New Digital Voices to Meet Tolkien

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The British Writer J. R. R. Tolkien has now become one of main literary figures worldwide. His two novels *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* have been read by millions of people and Peter Jackson's film adaptation, as well as the recently released Amazon Prime Series *The Rings of Power* has contributed to Tolkien's fame. His diffusion in Italy has always been troublesome since the 1960s because of political issues: Nowadays, some associations and groups have come to life and one of these, Tolkieniani Italiani (Italian Tolkienians), and developed new digital ways to discuss and widen Tolkien studies and cultural sharing all over Italy and abroad.

Keywords: Tolkien, Italy, translation, dissemination, social network, Facebook, web-radio, cultural sharing

Introduction

The English writer J. R. R. Tolkien is now one of the most widely read and influential authors both academically and commercially. In recent years, thanks to digital technologies, the web and social networks, new tools for dissemination, discussion and study have sprung up that embrace Tolkien's works: In the following pages, after a brief introduction regarding his literary production, some current examples of Tolkien's digital dissemination will be presented, in particular the one concerning the Italian Tolkieniani group.

Author of the Century and Beyond

In September 2000, Thomas A. Shippey (b. 1943), a British academic and scholar of medieval literature, published *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, published in Italian translation by Simonelli in 2004 (*Tolkien Author of the Century*). Shippey, considered one of the world's foremost Tolkien experts, seeks to substantiate the thesis that Tolkien's fantastic stories, long considered by critics to be "escapist literature", deserve a place on par with the great authors of the 20th century. The author draws from the result of a survey commissioned in the late 1990s by the British bookstore chain Waterstone, which, according to the preferences of more than 25,000 readers, declared *The Lord of the Rings* the best book of the 20th century.

The popularity of the works of John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892-1973), particularly of *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) and *The Hobbit* (1937), has always reached high levels, ever since the time of their publication: By the 1960s the Oxford professor has been elected an icon of the hippie movement, and clear references to his texts appear in the songs of groups such as Pink Floyd or Led Zeppelin. In the aftermath of the beginning of the third millennium, Peter Jackson's film adaptations—first of *The Lord of the Rings* and then of *The Hobbit*—have done more to ensure Tolkien's planetary success. In 2019, Dome Karukoski directed the biopic Tolkien, which chronicles the British writer's youthful years between Birmingham and Oxford, his

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participation in World War I, and the beginning of his love affair with Edith Bratt, which so marked Tolkien's academic and literary career. Amazon is also filming a television series, which is now available online with its Prime Video streaming service, in which the events of the Second Age of the World, prior to those that make up *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* will be adapted. The series, as it was expected, is receiving a lot of criticism, dividing fans all over the world, but such topic is not the aim of this paper, which limits to Tolkien's literary production.

The two novels published in his lifetime are only the tip of a very large iceberg, constituting the so-called "Tolkienian Legendarium", that is, what was to become for Tolkien a true mythology for England: This was the young scholar of philology and literature's intent when in the trenches of World War I he began writing "the book of *Lost Tales*". Beginning in 1917, Tolkien never stopped elaborating his mythology, leaving at his death an immense body of stories, tales, and legends, to which his third son Christopher became literary heir. The latter was faced with a staggering amount of writings, notes, lists, annals, drafts, unfinished works, and multiple versions of the same, and he therefore undertook to give a complete form to this mythology: In 1977, *The Silmarillion* was given to the presses. Christopher Tolkien's work did not stop, and as early as 1980 it was the turn of a new unpublished work, *Unfinished Tales*, a collection of texts that clarified and expanded many of the stories in the Legendarium, which was followed the following year by the author's epistolary (letters, edited by his biographer Humphrey Carpenter), which revealed the genesis and evolution of Tolkien's ideas and projects, as well as his relationships academically and with publishers, readers, and critics. In 1983, the creation of a critical edition of Tolkien's writings was undertaken, including all the notes, drafts, and various versions of each individual tale. Thus was born the *History of Middle-Earth* (HoME), consisting of 12 volumes (plus one of indexes), published serially from 1983 to 1996. In 2021, *The Nature of Middle-Earth*, containing unpublished materials and edited by Carl F. Hostetter, was published.

Today, after Christopher Tolkien's death in January 2020, the Tolkien Estate holds the rights to the author, and numerous Tolkienian societies are found throughout the world: The most important is the Tolkien Society, founded in 1969, which brings together scholars and enthusiasts from five continents and is dedicated to disseminating research on Tolkien through the publication—print and digital—of journals, such as Mallorn and Amon Hen, and the annual organization of events and conferences.

