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Playing with frontiers: Tolkien-zines, between fandom and academia

Laura Martin-Gomez

Abstract: Tolkien fandom has been active since the beginning of the 1960s and has produced a variety of fanzines, in multiple contexts. This paper explores the different types of Tolkien-dedicated fanzines in the USA and the UK in the first decades of Tolkien fandom – it shows how “Tolkien-zines” have been influenced and inspired by science-fiction fandom. The analysis then focuses on a specific phenomenon observed in some fanzines, edited by fan communities: studying three examples, we observe how some amateur publications evolve and play with the frontier between fandom and academia.

Key Words: Tolkien – fanzines – fandom – academia – scholarship

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It is well established that “fanzines” as such began with the science-fiction fandom¹ and – between the interwar period and right after World War II – gradually allowed a full-fledged fandom culture to be born around the “paper communities”² that fanzines nurtured. The history of science-fiction fandom is well documented, by fans themselves³ as well as by academics⁴, and despite being often “ephemeral”⁵ those written testimonies are often made available today to the researcher⁶.

When *The Lord of the Rings* was published, between 1954 and 1955⁷, it didn’t quite fit into any editorial category but was “adopted” by a lot of science-fiction fans quite early on. The first fan text dedicated to Tolkien that is known to us today was published in *Psi-Phi* by Ted Johnstone in 1959⁸. In the years that followed, a lot more texts dedicated to Tolkien works were printed in American and British science-fiction fanzines and a few “Tolkien-zines” began to be published in the USA. By the 70s, some associations dedicated to Tolkien or the Inklings had become well-established in both English-speaking countries, as well as some successful fanzines.

Our goal here today is to comment on these fan publications⁹, in the USA and the UK, between 1960 and the end of the 70s. First, we are going to categorize and define the different types of non-professional publications that were printed at that period and discussed Tolkien and his works. Then, we will focus on some specific titles – *Tolkien Journal*, *Mythlore* and *Mallorn* – that, in that period of time and sometimes until now, have challenged classification and seem to have gradually adopted a middle-way, between fandom and academia.

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Even though it seems to have taken a few years to take root in science-fiction fandom, Tolkien-related pieces began to appear and became common in fanzines after 1960, especially in the USA. Simultaneously, the first Tolkien-dedicated association, The Fellowship of the Ring, appeared in 1960 in California. It was founded by science-fiction fans, active in the Los Angeles Science-Fiction Society (LASFS), but showed a wish for a specific outlet for Tolkien fans. The group was ambitious and successful but didn't produce much or lived up to expectations¹⁰. Soon, some other initiatives popped up, as fanzines distributed through an APA¹¹ – acknowledging the seniority of science-fiction fandom – or as local groups, some of them becoming rapidly so big that they turned into national structures, like the Tolkien Society of America¹².

In 1965 and the few years that followed, *The Lord of the Rings* suddenly reached fame in the USA, attracting the mass media's attention as an editorial battle was fought around the paperback editions¹³ and as the counterculture movement and students adopted the book as their new favorite. Interestingly, the "Tolkien craze" didn't directly impact the UK, and the British fan groups were few and far apart and have not left written traces until 1968¹⁴. Still, by the mid-70s, there were a multitude of fan publications about Tolkien's works, coming from a range of people, groups and associations in both countries.

As imperfect as a categorization might be, it still provides an interesting insight that enlightens how differently Tolkien works have been received by his fans and readers¹⁵. Thus, the large corpus of fanzines that I used for my PhD research allows us to get a global view on types of amateur publications with Tolkien's works as the focus point. If we observe "Tolkien-zines" as material objects – printed pages stapled together and sent through mail – and amateur productions, we can begin to distinguish several categories.

Different criteria could be taken as a focus point in order to categorize these Tolkien dedicated fanzines¹⁶: who produces them, how they are spread or how they are technically made, being the most obvious. Given the importance of identity conveyed by fanzines as means of communication, we will focus on the different producers, that is to say who actually creates, prints and spreads "Tolkien-zines"¹⁷:

1. Personalzines: these zines are thus called because they come from a unique author-editor, who personally types, copies, staples and sends the fanzines to his readers. Sometimes, the fan gets some friend's help or has to rent the typing machine as he doesn't have one himself, but he has complete control of what gets printed in the pages and of the overall tone he wants to use. This doesn't mean that all the content is written by the editor himself, most of the time, the readers share their thoughts letters that are printed as "Letters of Comment" in a specific column or send articles that are printed as such by the editor if they correspond to what he expects for his fanzine.

