and American universities. You might say it’s not even rejected by argument, just neglected, assumed to be irrelevant. Well, we hope – and the reviews indicate that this is already happening – that the Neidorf volume on *Dating* will make people think again. The range and strength of its arguments for an early date for *Beowulf* – not a late date, not an indeterminable date – should convince anyone who is not, like Creationists, ideologically committed. In many areas proof is not attainable. But (as Robert Fulk has often said) probability may reach such a level as to make denial irrational: especially where “a theory” explains elegantly and economically prodigious amounts of accumulated data.

Robert Fulk was of course the keynote speaker for the conference which generated Neidorf's *Dating*, and the festschrift which he and I and Rafael have put together will not only bear tribute to his initially lonely efforts to keep philology within scholarly awareness, but also remind people of the range and strength of his contributions. Remembering my parallel above, I might say that Robert Fulk has been to Grimm as Richard Dawkins to Darwin. It's not by any means a perfect comparison, as Fulk is quite without Dawkins's aggression and intolerance. But Fulk has been "the critic of the century", or shall we say of his half-century career, and *Old English Philology* will help people to see that.

Besides all that, we hope (and I confidently expect) that the two volumes together will act as a support and encouragement for younger scholars in particular. The range of approaches taken will show them that there is still much more to be gained by philological studies of all kinds: such approaches are there to be followed up. Moreover, the number of contributors – thirteen for the *Dating* volume, twenty for *Philology*, though some names occur in both – will reassure junior scholars who may be wondering what direction to take, that their career-options are still open. The "jobs-market", as it is crudely called in the USA, is a very frightening place to be, notably at the MLA conference after Christmas (the "hiring-fair"), and I have heard young post-grads say that they fear being overlooked because Old English studies are "too masculine", or "not relevant", or "insufficiently theoretical". Well, now they know not everyone thinks that, and they have a powerful and respected body of opinion to support them. They can take these books into the interview room to show sceptical interviewers that the tide has turned!

#### 4. What are some of your other current projects in medieval studies?

This is a sad question to answer, because I have been so slow in developing them. I have almost finished a book on Old Norse literature, centring on the many death-scenes, death-songs, "Last Stands" etc., which also doubles in a way as what one might call – and this is the kind of title that publishers like – "Top Ten Vikings". I have written about half of a book called *How the Heroes Talk*, which seeks to apply pragmatic linguistics to *Beowulf*, Eddic poems, *Hildebrandslied*, saints' lives, the *Heliand* (etc.). Three articles of this kind have already been published, but I need to finish the job and set those articles in a wider frame.

5. Can the world expect any additional projects from you in the realm of Tolkien studies?

What the world needs, I feel, is a survey of Tolkien's effect and influences. But this is such a massive job, when one considers the explosion of fantasy since 1955, that I think it would have to be done by a consortium.

6. Which avenues of research in medieval studies and Tolkien studies do you think are most promising at present?

On Tolkien studies, I feel we still have little awareness of his literary and cultural background – and that has the same kind of cause as the turn-away from philological studies I mentioned above. When I was an undergraduate at Cambridge, our syllabus – I mentioned this in a recent article drawing on Erich Auerbach – was extremely restricted, without us or many of our tutors realizing the fact. In fiction, it was exclusively “the Great Tradition”, which dealt with the often-repressed emotional lives of a cultured, sheltered and privileged elite who were much less interesting than they thought they were I won't name names, except to say that Henry James was in, but his much more widely-influential contemporary H.G. Wells was out. Firmly excluded also were all the “New Romancers”, as they are sometimes known – Conan Doyle, Rider Haggard, R.L. Stevenson, Bram Stoker, and many more.

Tolkien has much in common, especially as regards class-feeling, with the latter group; and conversely, much less in common with “the Bloomsbury Group”, whose members were (I think) a continuing provocation to the “Inklings”, especially Lewis. But there were people with links to both sides, like Naomi Mitchison, surely a New Romancer and a correspondent of Tolkien, whose brother J.B.S. Haldane however reacted sarcastically to Lewis's “Space trilogy” – google “Haldane” and “Auld Hornie, F.R.S.”. This whole area of literary life in the early twentieth century has hardly been noticed.

Meanwhile, in medieval studies I (and Michael Drout) have put our disagreements with Tolkien's (1936) lecture online through “Scholars' Forum”,<sup>3</sup> but I have to agree with Tolkien that, for all the avalanche of studies

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<sup>3</sup> Our two essays are online at <http://www.lotrplaza.com/showthread.php?18483>, and

about *Beowulf* as a poem, there has been remarkably little about the nature of alliterative poetry at any time, its strengths, its characteristic tropes and rhetoric. New Critical terminology just doesn't work, but we have not developed a different one. Tolkien, of course, spent many years trying to revive alliterative poetry, with to begin with very little success.

7. You were involved with the production of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* movies. Could you describe your involvement and share some opinions on these films?

My involvement really consisted of making sure all the (many) names were pronounced correctly. This is not so easy. Tolkien uses the word "Thain", as a title for hobbits, "Gwaihir" (for an eagle), and Thrain (so spelled in *The Hobbit*) for a dwarf, and in each case the <ai> is pronounced differently. I produced a long video-tape for the actors, which I must say they stuck to very accurately – with one exception. Sméagol came out as "Smeagle". They must have forgotten to ask me about that one. The *Hobbit* movies were much less careful about the dwarf-names.

