"After the annihilating traumas of the last century," Andrew Rissik snipped regarding Tom Shippey's analysis of Tolkien when the book first appeared in British bookstores in late summer 2000, "it's merely perverse to ascribe greatness to this airy but strangely simplified mock-Teutonic never-never land, where races and species intermingle at will and great battles are fought but there is never any remotely convincing treatment of those fundamental human concerns through which all societies ultimately define themselves - religion, philosophy, politics and the conduct of sexual relationships." One must wonder if Rissik actually read Shippey's book or if he just reeled back in shock when he first saw Shippey's title and wrote a review based on it alone. Like so many of his colleagues, all members of the British literati, Rissik dismisses the notion that Tolkien might be a great author as simply preposterous. His response, like many in England (and America) is knee-jerk.

Shippey, formerly a professor of Old English and Beowulf at Oxford, held the same position and taught the same syllabus that Tolkien taught. Now holding a chair in the humanities program at St. Louis University, Shippey is an expert on medieval literature. Considering his position within academia, his pronouncement that Tolkien is a great author carries considerable weight, especially since the vast majority of the English professorate (in America and Britain) regards Tolkien's works as childish and merely rooted in the 1960s youth rebellion.

Contrary to Rissik's assertion and blanket dismissals, Shippey effectively argues that for one to understand Tolkien fully as a literary figure, one must understand the traumas of both World War I and the twentieth century as a whole. Shippey argues persuasively that one must place The Lord of the Rings and The Silmarillion alongside other great fantasy works of the century, especially those by George Orwell, Kurt Vonnegut, and William Golding. Something about the wartime experiences of these authors — whether Tolkien at the Somme, Orwell in the Spanish Civil War, or Vonnegut at the firebombing of Dresden — prompted each of these men to confront the horrors of modernity through the lens of myth and allegory (though Tolkien adamantly rejected allegory as an effective literary device).

Shippey wrote his latest book, Tolkien: Author of the Century for a general but well-educated audience. It contains much of the same information as his more scholarly 1983 book, The Road To Middle-earth. While the newer book is excellent and a must-own for any serious Tolkien reader or devotee of Catholic fiction, the 1983 book may be one of the two best books ever written on Tolkien (along with Joseph Pearce's Tolkien: Man and Myth from Ignatius.
Still, *Tolkien: Author of the Century* has much to offer, especially in terms of sheer style. Shippey can write with the best of them. This reviewer found the new book nearly impossible to put down, even while riding on a rather rough and long air flight, whereas *The Road To Middle-earth* took serious concentration and no distractions whatsoever from students or children!

Despite similarities between the two works, Shippey provides new and worthy insights on Tolkien in *Author of the Century*, especially after having included an analysis of Christopher Tolkien's editing and publication of the indispensable twelve-volume *History of Middle-earth* (1983-1996). Perhaps Shippey's most interesting contribution to Tolkien scholarship in this newer work is the contention that Tolkien was a modernist. But he was a unique modernist, as well educated as the modernists who dismissed him, but from a different tradition: northern European, rather than Mediterranean. Though he started by reading Classics at Oxford, Tolkien was also determinedly hostile to "the Classical Tradition," as Eliot called it. Joyce's schema depends on Homer, Eliot alludes continually to the tales of Agamemnon and Tiresias, Oedipus and Antigone. Milton attempted to supersede these (though he knew them better than anyone alive) by the heroes of the Bible. But Tolkien's heroes and his major debts came from the native and Northern tradition which Milton never knew and Eliot ignored: Beowulf, Sir Gawain, Sigurd, the Eddic gods - a tradition seen by most modernists as literary barbarous (314).

Tolkien would have abhorred the modernist label, but Shippey makes a strong case for his admittedly controversial argument. Shippey's most significant contribution to Tolkien scholarship, taking both the 1983 and the 2001 books together, derives from his intimate knowledge and reading of the greater and lesser works of medieval literature. After reading Shippey's analysis of the early and middle-period medieval works that Tolkien knew, loved, and, quite often, memorized - works that are well known only to serious medievalists and certainly not to a general audience - one appreciates the depth and debt of Tolkien's academic career to his "mythological hobby" as he referred to it. Though his academic colleagues teased and berated (and worse) him for his stories about "hobbits and other nonsense," Tolkien never truly neglected his academic duties. Ultimately, his "hobby" and his scholarship were one and the same. If Tolkien was not, as Shippey suggests, the "Author of the Century" (though this reviewer believes he was), he was most certainly the most important Catholic author of fiction of the century, rivaled only by G.K. Chesterton . . . perhaps.

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Notes


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Several years ago in a very wise little book titled *Plastic Words*, the German linguist Uwe Poerksen remarked, “A person in the Middle Ages had no ‘sexuality,’ neither the word nor the thing. This is a relatively recent construction.” Indeed, the *Oxford English Dictionary* reports that the word “sexuality” is only two centuries old in English, and that something even arguably like its present connotation - as a psychological phenomenon - is only about a century old. At about the same time, “heterosexuality” and “homosexuality” (along with the adjectives “heterosexual” and “homosexual”) came into being as terms for “sexual propensity” or attraction toward the opposite or the same sex, with the nouns “heterosexual” and “homosexual,” each meaning a person having one of these propensities, arriving soon thereafter. When exactly one or the other of these varying “sexualities” came to be seen as ineluctably central to one’s “personality” (this, too, being a word only a century old in its now familiar psychological meaning) is something of a mystery, but a fair suspicion would be that this happened only in the last few decades.

We have reason, therefore, to wonder whether “sexuality” really exists, as a thing that somehow defines us. There is sex, of course, and there are sexual passions, habits, inclinations, acts - but they are not we, and we are not they. What is more, these passions, acts, and so forth may be judged as right and fitting, or as wrong and disordered, for human beings - that is, there are sexual virtues and vices. But only the most inhumane and un-Christian among us can judge as wrong what people are rather than what they do. Herein lies the great power of the word “sexuality” as currently used, with or without its prefixes, for