THE EPOCH TIMES

ARTS & TRADITION

PUBLIC DOMAIN

Jane Austen and Her Ladies' Well-Regulated Society

*Recognizing our essential dignity through literature...*2

LEST WE FORGET

Jane Austen

and Her Ladies' Well-Regulated Society

1995 BBC

Colin Firth and Jennifer Ehle in the BBC miniseries "Pride and Prejudice."

SUSANNAH PEARCE

I'd been reading Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice" to my 10-year-old daughter. I admit I was immediately motivated by my desire to watch with her the BBC miniseries, for which the book was clearly written to produce one day.

There's a rule here that we have to read the book before we watch the movie. Well, she still reads too slowly for me to wait, so I'm reading it to her. We're both loving it! I have the actors in mind as I try to emulate their voices for each part. She is enjoying it almost as much as I am.

She has a set of paper dolls of Jane Austen characters, which she has enjoyed because of the beautiful costumes and general loveliness. But paper dolls are rather two-dimensional (in the most literal sense). So, we're breathing life into the characters and placing them in their rather more interesting literary world when we read the novel.

I find I must explain some of the social rules to her as we go.

Ladies Did Not Watch Television

There was serious protocol for every public interaction! But the behind-the-scenes behavior of the characters reveals to us that however dignified a time in history, a culture in the world, or a rank in society appears, human character—in its strengths and especially weaknesses—has always been a constant.

People in Austen's world (always those wealthy enough to have leisure time) dressed up to dine and then sat around together watching television. Just kidding; there wasn't television then. You could say that in Jane Austen's world, ladies did not watch television; they were the television! That seems almost to be the whole point of their existence. (The point of men's existence is unclear.)

Young ladies became "most accomplished" in playing the pianoforte and singing, in painting and crafting pretty (and marginally useful) things for the entertainment and enjoyment of those around them—and often for their own vanity.

I'm not making a judgment as to whether this is a good or a bad thing. I mean, in our world, we binge-watch TV shows on the internet; who are we to judge?

Austen's people also played cards, took a turn about the room to show their figures to greater advantage, and (very occasionally it seems) read books for entertainment. I can only assume that there were men who knew how to perform musically, but mainly, we hear about the ladies.

The ladies played well or poorly—and there was nothing you could do about it. You had to sit there and listen. In addition to the value in the musical entertainment itself for a social group, a lady's talent provided material for others to discuss her worth when she was not present.

Electricity and recorded music not having been invented either, ladies also provided the music for dances. And, since social media wasn't a thing yet, dances were essential for meeting, watching, and gossiping about one's neighbors, old and new.

Just like us, they were not too dignified to pick apart their friends, acquaintances, and strangers at the smallest provocation. The internet simply allows us to judge people even more remotely.

Behind the long gowns and country dances, people in Austen's era struggled with the same weaknesses we struggle with today.

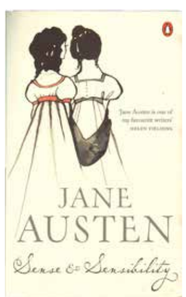
Going a-Calling

And then there's that business we read about in many old-fashioned books of ladies having days when they went calling and days when they received visitors. They did their work in the morning (those low enough to have any work to do), and in the afternoon they changed into a nice dress and sat in the parlor waiting for other ladies to visit.

This pattern set me off thinking about what it would be like to live in such a well-regulated society. I'm sure I'm not the first person to apply my mind to how to work this system to my advantage.

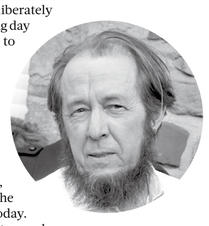
Naturally, the first thing to do is to find out when everyone else is receiving and visiting. Then you make sure you will be in on the same days as the ladies you don't want to have to visit with. However, that means you may run into them at someone else's house on your visiting days. But the chance is slimmer.

The next thing to do is to find out who serves the best snacks, of course. This is not just for your own culinary pleasure, though. The person serving the best goodies will have a purpose behind it. She is either showing off or trying to attract people (because everyone will know whose goodies are to be sought and whose to be avoided). If she is trying to attract people, it is either because no one would visit her otherwise (caution!), because she aims to collect the news on everyone for future use (again, caution!), or because she is really fun!



If she succeeds in attracting many people to her house on her receiving days, then, chances are, you will run into everyone else there. So, you should plan accordingly and try not to display any visible flaws, physical or behavioral—because people need something to talk about. If you are more inclined to a quiet gathering, you may prefer flavorless biscuits at the home of a quieter lady. She will probably appreciate the company more than the others—unless she deliberately scheduled her receiving day at that time in order to deter visitors.