In our corpus, these fanzines have existed in various contexts, but share the above-mentioned common points. In the US in the 60s especially, there have been some personalzines at the very beginning of Tolkien fandom that were strongly linked to science-fiction fandom and were mostly spread through the system of the APAs¹⁸. Interestingly, in the same period and place, some counterculture fanzines of the same types circulated that had a strong interest in Tolkien¹⁹. In the UK, some personalzines appeared on the fringe of

the newly founded Tolkien Society at the beginning of the 70s: humouristic or polemical, their audience was mainly the same as the Tolkien Society's²⁰.

2. Newsletters and bulletins: most of the time produced by a formal group like an association (see *Mythprint*, *Green Dragon* or *Amon Hen*²¹), it sometimes also stemmed from the central member of a reading group (like *News from Bree*, edited by Pauline Johnson²²). These fanzines act as a means to connect people who don't see each other on a regular basis but do meet sometimes (like in reading groups for example) or as a way of fostering a feeling of belonging to the community through writing – the bulletin acts as a means to keep everyone up to date on publications and rumours²³ but also on the group's latest activities.
3. Letterzines: this type of fanzine could also fall into one of the two former categories, but in my view, is sufficiently idiosyncratic to deserve to be one on its own right. A letterzine is a fanzine that is almost entirely composed of readers' letters ("Letters of Comment") but compiled by an editor just like a personalzine. Our corpus included one such example, *The Middle Earthworm*: it appeared as a "correspondent" to a sister-fanzine in the USA (*The Tolkien Journal*) but even though the Tolkien Society of America soon "disappeared" (it merged with the Mythopoeic Society), it continued for some years to be printed regularly and independently by its editor Archie Mercer, and only contained letters from its readers.
4. Collaborative content fanzines: these fanzines are usually produced by formal groups or associations, sometimes there are also student fanzines linked to a university interest group. These publications are, by definition, the product of a collaboration between several people, some being usually in charge of writing some texts, others of typing, copying and sending them for example. Various columns usually mean various authors too. These fanzines, much more than the others, rely on the participation of its readers, not only for the letter column but also for its articles. This leads to an invariable litany coming up regularly in their pages: the editors are always in need for texts and call for help and more participation from their readers who seem very apathetic.

Thus, these different types of fanzines have clearly different dynamics, depending more or less on reader's participation or on the editor's will and time to create the material. Actually, one dynamic that seems to be frequent through all of Tolkien fandom, is the one where fanzines tend to evolve to such an extent that the term "fanzine" doesn't seem to apply to them anymore – if it ever did.

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Our study will now turn to three examples of publications that illustrate this trend among some Tolkien fan publications. We will focus on the *Tolkien Journal*, published by the Tolkien Society of America between 1965 and 1972²⁴, *Mythlore*, published by the Mythopoeic Society since 1967²⁵, and *Mallorn*, published by the Tolkien Society since 1970. All these publications came out as a printed product of non-professional people, committed to Tolkien's work, within the framework of a specific fan community – as such it would seem fair to call them fanzines.

Despite disappearing after a few years of existence, the *Tolkien Journal* showed some signs of evolution towards a scholarly journal quite soon. As for *Mallorn*, it actually became a peer-reviewed journal just this year and has also begun giving open access online to some of its earlier contents. It seems to have been following an example set by *Mythlore*, which was

classified as journal in 1999. Thus, a few decades into existence, these publications are assimilated as academic or scholarly journals, rather than fan publications.

If the evolution towards a better editorship and quality makes sense given the long years of accumulated experience for these publications, what is actually interesting is to observe how, from the start, these publications didn't quite "fit in" the definition of a fanzines.

To begin with, the *Tolkien Journal* was edited by Richard Plotz, a New York high school student. From an educated and well-connected family, he advertised his newly founded Tolkien-group, initially dubbed "New York Tolkien Society", in the newspapers. From the start, as Dick Plotz didn't participate in science-fiction fandom and was actually unfamiliarized with it, he reached out to readers and fans in an uncommon process in fandom²⁶ – one of the consequences seems to have been the lightning speed at which the society grew. *The Tolkien Journal* was printed as a single page at first, but soon was several pages long and by the fifth issue included scholarly articles²⁷. In the second issue, Dick Plotz, commenting on the project of a fanzines' list that a member of the society plans to compile, wrote: "*The Tolkien Journal*, although not strictly a fanzine, will be included"²⁸. Thus, even though he launched and advertised his society and publication outside fandom, he also reached out to science-fiction fandom, as on second thought, while distinguishing his material from other fan publications. From its title to the range of advertisement, *The Tolkien Journal* definitely didn't "act as" a fanzine from the start. This was quickly confirmed by the tight links Dick Plotz established with the Ballantine Editions which published *The Lord of the Rings* in paperback, which led to some commercial ads being included in the publication. Also, Dick Plotz endorsed a role of "messenger" or "prescriptive" figure as he exchanged a few letters with Tolkien himself and only transcribed or talked about some extracts in the pages of the journal. On the other hand, the *Tolkien Journal* was clearly considered as the most-needed Tolkien-related material, as we can see with the huge number of members the Tolkien Society of America soon had. Designed as a non-fannish publication despite the amateurish means of printing, the *Tolkien Journal* gained a wide audience it probably wouldn't have had if it had merely circulated in the traditional science-fiction fandom networks, and at the same time it helped foster the first solid and wide Tolkien fan community that existed²⁹.