Tolkien in Italy

The relationship of Tolkien and his works with Italy has always been and still remains troubled, due to reasons of reception in our country, translation rendition, and ideological interpretation. The research carried out by Oronzo Cilli in his *Tolkien e l'Italia* underscores the evolution of our author's first diffusion in the peninsula: In the aftermath of the original publication of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the first part of *The Lord of the Rings*, Mondadori had the opportunity to translate that volume into Italian but the project did not go ahead. Likewise, in 1962, Vittorini and Sereni, collaborators of the Milan publisher, judged the publication inappropriate because of the prevailing neorealism in the Italian literary scene. It was not until 1967 that the publisher Astrolabio-Ubaldini, entrusting the translation of the novel to the young Vittoria Alliata di Villafranca, offered the first edition of *La Compagnia dell'Anello* on the market. Economic difficulties and initial failure led to the sale of the rights to Rusconi, which, thanks to collaborations with Quirino Principe and Elémire Zolla, published *The Lord of the Rings* as a single volume in 1970. The Rusconi imprint gradually translated Tolkien's various works, although

of the 12 volumes of the HoME only the first two exist in Italian versions to date, until the rights were passed to Bompiani in 2000.

In Italy, now, Tolkien's work has acquired the status of a best seller, and there are numerous scholars who deal with the British writer, as well as fans who keep his cult alive and associations that edit Italian editions and organize events throughout the country. The oldest and best known undoubtedly remains the *Societ à Tolkieniana Italiana*, initially conceived in 1992 and active since 1994, whose primary goal is the study of Tolkien's work and thought.

> To this end, STI promotes events and conferences throughout Italy with the participation of leading scholars […] Many projects have been successfully completed, such as the drafting of the *Dictionary of the Tolkienian Universe* and the volume *The Peoples of Tolkien*. […] The Association also intends to foster the recovery and dissemination of Tolkienian texts outside the literary corpus of *Middle-Earth*. (Societ à Tolkieniana Italiana, Website homepage)[1]

In recent years, another association concerned with the study and dissemination of Tolkien's work in Italy, the Associazione Italiana di Studi Tolkieniani (AIST), has become increasingly popular. The website's information page states, "AIST is not interested in an 'Italian way to Tolkien,' but rather in an Italian contribution to Tolkien studies, placing itself at the same level as Anglo-Saxon Tolkienian societies". In addition to having edited a number of publications concerning the Tolkienian world, including Tolkien and the Classics (Effat à Editrice, 2015), and extensive online activity at www.jrrtolkien.it and the corresponding Facebook group, AIST has been working to ensure that a new Italian translation of *The Lord of the Rings* would be undertaken. Bompiani entrusted the work to Ottavio Fatica, and between the fall of 2019 and August 2020 the three parts that make up the novel were released in bookstores, with the single volume published on October 28, 2020. AIST, as stated by President Roberto Arduini at the last Turin Book Fair held online, followed the translation from a philological and scientific point of view.

The new translation has been met with not a few criticisms, which is also the result of the comparison with the previous one. Bompiani has now started a revision of the previously translated Tolkien's books and the remaining volumes of *The History of Middle-Earth* are currently being translated, even thanks to the enthusiasm Amazon *The Rings of Power* series which is spreading among fans. This may contribute to keeping the Tolkienian debate in Italy still fervent and intense; as a matter of fact, more and more realities are emerging that are interested in the Oxonian writer. New digital technologies, especially social networks, contribute and play a fundamental role in this regard, and in the next sections it will be precisely one of these "Tolkienian" realities that will be examined.

Tolkieniani Italiani

Tolkieniani Italiani (Italian Tolkienians) project initially came to life on Easter Monday 2018 from an idea of Giuseppe Scattolini, a Tolkien scholar and founder of the "Cavalieri del Mark" (Knights of the Mark) group, with the intention of bringing together—in a primarily digital way—the various Italian entities that deal with Tolkien. As stated in the description of the Facebook group "Tolkieniani Italiani—public group", this "was born thanks to the sharing of resources and platforms that we put in place as a network of associations, groups, simple fans and scholars". "Networking", a term widely in vogue these days, is one of the essential elements of Tolkieniani Italiani.

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[1] Retrieved February 23, 2023, from https://www.tolkien.it/la-societa-tolkieniana-italiana/attivita/.

As mentioned earlier, there are now a large number of associations, groups of enthusiasts, and individual scholars who are interested in Tolkien and his work, and so that each of these does not lose its specificity or independence, with a view to a shared and open culture, Tolkieniani Italiani is not configured as a very specific association that pursues a goal and requires membership, but rather as an idea that embraces the Tolkienian realities that adhere to it. In this way, any principle of ideology or political intent is eliminated, with the simple aim of discussing about Tolkien, an author, moreover, who stresses that he prefers "applicability" of his work, according to the freedom of the reader on whom the allegory set by the writer should not be imposed. Therefore, this is a unique aspect in the Italian Tolkienian scene, where over the years, political ideologies have had no small influence: All this is made possible thanks to the freedom of expression that the Internet grants to its users and which is fully implemented within Tolkieniani Italiani, where the sharing of Tolkienian knowledge takes center stage.