If you are one of those who longs for simpler days of highly regulated social behavior, when roles and intentions were much more clearly communicated than they are today, I advise you to pick up a Jane Austen novel. You will discover that behind the long gowns and country dances, people in Austen's era struggled with the same weaknesses we struggle with today. In fact, people have always been pretty much the same. Ages and societies are not good or bad, virtuous or evil. The battleground is in the heart of each individual born. It is a never-ending battle throughout each and every life and is true for every person from Adam to the last human standing.



Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn explained that good and evil lives in every human heart.

Inside the Human Heart

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said it like this in "The Gulag Archipelago":

"If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart."

I often cringe when I hear someone explain that those people of a time long ago didn't understand this or that like we do today, as if they simply didn't think, or when tales of times past cast the heroes and villains as all and only good or evil. Or those living in a place more burdened with poverty or war, who perhaps lack every technological advantage we expect in our society, do not suffer just as acutely as I would at the death of their child or the bombing of their city, and that just because they haven't electricity, they may not feel the fear or jealousy or joy that every human person has experienced from the beginning of humanity.

Just one of the many benefits of reading great literature (especially that written long ago and not just set in the past) is that in it we see that people of every time have struggled to answer the same great questions, to overcome the same sins and pettiness that we experience today.

Well-written stories bring to life the human drama that is played out in every age, in every heart. The same can be said of well-made, accurately portrayed historical films. It is good for us to see that mundane human emotions that we feel today were likewise felt by people remote from ourselves in culture and time. It reinforces in us in an experiential way the reality of the dignity of the human person. We are just like them.

Great literature has come to be known as great because it has endured for hundreds, even thousands of years. We have it now because it brings to life the drama within the human heart and shows us ourselves. Through it, we are led to more fully appreciate the dignity of our neighbors, past, present, and future.

The list of great works of literature is too long to include here, but the upside of that is that you never need be at a loss for finding something to read. There's Homer, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Coleridge, Austen, Hugo, Dickens, Dostoevsky, and so many more! As time marches on, more great works are added—though their greatness will be determined by their durability.

So, if you have not done so before, pick up some great literature and become a student of three-dimensional human character, celebrating the dignity of the human person through delightful stories that reflect the virtue and ridiculousness of us all.

Susannah Pearce has a master's degree in theology and writes from her home in South Carolina. This article, edited slightly for style, has been republished by the permission of the SlowGoingLife.blogspot.com

MOLLANDS.NET

The ladies of Jane Austen's era became "most accomplished" in playing the pianoforte and singing. Watercolor illustrations for "Pride and Prejudice" by C. E. Brock.

Mark Jackson grew up in Spring Valley, N.Y., where he attended a Waldorf school. At Williams College, his professors all suggested he write professionally. He acted professionally for 20 years instead. Now he writes professionally about acting. In the movies.

ALL PHOTOS BY CHUCK ZLOTNICK/MARVEL STUDIOS

Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson) and Captain Marvel (Brie Larson) in Marvel Studios' "Captain Marvel."

A Blah Bockbuster

MARK JACKSON

Mr. Marvel Comics himself (the real Captain Marvel)—the venerable Stan Lee—is given a nice send-off at the outset of "Captain Marvel," and then a two-hour slog of blah, meh, and feh is foisted upon one. Yet as of this writing, it's the most popular superhero movie opening to date, with $455 million worldwide.

Carol Danvers, Captain Marvel (Brie Larson), was one of the rarified, early-days female Air Force pilots (which means some "Top Gun"-type scenes). Then she crashed and burned, and was turned into a Kree named Vers.

The movie just looks cheap overall.

What's a Kree? A green-and-gray-superhero-suit-wearing people, headed up by Starforce commander Yon-Rogg (Jude Law), responsible for keeping order in the universe. As opposed to another race: the greenish-skinned Skrulls, who look like pointy-eared Tolkien orcs.

Yon-Rogg is doing some Yoda-like kungfu-ish training of Carol. He would like her to get proficient at fighting without using her blue, electric-looking superpowers that she apparently got from standing too close to this, this blue, electricity-radiating cube, that's apparently good for something. Probably universe-dominance.

Back on Earth

When she's good to go, Danvers heads back to Earth to Hulk-smash some Skrulls. Who decides she's ready? The computer-generated Supreme Intelligence (Annette Bening).