On the other side of the country, *Mythlore* was published by the Mythopoeic Society, founded in California in 1967 by some students, and mainly led by Glen GoodKnight. The first issue appeared in 1969 when the society had already acquired some solid membership and some traditions of its own³⁰ – it was around 50 pages long. Like a fanzine, it included letters, columns, reports from meetings and some content articles and its production was clearly non-professional, but the goal seemed ambitious to say the least. Very soon it seems that the editors received mixed-feelings comments from the society's members who didn't quite know what to make of the publication, and Glen GoodKnight felt compelled to react on this matter:

As editor I feel it is both fish and fowl (you punsters lay off of this metaphor), and I like it that way personally. Why not (hopefully) have the best of both worlds. I like the serious scholarly articles to further discuss and probe the genre of literature we are interested in. But although we take our subject seriously, I trust we will not take ourselves as seriously. There is room for humor, whimsy, and a good laugh among friends. The letter column reflects a relaxedness I appreciate - keep it up. I imagine Mythlore would appear a rare bird indeed to those accustomed to serious professional journals, and an odd fish-to those engrossed in reading the publications of fandom³¹.

Thus, it seems that from the outset, the self-definition of this publication was an issue – albeit a voluntary one of sorts. Actually, this seems to reflect the mixed activities that the MythSoc has put in place since its inception: it's founded on both fannish practices (the first meetings combined costumes, games and quizzes on Middle-earth for example) and more scholarly ones (like reading meetings, with a specific defined programme). Yet, Glen GoodKnight opposes here seriousness and humour, as he does scholarship and fandom – a partial view at best, but also a quite common one in Tolkien fandom³². While acknowledging the role of fans inside the society, Glen GoodKnight also seems to be paying more attention to the members who, while being capable of humour, are not used to fanzines and their specific discourses – do not belong to fandom per se.

Turning to the UK, *Mallorn* is the main publication of the Tolkien Society, and its first issue appeared in 1970, just a few months after the society was created. It wasn't the first printed material associated with it though: Vera Chapman, nicknamed Belladonna Took, had already published a few issues of *Belladonna's Broadsheet* around the time the society was launched. In the first years of the society's existence, the issues of *Mallorn* were few and far apart, and the society's members didn't get a lot of news of what was going on in the society or as far as decisions from the committee were taken. As a society both connected to science fiction fandom in a way – through the pages of a fanzine called *Middle Earthworm* edited by Archie Mercer – and to less community-invested readers like Vera Chapman for example, the society had trouble finding its feet at first – mostly due to lack of experience among active members. As a result, personalzines discussing the society and its goal sprouted quickly, while simultaneously, a “bulletin”, called *Amon Hen*, supposedly more reliable and frequent than *Mallorn*, was launched by the society.

With members from different backgrounds, from seasoned fans to newly “converted” readers who just discovered fandom, the Tolkien Society soon sought to find a balanced “middle-way” to include everyone. One of the moves this implied was the curbing of fan-speak, as in *Amon Hen* for example, where, following a poll inside the society, the editor writes: “Abbreviations in general, and ‘zine’ in particular, are disliked. Thus, we shall try to cut down on abbreviations in the future”³³. This shows a trend towards a more “neutral” language, which somehow could be considered as paving the way for a more scholarly or at least less-connoted environment. As the publications became actually more regular, *Amon Hen* kept its role as a bulletin of information, while *Mallorn* increasingly took a more scholarly approach.

These three examples, despite their specificities, show a gradual professionalization of layout, general editing, tone and contents. Some contextual explanations come to mind quite easily: first, fanzines have gradually become more and more professional in their layout as computers and printers became more available to the general public, second, the accumulated

experience of the editors and consequently the reputation of the publication helps improve the consistency and probably the quality demands. Moreover, these three publications were printed in specific context that we shouldn't neglect: all three were printed by associations, and they weren't their only means of communication – each journal had a matching bulletin which in a sense could play the sociability role of fanzines³⁴.

