

**Review of Tolkien, J.R.R., trans; ed. Christopher Tolkien. *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014.**

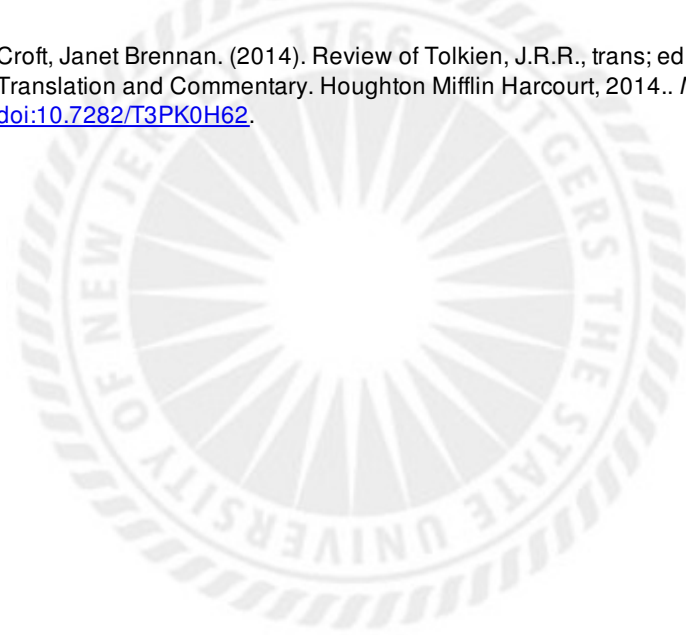
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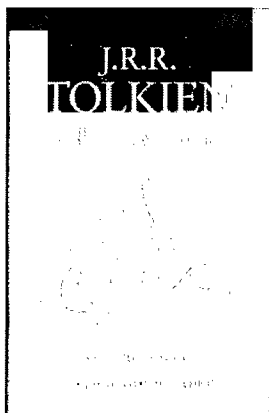
J.R.R. Tolkien, edited by Christopher Tolkien. *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014. 448pp, \$28. Reviewed by Janet Brennan Croft.

I am neither a linguist nor a medievalist and can claim no special scholarly familiarity with *Beowulf*. It interests and moves me, but I have to confess that I am primarily interested and moved by it because Tolkien was. What I intend to briefly address here is what fresh insights into Tolkien we might look forward to gleaning from his commentary on the poem.

The commentary, first of all, reveals even more than the poem itself the roots of Rohan in the world of *Beowulf*. The discussion of Unferth on pages 208-13, for example, resonates with the parallel character of Worm-tongue in *The Lord of the Rings*, casting light on the origins of his personality and actions. Aragorn, though, in contrast to *Beowulf*, never allows himself to be goaded to the point of being “forgetful of all courtesy” (212), proving his mettle under stress. We can also see, in Tolkien’s commentary on the dragon’s hoard on 351-52, hints of the dangers of gold long brooded over by great worms, to become a “staggerment” to a poor fellow who just wants to steal off with a souvenir or two.

In the long commentary on lines 301-304 (214-220), Tolkien provides a somewhat unexpectedly astute political analysis of the state of Hrothgar’s court; here the motivations and ramifications of the sort of situation that might be obscured by the bare annalistic style of one of his appendices are examined in far greater detail. It’s not a mode we often encounter in Tolkien’s fiction, but one can see that there must be similar analysis behind the entries in the various chronologies.

Also interesting are Tolkien’s artistic judgments throughout, especially where he considers that a later editorial hand has “retouched” a passage to drive home a Christian point (e.g. 310-311) or a

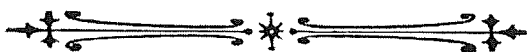


scribe has made a particularly egregious transcription blunder. (The reader particularly interested in such interpolations and rewritings might regret the fact that Christopher Tolkien left some of his father’s longer essays on the topic out of the finished volume. Perhaps they will be published elsewhere?) These scholarly

judgments could cast particularly interesting light on the conceit that much of Tolkien’s *legendarium* was written by contemporary authors and only much later transcribed by Tolkien, or on the revisions made between the editions of *The Hobbit* and alluded to in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Buried in the commentary is also a bit of linguistic play, a delightful translation of “high” archaic language into very modern British, akin to an example in the *Letters* where he updates Théoden’s post-healing speech to Gandalf into modern idiom (225-6): “My dear *Beowulf*! How very good of you to come to this country, where we once had the honor of receiving your father and helping him in his troubles. [...] As for Grendel, it is *painful* to be reminded of the shame he has put me to. [...] Well, well: take a seat now, and something to eat and drink” (246). One is reminded of T.H. White’s style in his retelling of the Matter of Britain.

What I have done here, of course, is precisely what Tolkien inveighed against in his essay on *Beowulf*: mined the work for mere tidbits, ignoring the story and its monsters. So be it—those tidbits can whet one’s appetite for the full meal: the rhythmic, vigorous, fast-moving prose translation, the eccentric retelling of “Sellic Spell” (think of it as *Beowulf* fanfiction!), the rousing meter of “The Lay of *Beowulf*,” and the riches of the commentary for the serious student of the poem. Is it a good translation of *Beowulf* from a technical standpoint? That is for others more expert than me to decide. Is it a good telling of the story, something a scop could be proud of? Indeed it is. “Sit now at the feast.”



## TOLKIEN READ-ALONG ON TUMBLR

Decades after his books were published, J.R.R. Tolkien continues to entertain and inspire readers all over the world. And as the world changes each new generation of Tolkien fans finds a new way to appreciate Middle-earth. Today, for many of the youngest and newest lovers of Tolkien’s works, that means the Internet. From July to November I’ll be gathering with a few thousand of these online fans on the website Tumblr.com to enjoy reading *The Silmarillion* together through The *Silmarillion* Read-Along.

Tumblr is a microblogging website (if blogs are journals, then microblogs are scrapbooks) that is home to a vibrant and growing community of Tolkien fans. The *Silmarillion* Read-