'Captain Marvel'

Director
Anna Boden, Ryan Fleck

Starring
Brie Larson, Samuel L. Jackson, Ben Mendelsohn, Jude Law, Lashana Lynch, Annette Bening, Clark Gregg, Djimon Hounsou

Running Time
2 hours, 4 minutes

Rated
PG-13

Release Date
March 8

★★½☆☆

The Skrulls' fearless leader (Ben Mendelsohn) can shape-shift, sort of like a "Transformers" version of an orc or a "Mission Impossible" latex mask, and so you're never sure who's talking, him or disguise.

And Nick Fury and Phil Coulson of S.H.I.E.L.D. are here. (Samuel L. Jackson and Clark Gregg, respectively, are both young-ified with CGI, so this is two-eyed Fury back before the eye patch happened, with the addition of a terrible toupee.)

And so, these two are in pursuit of Carol Danvers, as she, dressed in her Kree gray-green paintball suit, shows up in a mid-1990s L.A. setting, replete with Blockbuster Videos and RadioShacks, and the action is wreathed 'round with catchy tunes of the day (Nirvana, Hole, etc.)

Shoddy Production

The movie just looks cheap overall. Captain Marvel has one of those forearm-situated computer readouts, like the Predator has, but it functions like something you'd find in a Walmart toy section.

"Captain Marvel" is related more to the "Guardians of the Galaxy" side of the Marvel-verse; lighter fare, but not quippy like "Deadpool."

It's a fair bet to say that Samuel L. Jackson provides 99 percent of the chuckles here, but then, he does that in just about any movie he's in. Why is this movie suddenly a financial blockbuster? The only blockbuster-ness it warrants is the one Captain Marvel crash-lands in.

Most likely because this is the second-only female lead other than Wonder Woman. Which is a good thing. But also probably because the Marvel-verse has become an addiction, and quantity is winning out over quality. Which is a bad thing.

(Top)
(L–R) Maria Rambeau (Lashana Lynch) and Carol Danvers/Captain Marvel (Brie Larson) in Marvel Studios' "Captain Marvel."

(Left&Above)
Carol Danvers/Captain Marvel (Brie Larson) in "Captain Marvel."

THEATER REVIEW

Coping With the *Unthinkable*

JUDD HOLLANDER

ALL PHOTOS BY JOAN MARCUS

Tom Sturridge in "Sea Wall."

NEW YORK–There is no way to prepare for dealing with death, as inevitable or unexpected as it might be. Playwrights Simon Stephens and Nick Payne provide examples of this in their respective one-acts "Sea Wall" and "A Life," while also showing how much an impact the deceased have on those who remain. These two one-person monologues–both having their New York premieres–have been combined into a single evening at The Public Theater.

In Stephens's "Sea Wall," which opens the production, Alex (Tom Sturridge) is an ordinary and somewhat self-deprecating young man from England who has the perfect life. He's married to a woman he loves, has a daughter he adores and, after years as a struggling photographer, has found his niche photographing objects for catalogs. A person who finds emotion in the simplest things, he never forgets how lucky he is–until an unspeakable tragedy upends his world, plunging him into a morass of grief and anger.

Taking a different route, Payne's "A Life" introduces us to Abe (Jake Gyllenhaal). Abe must watch the slow decline of a loved one while also dealing with the prospect of his impending fatherhood and all the worry and joy that comes with it.

The narrative switches back and forth in time, thus allowing the two storylines to play out simultaneously. Abe's reaction to the first event threatens to color the outcome of the second.

What is clear in both pieces is how just impotent Alex and Abe are when it comes to preventing these tragedies: Alex because he is physically unable to do anything to stop it, while neither Abe nor anyone else has the knowledge or power to change things. It's also why Alex blindly lashes out in anger and blames someone for the tragedy. He later calls it "the cruelest thing I ever did to anybody else."

Yet while the events themselves and the people involved are completely different, when watching both shows together, one can't help but see the linkage between them. Both explore the different stages of grief and what must happen before one can even begin to move on.

It's a testament to the excellent direction of Carrie Cracknell in taking what's on the page and working with the actors to bring the words so brilliantly to life.

Of the two, "Sea Wall" is by far the more emotionally raw. The tragedy takes place barely five weeks prior. Alex is only beginning to think of trying to climb back up from the pit into which he has fallen. The play's title is a reference to a sudden sheer drop in the ocean floor, where the ground falls away to reveal a black hole. An apt analogy to the situation Alex now finds himself in.