Still, the attraction towards a more serious and professional publication as far as layout goes does not necessarily imply a more academic approach to Tolkien, and yet that is what happened in each instance. Two different but complementary explanations come to mind: Tolkien readers, as well as science fiction readers of that period, were mostly educated and so it entails that part of the participants in fandom were to become academics, “Tolkien-zines” could be a sort of first glimpse or first trial at academic writing³⁵. It also seems interesting to note the parallel between scholarly Tolkien fans who both enjoy fiction and dive into a serious and rigorous analysis of it with Tolkien's career himself, as a writer and as an academic.

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The study of Tolkien-zines shows that there is an important diversity in the field, the fanzines ranging from politically oriented publication to very narrow interest-centered publications. In the US and to a lesser extent, in the UK, there were fanzines dedicated to Tolkien's work that took their roots and influence in very different environments, even though science fiction fandom was the predominant influence for most.

As the case study examples we commented upon illustrate, there seems to be a specific trend in Tolkien-themed publications that bridges gaps or attempts at defining new frontiers, between scholarship and fandom. As such, these publications actually to get the best of both worlds: passionate individuals, rigour and editing experience, scholarship without the burden of professional journals – especially financial considerations, but perhaps also career interests for individual participants for example. Today, as *Mythlore* and *Mallorn* become open access peer-reviewed journals, they confirm their move towards an academic image. As it reflects a push for more access to knowledge in academia, it also looks like a faithful inheritance of their belonging to traditional fandom, in which participation and time was more valued than money.

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Mythlore: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/>

Mallorn: <https://journals.tolkiensociety.org/mallorn/index>

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¹ Other forms of amateur publications existed already, but Hugo Gernsback and his magazine *Amazing Stories* stand as the groundbreaking elements for science-fiction fandom.

² "communauté de papier", Christian Le Bart, "Stratégies identitaires de fans, l'optimum de la différenciation", *Revue française de sociologie*, Vol.45 n°2, 2004, p. 295.

³ See for example online history books by Richard and Nicki Lynch or by Rob Hansen.

⁴ See Henry Jenkins's works mainly.

⁵ Jean-Pierre Andrevon's definition of the term "fanzine" includes the idea of "ephemerality": "[fanzines are] small publications with an uncertain periodicity and with an ephemeral survival lifespan" ("petites publications à la périodicité incertaine et à la durée de survie éphémère", Jean-Pierre Andrevon, George W. Barlow and Denis Guiot, *La science-fiction*, MA, coll. "Le monde de...", 1987, p. 85).

⁶ See for example the online collection on the website fanac: https://fanac.org/fanzines/Classic_Fanzines.html

⁷ Printed in three volumes because a single volume would have been too pricey, and thus despite not being a trilogy, the edition in several volumes created the sensation of a "series" which impacted how the book was received. See Anne Besson's work on cycles and series: *D'Asimov à Tolkien : Cycles et séries dans la littérature de genre*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2004.

⁸ See also "The Passing of the Elven-Kind", *All Mimsy* n°5, November 1959.

⁹ We use this definition as framework: "zines are noncommercial, nonprofessional, small-circulation magazines which their creators produce, publish, and distribute by themselves", Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from Underground: Zines and the politics of alternative culture*, Verso, 1997, p. 10-11.

¹⁰ The Fellowship of the Ring published a fanzine entitled *I Palantir*, but only four issues were printed between 1960 and 1966. Its main editors were Bruce Pelz and Ted Johnstone, who were both very active in science-fiction fandom and thus lacked time to properly handle this association.

¹¹ "APA" stands for Amateur Press Association. A system that predates science-fiction fandom, it works around an organizer that centralizes fanzines, sometimes even prints them, and then sends them collectively to the whole mailing-list members.

¹² The Tolkien Society of America, originally named "New York Tolkien Society", was founded in 1965 by Dick Plotz.

¹³ Ace Books took advantage of an error in copyright protection for *The Lord of the Rings* in the USA and published a “pirate edition” in paperback in 1965. It took a few more months for Ballantine to print a legal and revised edition. The “war over Middle earth” found its way into mainstream media at the time and *The Lord of the Rings* became a best seller.

¹⁴ A noteworthy exception is *Nazgul’s Bane*, a fanzine edited by Ken Cheslin, who indicated he was the “correspondent” for The Fellowship of the Ring in the UK. As it was a sort of twin publication of *I Palantir*, it didn’t last very long either – there were four issues between 1960 and 1963. There’s a gap then until the first *Middle Earthworm* was published, in 1968.