As for opinions, I have to say that Jackson was coping with a changed medium, and a changed audience. I was impressed by his comments on why he made the changes he did in the *LotR* movies – characters could not merely be left in abeyance, like Arwen (a place had to be made for her in the second movie, though she does not figure in the second book). Nor could major action-scenes like the destruction of Isengard merely be told in flashback! In movies, you MUST show, not tell! Or the special effects team will break its collective heart! And there were other forced changes which I understood. What was lost, I felt, was first, something in Tolkien which was hard-hearted and realistic: Tolkien was a combat veteran who passed his life in the company of other veterans. They understood that the bold aggression rewarded in video-games was not always so rewarded in real life. More subtly, I felt – but not many have agreed with me – that the movies lost Tolkien's almost-imperceptible presentation of the effects of Providence, or if you prefer, the Valar.

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<http://www.lotrplaza.com/showthread.php?17739>. The two essays complement each other, but were written entirely independently.

These criticisms are much more easily made about the three *Hobbit* movies. Once again I think Jackson put his finger on the problem with *The Hobbit* as a narrative: it is highly episodic, one thing after another. It needed a connecting thread, which Jackson introduced (the continuous pursuit by the orcs). What it lost was the development of Bilbo as a hero, from being regarded with complete contempt to his final demonstrations both of physical courage (going down the tunnel to Smaug a second time), and moral courage (handing over the Arkenstone, and then returning into the power of the dwarves whom he has betrayed). All Bilbo's big scenes, in the book, take place when he is alone and in the dark, and movies don't do this very well. But we had too much waving a sword and charging, video-game heroism, instead.

8. In addition to being a prolific scholar, you are also a celebrated teacher, whose lectures were recently recorded and published by The Teaching Company. How would you characterize your philosophy of teaching?

Perhaps here I can quote my successor at Leeds, Andrew Wawn. He said that whenever he went out to confront the 250 students of the new intake at Leeds, he knew that not one of them had any interest in medieval studies. But every one of them could have! (And they did: year after year we had to cap the number of entrants to our Old Norse courses because we could not fit any more into our allotted times at the language laboratory.) My view is that every student knows something, and probably something I don't. The trick is to connect what I am trying to tell them with what they know already.

Just to give one example, the most perceptive comment I ever heard on Old Norse sagas came from an undergraduate student at St Louis, who was studying aeronautical engineering. I was explaining the plot of *Laxdæla saga*. What is the cause of the death of Kjartan? His abandonment of Gudrun? The jealousy of Bolli? The family grudge going back to Hoskuld's purchase of a concubine? Or is it the cursed sword? But as I droned on, young Joseph Yurgil spoke up, and said: "Stop! You are describing what we in aerospace call, 'an error-chain'". And then he told us what an "error-chain" was, and why airliners crash. But that told us a lot about sagas too.

9. Looking back on your career, what accomplishments are you most proud of? In your voluminous corpus of scholarship, are there certain works that you regard most highly?

There's a kind of discrepancy here. I think my most-read book may well be *Tolkien: Author of the Century*. But this did not take me long to write, and was strangely trouble-free – largely because my editor at HarperCollins, Jane Johnson, kept on telling me “No footnotes! Not a single footnote!” (Did I smuggle two or three past her? No more than that.) But my least-read book must certainly be the *Critical Heritage* volume on *Beowulf*, for which I read almost everything written on the poem up to 1935, most of it in German or Danish or Swedish, and translated large amounts of it (my friend and colleague Rory McTurk helped me with the Swedish, but my Danish collaborator Andreas Haarder unfortunately had an incapacitating stroke). But then few copies were printed, and they were sold at an exorbitant price. I have now put my long “Introduction” up on academia.edu, and I may put the whole book there, if I can settle copyright issues. I think my mini-book on *Beowulf* had a lot of new ideas, back in 1978.

10. Few scholars have been able to achieve the international reputation you've managed to earn. What advice would you give to young scholars who hope to thrive in this profession?

Frodo Baggins says, “Go not to the Elves for counsel, for they will say both no and yes”, and although my counsel can't be elvish, it may sound like the advice to lovers in *The Faerie Queene*: “Be bold, be bold, and everywhere be bold. / Be not too bold.”

So, first I would say: do not worry about wasting time on an idea, a project. You never know what will pay off. Back in 1970 there was no good reason for me to go and talk about “Tolkien and Philology” at a Tolkien-day run for the general public in Birmingham. I was never paid for it, it has never appeared on my curriculum vitae. But Tolkien's secretary was there, she liked the talk, I gave her the carbon copy of my script (this was forty-five years ago), Tolkien liked it too, the effects are still with me to this day. So, range widely.

On the other hand, read deeply. It is hard to make the time for this in the modern academic world, where rapid results are often demanded, but not only did I spend a long, long time in the 1980s and 1990s reading long-dead *Beowulf* studies, I also spent a long, long time in the 1970s and 1980s reading

all the old reviews of *Lord of the Rings* (Rayner Unwin had kept a file of them), and many of Tolkien's old books donated to libraries in Oxford. Much of this looked like work wasted: but the overall experience was not wasted. And you can never tell ...

Finally, first reactions are precious. Write down any hint of an idea you have. Think about it later.

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received: 4 November 2015  
revised version accepted: 15 May 2016