"A Life," due to the situations depicted occurring further in the past, comes off as a more finished work, and one that is much funnier. The piece blends Abe's pain over an impending death with the oft-depicted worries of being a first-time father, such as when his wife goes into labor. Abe frantically tries to get everything ready so they can race to the hospital. He even says, "I know this is going to make a funny story some time later."

The show also functions as a sort of safety valve for the audience. They laugh at the humor not only because it is funny, but also because it's a relief from what they had seen before the intermission.

Another element present in both works, albeit different in connotations, is the various coping mechanisms Alex and Abe use in the face of what has happened. Alex, for example, becomes fixated on the fact that one of the ambulance men once lived in Southampton.

For Abe, it's his inability to face the subject head-on, often saying "I don't understand" to the doctors and refusing even to admit the reality of the situation to others.

Sturridge and Gyllenhaal both give tour-de-force performances here. Sturridge's delivery projects the rawness of an exposed nerve as he recounts what was for Alex a recent tragedy. While this serves to keep the audience on the edge of their seats, it can also somewhat color the perception of the play. Each time a scenario is presented, we wonder if this is the moment tragedy will strike, and sigh in relief each time it doesn't, at least until the moment actually happens.

Jake Gyllenhaal in the one-act play "A Life."

Gyllenhaal expertly flips back and forth between the comic and dramatic moments in "A Life," quite often at the drop of a hat. Such as when he's in a car driving to a hospital in order to watch a new life be born, and a moment later trying to get there before a different life ends. Although some of the funnier moments come off as a bit contrived, the work succeeds in drawing one into the story throughout and provides a fascinating counterpoint to what has come before.

Heart-wrenching at points, funny at others, and containing more than a hint of wistfulness, "Sea Wall/A Life" tackles a subject most people don't like to talk about, and does it with grace and dignity.

Judd Hollander is a reviewer for Stagebuzz.com and a member of the Drama Desk and the Outer Critics Circle.

'Sea Wall/A Life'

The Public Theater
425 Lafayette St.
New York

Closes
March 31

Tickets
212-967-7555 or
PublicTheater.org

Running Time
1 hour, 45 minutes
(one intermission)

CELEBRATING THE ART OF ASIA

ASIA WEEK NEW YORK

IRENE LUO

Every year, Asia Week New York brings together leading Asian art specialists, auction houses, and museums for a 10-day celebration of Asian art.

From March 13 to 23, art enthusiasts can revel in nonstop special events, including auction sales, exhibitions, lectures, symposiums, and special tours. Six auction houses and over 40 international galleries are participating in Asia Week's 10th anniversary this year.

The exhibited works span from ancient times to modern day and come from China, India, Southeast Asia, the Himalayas, Japan, and Korea.

All participating art dealers will open their doors to the public during Open House Weekend on March 16 and 17.

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COURTESY OF SOTHEBY'S NEW YORK

White Marble Carving of a Bodhisattva. This exquisite work from the Tang Dynasty (618–907) is being auctioned by Sotheby's New York on March 19 for an estimated $600,000 to $800,000. It is part of the Junkunc Collection, one of the largest and most significant Chinese art collections ever gathered in the United States.

COURTESY OF DOYLE NEW YORK

Chinese Underglazed Blue and Iron-Red Porcelain Fish Jar. This potted jar is painted in the round with eight iron-red carp swimming amid lotus blossoms and water weeds. Qing Dynasty, height 12 3/8 inches. Auctioned by Doyle New York on March 18 for an estimated $20,000 to $30,000.

HOW CLASSICAL PLASTER CASTS

HELP SHAPE ARCHITECTS

LORRAINE FERRIER

Helen Valentine, senior curator at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, shares how and why the Academy has approximately 500 architectural plaster casts: from small medieval heads coming from England's cathedrals, to huge plaster casts coming from the great architectural monuments of ancient Rome.

The primary purpose of having these architectural casts was for the architectural students who went to the Royal Academy Schools from 1769 through to the 1950s.

To enroll at the Royal Academy Schools, originally architecture students had to produce a finished architectural design of their own invention. But after 1814, when the rules of the school were tightened, the students also had to present a drawing from a plaster cast: a plaster cast of an architectural fragment.

The plaster casts were bought by or donated to the Academy Schools over about a hundred-year period from around 1770.

Nearly all the plaster casts are from ancient Rome, so either from the Colosseum or from some of the museums like the Vatican Museum and the Capitolini Museum, which had, and still have, a lot of architectural fragments. The plaster casts came from places like the Round Temple by the Tiber near Rome, the Arch of Septimius Severus, and the Pantheon.