The group is animated by fundamental principles, such as the absolute centrality of Tolkien's literary work, attention to criticism, and interpretation of Tolkien's writings, so the experts and academics in the group set themselves the role of custodians of the reality of Tolkieniani Italiani. Scientific "popularization" thus plays a prominent role, but it is thought of differently, without a clear separation between "high studies" and "popularization" proper: Everyone can be introduced to it and must be part, in some way, of the more advanced studies. It is not a simple participation in meetings designed more "for the people" (Tolkien and fantasy, Tolkien and the Iron Throne, and other very pop elements), but a real sharing that allows for collective enrichment, because everyone has a desire for a deeper knowledge of reality and can come to understand the truth, if presented in a non-specialized way.

All of this takes place, on a national scale, within the public group on Facebook, thus taking advantage of one of the most interesting functions of the world's most famous social network: At the beginning, efforts were made to gather more and more people and realities, inviting all Facebook pages that dealt with Tolkien to collaborate. The page that responded most enthusiastically and with which an important collaboration as well as a beautiful friendship was born was that of "Pedo Mellon to Minno" and from there many others were added among which the most important ones, which exceed 10,000 followers, are "Tolkien Italia" and "Le migliori frasi del Silmarillion". The pages connect to the public group by bringing in their followers, then sharing their own material on the group as well as catching up with their own, who may be dormant on the page. One thus connects with the audience of other pages, increasing one's own, aiming for the creation of a national network in which knowledge is made available to all. The public "Cavalieri del Mark" group, which later morphed into the "Tolkieniani Italiani" group, became and remains a meeting point for all, sharing followers and fellowship for all Tolkienians. Networking on Facebook is specifically based on the ebb and flow of people passing through on the public group and the coordinated posting of news, events, and articles on the pages, which maintain their specificity but are still all aligned to the same goal and try never to overlap. Tolkieniani Italiani were born to coordinate and allow the collaboration of already existing realities, so it can be said that whatever is organized by those who are part of the network, whether they are the "Cavalieri del Mark", the Societ à Tolkieniana Italiana or other groups related to it is as if it were organized entirely by Tolkieniani Italiani. Views and accesses to the group have increased from 5,866 on 12/31/2019 to 9,729 on 11/22/2020, with an average of about two hundred interactions ("likes", "comments", and "shares") daily. In addition, according to data provided by Greta Bertani, one of the managers of the Tolkieniani Italiani, the number of members of the group, constantly monitored, was

1,798 on 08/24/2018, while as of 11/24/2020, they corresponded to 12,762, with an increase of 709.79%, including 149.28% in 2020 alone. As for the main pages pertaining to the group, it is possible to see a steady increase in the number of followers: The page "Cavalieri del Mark" increased from 4,745 on 25/08/2017 to 17,913 on 20/11/2020, an increase of 377.51%; "Tolkien Italia" from 14,486 on 20/08/2017 to 26,379 on 20/11/2020 (182.10%); "Le migliori frasi del Silmarillion" from 15,364 on 27/11/2018 to 25,107 on 16/11/2020 (163.41%).

The Facebook group, which represents an optimal use of the social network, is also joined by the "Tolkien Italia" website, https://tolkienitalia.net, where news about Tolkien's world can be found both from Italy and the rest of the world; new releases in the field of Tolkienian research are discussed, with ample space devoted to the new translation of *The Lord of the Rings* by Ottavio Fatica; there is also a detailed course in Elvish languages, organized by Gainluca Comastri, who also joins the project of the Tolkieniani Italiani.

The aim in the future is to organize cultural events, meetings, and conferences with scientific publications to follow up on the various initiatives that characterize this project. One of these was undoubtedly the conference *Barlumi di cose più alte*, held at the University of Macerata, Italy, between December 4th and 6th, 2019 with the intention of expanding the network of Tolkieniani Italiani not only to university professors but also to the entire network of universities. In Macerata, only the first step was achieved thanks to the intervention of academics or various Tolkien experts, such as Gianluca Comastri, Luisa Paglieri, Greta Bertani, Costanza Bonelli, Francesca Montemagno, or even Oronzo Cilli, whose latest book *Tolkien's Library* was awarded best publication at the "Tolkien Society Awards 2020". The event in Macerata also benefited from a live web broadcast thanks to what is perhaps the most interesting initiative of the Tolkieniani Italiani project, especially at the digital level, namely the creation and management of a Web-radio, *La Voce di Arda* (The Voice of Arda).