¹⁵ This has been the main focus of my PhD thesis, entitled “The reception of Tolkien’s work in the USA, the UK and France (1955-1992)”. In my thesis, I discussed “Tolkien-zines” as texts themselves, that is to say as places where fans write and interact, where a discourse about a fiction is made. It allowed me to draw hypotheses and suggest conclusions on the way fans related to Tolkien fiction through their production in fanzines. More information on my research blog: <https://fanstolkien.hypotheses.org>.

¹⁶ Our own categorization takes its inspiration from a broader list of types of fanzines, see <https://fancyclopedia.org/Fanzine>.

¹⁷ “the Tolkien-zine with third largest American audience”, *Chronicles of the King* n°4, 1978, p.1. The term is also used by Philip Cohen in a paper about the language used in science-fiction fandom, but without a hyphen (“Tolkienzine”): this strengthens the idea that fanzines dedicated to Tolkien had a strong identity but also that they were initially affiliated with science fiction fandom.

¹⁸ See for example Bruce Pelz’s *Glamdring* or Greg Shaw’s *Entmoot*.

¹⁹ See for example Scott Smith’s fanzines like *Ilmarin*, *Nazg* or *Elbereth*.

²⁰ See for example Phil Spencer’s *Gamma* or Hartley Patterson’s *News from Bree*.

²¹ See below, note 34.

²² Several fanzines were entitled *News from Bree*. Pauline Johnson edited one of these for several years for the Tolkien Society of Peekskill (New York).

²³ From 1960 to the end of the 70s and more recently end of the 90s, there were frequently rumours about adaptations of Tolkien’s work on screen, but also about the expected date of publication of future books, especially *The Silmarillion* (announced as soon as 1960, published posthumously in 1977).

²⁴ As the TSA grew fast, Ed Meskys soon took over from Dick Plotz, but as he had health issues, the journals were joint editions for some issues before merging with *Mythlore*, just like the TSA merged with the MythSoc.

²⁵ Let’s just specify that this society is not solely dedicated to Tolkien but to “mythopoeic” authors, namely and mostly C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams for example.

²⁶ Ed Meskys, a well-known science-fiction fandom and editor of *Niekas*, wrote at the time: “I understand that the founder is unfamiliar with fandom, and that several fans had seen an advertisement he placed in a newspaper or magazine and contacted him.”, *Niekas* n°12, June 1965, p. 78.

²⁷ Donald Reinken, “*The Lord of the Rings: A Christian Refounding of the Political Order*”, reprinted in *Tolkien Journal* n° 5 (Vol. 2 n°3), Summer 1966, p. 4-9. Originally printed in *Christian Perspectives*, Winter 1966.

²⁸ *Tolkien Journal* n°2, Autumn 1965, p. 3.

²⁹ We mentioned above The Fellowship of the Ring which had been active a few years before in California, and was actually officially in existence when the TSA was launched. Despite being successful at first, it didn’t really manage to create a viable independent fandom.

³⁰ There were different branches which each had its own reading programme and meetings. Also “Bilbo’s and Frodo’s Birthday Party”, first organized in 1967 by the MythSoc, soon became an important date in the calendar of Tolkien fans.

³¹ “Council of Elrond” (Glen GoodKnight’s column), *Mythlore* Vol.1 n°4 (n°4), October 1969, p. 2.

³² The issue of tension between seriousness and humour and the distance to be put between oneself and one’s passion to remain sociably acceptable has been studied by Christian Le Bart and other sociologists like Matthew Hills for example.

³³ *Amon Hen* n°16, 1975, p. 2. This had already been remarked elsewhere, like in *Gamma*, a personalzine, where an American fan, Joan Brown commented on the word “zine” as “ugly” and that it shouldn’t be used because “there must be more inoffensive words” (Joan E. Brown, *Gamma* n°3, n. d., p. 4).

³⁴ As mentioned above, the Tolkien Society of America published the *Tolkien Journal* and soon added the bulletin called *Green Dragon*. The Mythopoeic Society began printing *Mythprint* more frequently than *Mythlore* as soon as 1970. As for the Tolkien Society, it tried several bulletin formats and titles before settling for *Amon Hen* in 1972.

³⁵ Richard C. West began publishing *Orcrist* when he was a student at the University of Wisconsin: it began as a student publication mixing fannish and academic contents and Richard West later became one of the first and most respected bibliographer about Tolkien’s work.