The casts have great archaeological value because the details on some of these buildings today have been damaged by weather pollution, overzealous 19th-century restorations, or even vandalism, and so they are a great historic record.

Many of the plaster casts were taken from molds cast in the 1790s. Scaffolding would have been built, and then casts were taken from sections of the building, such as the top of a capital, the architrave (the beam that spans the tops of the capitals and connects the columns), a little bit of a frieze, or just a small architectural ornamental detail.

It's extraordinary, really, as some of the capitals are very high up; they're way, way up off the ground. And, the casts are obviously interesting for students because they'd be quite difficult to draw because they are up so high, and you couldn't get close up.

Interestingly, the architectural plaster casts are nearly all designed to hang on the wall, but in the Royal Academy of Arts Schools from the 1870s, a lot of them sat on little shelves.

Architecture Students at the Academy

In the daytime, the students would be working in an architect's office, learning some of the practical tools of the trade: how to do architectural drawings, how to understand building terms, and how to negotiate with builders, for example. In the office, the students were probably at an apprentice level, and they'd be told to draw another architect's ideas. But if they came to the Academy Schools, they'd be asked about their own ideas for a building.

At the Academy Schools, the students would make detailed drawings from the architectural plaster casts, but also use the plaster casts for inspiration for their competition drawings.

The Academy had specific competitions where a subject was set, such as to draw a measured drawing of a gateway (where the actual measurements are included in the drawing), or create their own designs for a mansion in the country, for example.

The students then had to do very beautiful finished drawings, and they could use the Academy facilities like the casts and books from the library to inspire them. Students would go to the architectural casts to see how classical architects combined details, and to observe them in an exact scale. Sometimes, students would even just measure the casts to understand the relationship of different ornamental details to each other.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, architects were using lots of details from classical architecture, and they'd combine their ornaments in a particular way and present these competition drawings, which were then judged and awarded medals.

Buildings in the 18th and 19th centuries very often had columns with capitals. So the plaster casts show different styles of capitals, including a Pegasus on the cast of the Corinthian pilaster capital from the Forum of Augustus in Rome, where a horse is part of the capital. If you look at many buildings from the 18th and 19th centuries, they are based on classical Greek or Roman buildings in terms of proportion, ornament, and style.

The Academy also had a professor of architecture, who gave a series of lectures for the students, which I think were well-attended. The professor would actually produce these rather beautiful lecture drawings, such as a re-creation of a famous building, or a re-creation of a building from the ancient world, that they would then discuss with students.

I think eventually, by the 1950s, the Royal Academy Schools stopped taking architecture students because it couldn't compete with other places that were doing much more teaching for architects. But it was still a good place to come and meet other architects, attend lectures, and use the library.

Now, visitors can see a selection of the architectural casts at the Dorfman Architecture Court at the Academy. Here, the casts are hung quite densely. There are lots of different capitals, cornices, architraves, and medallions, hung together in a slightly grid-like manner, which does reflect how they were originally hung around 1867.

For more information about these historic architectural plasters casts and the Dorfman Architecture Court, visit RoyalAcademy.org.uk

This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF ROYAL ACADEMY OF ARTS, LONDON

Visitors explore the Dorfman Architecture Court at the Royal Academy in London, where the architectural plaster casts are hung as they would've been in the 19th century.

A cast of one-quarter of a Corinthian capital of the Round Temple near Tiber in Rome, late 18th century or early 19th century. Plaster cast. Height: 4 feet 10 1/2 inches, Width: 2 feet 11 1/2 inches.

> **The casts have great archaeological value because the details on some of these buildings today have been damaged.**
>
> *Helen Valentine, senior curator, Royal Academy of Arts*

Cast of a pilaster capital from the north porch of the Erechtheion in Greece, late 18th century or early 19th century. Plaster cast. Height: 19 1/2 inches, Width: 22 2/3 inches.

Cast of a monumental pilaster fragment with acanthus, scrolls, and birds from Villa Medici in Rome, late 18th century. Plaster cast. Height: 8 feet, 2 inches, Width: 3 feet, 2 inches.

Cast of a Corinthian pilaster capital with Pegasus volutes (spiral scrolls) from the Forum of Augustus in Rome, late 18th century or early 19th century. Plaster cast. Height: 36 inches, Width: 25 inches. The original is in the Museum at Trajan's Markets, Rome.