Radio *La Voce di Arda*

In Tolkien's works, Arda is the world in which every event takes place: Therefore, the radio station *La Voce di Arda* intends to communicate everything related to the Tolkienian universe. It is a digital radio station, whose organizers, speakers, and animators are Giuseppe Scattolini and Simone Claudiani, and which, also thanks to the collaboration with the Italian Tolkienian Society, has become to all intents and purposes the preferred channel of wide-ranging communication of the group of Tolkieniani Italiani. Being a web-radio, it is possible to listen to the episodes, which deal exclusively with Tolkien's works and poetics, on the "Spreaker" platform, a podcasting distribution service active in Italy since 2010. The radio show airs live the first three Fridays of each month at 9 p.m. with a few exceptions, and each three-hour episode features reading and commentary on passages chosen through polls in the Facebook group, discussion regarding publications and research, and involves scholars, fans, and experts in the Tolkien world. Although this is not the first attempt at "Tolkien radio"—remember the concluded project of "Sentieri Tolkieniani Radio Brea"—it is the most successful digital tool for Tolkienian discussion and sharing in our country. The Spreaker platform allows live intervention during episodes through the comments function, so that listeners can provide their opinion instantly on what is said during the episode and thus become an active part of the radio. In this way, a perspective of continuous dialogue is established between the radio animators, the live guests—who are often great experts or established Tolkien scholars—and each individual listener, realizing that intent of knowledge sharing that is among the cornerstones of the Tolkieniani Italiani project. Once the episode is finished, it is possible to listen to it on a delayed basis both on

Spreaker and on Spotify, in the "Podcast" section, so that the content of each individual episode can be resumed and appreciated again. At the link https://www.spreaker.com/show/lo-show-di-radio-la-voce-di-arda one can find the titles of all the episodes aired so far; among them one might mention the Elvish languages course of which a complete documentation can be retrieved on "Tolkien Italia" (Retrieved from https://tolkienitalia.net). Ample space is devoted to reading passages from *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit*, or the writings that make up Tolkien's mythology collected at different stages of his life. They are complemented by discussions on recent Italian publications concerning the Oxford professor's work, such as Mauro Toninelli's *Colui che raccontò la grazia*, an in-depth examination of themes found in Tolkien, but which also have implications for contemporary reality, and a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree critique of the new translation of *The Lord of the Rings* by Ottavio Fatica.

The lockdown period, in which many Italians have been forced to stay indoors due to the Coronavirus pandemic, has encouraged the spread and increase in radio listening: More and more users have preferred to spend their Friday evenings in the company of Tolkien and probably of that positive and providential message that shines through in his novels; it is no coincidence that the word "hope" is one of the most recurrent within the pages of *The Lord of the Rings*, as many as 74 times in Book I alone. The return to hope is perhaps something that many have rediscovered during the past few difficult months, and it is important to note how this hope has been communicated through a digital channel: The Web is often mistreated as laden with hatred and negative messages, so it is crucial to remark when positive lights shine heralding new and different messages.

Thanks to a well-structured project and a consistency in commitment and collaboration, the radio station's popularity has reached levels that were perhaps initially unhoped for, from a mere 419 listeners on March 22, 2019 to a peak-about 250,000-recorded last June 19 on the occasion of the live appearance of Vittoria Alliata di Villafranca, the first Italian translator of Tolkien, who, in the late 1960s, as a teenager, undertook with a typewriter and simple dictionaries the Italian rendering of *The Lord of the Rings*. The radio station's ambitions certainly do not stop here, and other projects are in the works, including above all an English language course through the reading and analysis of Tolkien's work, the exploration of his early writings or comparisons between our author and other classics of western literature.

As mentioned, the ultimate goal of Tolkieniani Italiani remains the organization of cultural events and scholarly publication regarding Tolkien, also thanks to the active collaboration with the Italian Tolkienian Society recognized by the Tolkien Estate, which holds the rights to Tolkien's work. Nevertheless, the dissemination on social networks, first of all Facebook in the form of the public group, but also the respective Instagram pages that are increasingly gaining momentum, allows free and unlimited access by any user, who can become an active part of the project. Great importance is given to the experience and how one personally, individually, and communally experiences Tolkien, who can be defined in effect as a spiritual father for all Tolkienians, or as Tom Shippey calls him "the author of the 20th century". His ideas, messages, studies, and interpretations become the focus of a new digital communication, which through multiple forms spreads old and new ideas and allows for a wider dialogue and a totally shared and participatory enjoyment of cultural heritage.

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