ALL PHOTOS BY CAROL ROSEGG

THEATER REVIEW

Masterwork Gets Masterful Treatment

'The Shadow of a Gunman'

Irish Repertory Theatre
132 W. 22nd St.
New York

Closes
May 25

Tickets
212-727-2737
or IrishRep.org

Running Time
1 hour, 45 minutes
(one intermission)

Meg Hennessy and James Russell in Irish Rep's 2019 production of "The Shadow of a Gunman."

DIANA BARTH

NEW YORK—Set in Dublin in 1920 during the height of the Irish War of Independence between the British government and Ireland, "The Shadow of a Gunman" marks the first of several masterworks by Sean O'Casey. Written when he was 43, the play established O'Casey as a star in the firmament of great Irish playwrights.

Director Ciaran O'Reilly's work here has enforced and amplified the playwright's thoughts and words. It's a terrific production.

The odd couple, wannabe poet Donal Davoren (James Russell) and peddler Seumas Shields (Michael Mellamphy), share a furnished room in a lowly tenement house.

A variety of neighbors pay the men casual visits rather regularly, giving the playwright the opportunity to display a cross-section of commonplace Irish folk, such as the pushy Mrs. Henderson (Una Clancy) and the energetic Tommy Owens (Ed Malone).

One of the visitors is Mr. Maguire (Rory Duffy), apparently a friend to Seumas. Maguire wants a favor: to leave a small bag with Seumas, which he promises to pick up that evening. Nothing too unusual about that, or at least it seems to have no importance.

In the course of conversation between Donal and Seumas, it comes out that Donal hasn't the least interest in politics or the struggle around them, which, however, is sometimes brought too close to home by the sound of gunfire in the streets nearby.

But there's the hint of suspicion among the neighbors regarding Donal. Some feel that because he's such an odd entity, he might be a fighter in hiding–a gunman on the run.

Nothing is further from Donal's experience. Except–he would like to impress the lovely young upstairs neighbor, Minnie Powell (actress Meg Hennessy, who is indeed lovely, with her tresses of wavy red hair). No problem, he feels, in letting her think, at least, that he is a shadow of a gunman.

But the play slides, almost seamlessly, from a light tone into darkness and tragedy. The feared Black and Tans, a vigilante arm of the Brits, invade the tenement, searching for a particular bag. Their raid brings about unexpected pain and sorrow.

One of the denizens, Mrs. Grigson (Terry Donnelly in a heartbreaking turn), speaks for everyone of their grief at the injustice that has just been visited upon them.

Top-rate production elements enhance the performance. Charlie Corcoran's detailed set truly transports the viewer into a low-level Dublin rooming house, filled, as it is, with properties meticulously selected by Deirdre Brennan.

The set is also fittingly filled with appropriate lighting by Michael Gottlieb and sound design by Ryan Rumery and M. Florian Staab. The deliberately somewhat seedy costumes by Linda Fisher and David Toser complete the picture.

Kudos to director O'Reilly for doing full justice to this classic of Irish playwriting. Irish Rep productions of O'Casey classics "Juno and the Paycock" and "The Plough and the Stars" will follow.

(Top) Mrs. Grigson (Terry Donnelly in a heartbreaking turn) speaks for all of their grief at the injustice that has just been visited upon them.

(Left) (L–R) Wannabe poet Donal Davoren (James Russell) and peddler Seumas Shields (Michael Mellamphy) share a furnished room in a lowly tenement house.

Diana Barth writes for various theatrical publications and for New Millennium. She may be contacted at diabarth99@gmail.com

TRADITIONAL CULTURE

SHEN YUN's

Energy Brings Joy, Inspiration to Audience

EPOCH TIMES STAFF

NEW YORK–Actress Liane Curtis felt that she was immersed in a field of divine energy while she watched Shen Yun Performing Arts at Lincoln Center in New York on March 7.

"[The energy] here is incredibly high, and I felt it come through the whole audience as well as the orchestra. Everybody was in a very high [energy] frequency," Curtis said.

Curtis, who has been acting in television and film for more than three decades, attended the performance with her 95-year-old mother, Paulette Tirard, and writer John Guss.

Shen Yun has returned to New York City with a second run of performances in March, following its sell-out batch of performances in January.

DENGYU TENG/THE EPOCH TIMES

Liane Curtis (C) saw Shen Yun with her mother Paulette Tirard (R) and John Guss at Lincoln Center, on March 7, 2019.

Divine Energy

Traditional Chinese culture is grounded in belief in the divine. China itself was once called "Shen Zhou," or "Divine Land." For millennia, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism have informed the thinking and behavior of Chinese, encouraging them to live in harmony with their fellow man, with the earth, and with heaven.

Many of the stories and songs performed by Shen Yun reflect these ideas that permeated the culture.

"I feel the spiritual nature of the culture coming through all of the art that was performed this evening," Curtis said.

But the spirituality was not only being conveyed through the content of the performances; it was also through the dancers themselves, Curtis said.

"I think we're all divine creatures, and I think that the divine expresses through us all in different ways," she said.

The divine energy flowed from the dancers on stage to the audience, Curtis said, and "even [to] the chairs and the walls."

"That's how energy works," she said.

> **I feel the spiritual nature of the culture coming through all of the art that was performed this evening.**
>
> *Liane Curtis, actress*

The result of this effect was the creation of a very large field enveloping the whole theater.

"When the [energy] expresses through so many people at the same time, it's impossible for the energy not to permeate the whole room and permeate every single fragment that's in here," Curtis said.

"It becomes a big, big, giant energy ball in one room."

Exuberance

SHERRY DONG/THE EPOCH TIMES

John Cimino and Rachel St-Vincent enjoyed Shen Yun Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, on March 8, 2019.

Just seeing the beauty of Shen Yun Performing Arts on stage changed the way John Cimino was breathing.

"Any time I see something and hear something that inspires me, I mean the music changes my breathing. I breathe more lightly, more completely," said Cimino, who attended the March 8 performance at the David H. Koch Theater with his wife, Dr. Rachel St-Vincent. Cimino, an award-winning baritone, has performed on that very same stage, with the New York City Opera.

"I will remember this for a long time, and when I compose my own music, I will remember this inspiration," he said.

"It's a very happy experience. Also amazing dancing. Most especially the dancing was incredible. They are so athletic and graceful, and artistic and inspired. They seem to float in the air. Most beautiful," he said.

CATHY HE/THE EPOCH TIMES

Ray and Annie Speckman attended Shen Yun Performing Arts at Lincoln Center on March 8, 2019.

Cimino is also a champion of the arts, and he has brought innovative arts programming into projects of the White House and Fortune 500 companies. He is president and CEO of Associated Solo Artists, a nonprofit driven by his vision of the arts as a powerful catalyst for connectivity.

"I'm learning from this experience, and I find it a great way to bring this into my world of understanding. I will tell my friends about this. This was a great time," he said.

Shen Yun is the world's premier classical Chinese dance company, and Cimino felt they certainly lived up to their name. As the emcees explained, "Shen Yun" translates into something like "the beauty of divine beings dancing."

"For me, the most fantastic of all is the dancing," he said. "To see these dancers at such a high level of artistry and athleticism was just magnificent. ... I hope we can come again next year and see it again."

Hope in Humanity

Annie and Ray Speckman also attended the March 8 performance and were moved by the powerful effect of Shen Yun on many different levels.

Artistically, it was masterful and incredible, Mrs. Speckman said. And then from a cultural perspective, it was eye-opening.

"[They are] trying to reach out this powerful message to those that aren't there in China anymore and have lost their way from tradition, you know. It's just incredible, this message [Shen Yun] brings out," Mrs. Speckman said. "The idea provides so much insight and education to others to be more open-minded."

Mr. Speckman, an executive project manager for a construction company, agreed and added that he saw a profound spiritual message bookending the program, which was peppered with humorous moments that made the audience relax and laugh.

Mr. Speckman said that seeing the divine beings pass down this rich culture to the Chinese people, and seeing deities return to people of faith even in the modern day, gave a reminder that "we all have a little of that in us," that divine spark.

Mrs. Speckman said she thought Shen Yun was "about hope in humanity."

"That's what I walk away with. And everybody having that part of their heart touched, so we can reach out to each other," she said.

The Epoch Times considers Shen Yun Performing Arts the significant cultural event of our time and has covered audience reactions since the company's inception in 2006. For more information, visit ShenYun.com

SACRED MUSIC

MAGNIFICAT

Women's Voices in Celebration of Saint Mary

CATHERINE YANG

A Magnificat is a canticle, a Latin word that means "magnify," and in this context "My soul magnifies the Lord." It is also known as the Song of Mary, because this portion of scriptures taken for hymns is of Mary praising the Lord.

On March 17, 15 choirs from across the country joined to perform a program of seven works centered around the theme of Saint Mary. The concert was held at Carnegie Hall.

It's not every day that there is a performance solely of works for women's choirs, much less something of this scale–260 individual voices coming together as one.

Distinguished Concerts International New York (DCINY) was presenting this concert of magnificent scale and welcoming guest conductor Nancy Menk of Saint Mary's College to present a program based around the Magnificat with eight choirs of all-female voices.

The second act of the performance was led by DCINY artistic director and principal conductor Jonathan Griffith, with seven choirs coming together to perform John Rutter's "Magnificat."

Saint Mary's

Nancy Menk leads the 40-voice Women's Choir at Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, in Indiana. This year is the 175th anniversary of Saint Mary's College, and the performance also brings together alumnae from the college women's choir for a commemorative event.

To celebrate the milestone, Menk has taken the theme of Saint Mary and selected a wide range of music to showcase these women's voices.

"[These pieces] are really varied in style from size to orchestration, to the language, either English or Latin," Menk said. "Usually, you hear mixed choirs. "This is a whole different sound, and some people might not know there is such a large range."

"There are three 'Magnificat' pieces, but they're all so different," Menk said by phone. From Michael Haydn there is a "Magnificat" with a distinct Baroque flavor. Vaughan Williams's take is a large orchestral piece with a lovely mezzo-soprano soloist.

Libby Larsen's "Canticle of Mary" is a joyful work that was actually premiered by Menk and the Saint Mary's College Women's Choir 25 years ago for its 150th anniversary.

Then there is Brahms's brief "Ave Maria," and a lively "Gloria" by contemporary composer Ola Gjeilo.

From profound moments of serenity to spirited, almost triumphal moments, the program is filled with music that uplifts.

The performance ends with Zachary Moore's "Always Keep This Close," which has already brought some rehearsing choir members to tears. The song is about the shared experience of singing in a choir.

Menk shared a bit of the text: "No notes are as connected as the souls that sing them." Though the alumnae have been scattered around the country, song still brings them close, she said.

"There is a closeness there," Menk said of the members and alumnae of the Saint Mary's choir she has conducted for 30 years. "There's really a legacy here in this choir."

MATT CASHORE

Saint Mary's College Women's Choir featured at Carnegie Hall on March 17, 2019.

THE EPOCH TIMES

Shen Yun Performing Arts at Lincoln Center on March 8, 2019.

South Africa's Blombos Cave Is Home to the Earliest Drawing by a Human

CHRISTOPHER HENSHILWOOD & KAREN LOISE VAN NIEKERK

Scientists working in Blombos Cave in South Africa's southern Cape region have made a discovery that changes our understanding of when our human ancestors started expressing themselves through drawings. They've found a 73,000-year-old cross-hatched drawing on a silcrete (stone) flake. It was made with an ochre crayon. The Conversation Africa asked professor Christopher Henshilwood, who leads the team that made the discovery, about its significance.

CONVERSATION AFRICA: What does the drawing your team found look like?

CHRISTOPHER HENSHILWOOD: It consists of a set of six straight subparallel lines crossed obliquely by three slightly curved lines. One line partially overlaps the edge of a flake scar. This suggests it was made after that flake became detached. The abrupt termination of all lines on the fragment edges indicates that the pattern originally extended over a larger surface.

So the pattern was probably more complex and structured in its entirety than in this truncated form.

CONVERSATION AFRICA: This has shifted our thinking about when human ancestors started drawing. What was the earliest known drawing found before this?

MR. HENSHILWOOD: The earliest known engraving, a zigzag pattern incised on a freshwater shell from Trinil, Java, was found in layers dated to 540,000 years ago. In terms of drawings, a recent article proposed that painted representations in three caves of the Iberian Peninsula were 64,000 years old–this would mean they were produced by Neanderthals. So the drawing on the Blombos silcrete flake is the oldest drawing by Homo sapiens ever found.

CONVERSATION AFRICA: You describe it as a "drawing." How can you be sure it wasn't just a random series of scratches?

MR. HENSHILWOOD: The presence of similar cross-hatched patterns engraved on ochre fragments found in the same archaeological level and older levels suggests the pattern in question was reproduced with different techniques on different media.

This is what we would expect to find in a society with a symbolic system embedded in different categories of artifacts. It's also worth noting that patterns drawn on a stone are less durable than those engraved on an ochre fragment and may not survive transport. This may indicate that comparable signs were produced in different contexts, possibly for different purposes.

CONVERSATION AFRICA: Is there any reason to think the pattern is an artwork?

MR. HENSHILWOOD: We would be hesitant to call it "art." It is definitely an abstract design; it almost certainly had some meaning to the maker and probably formed a part of the common symbolic system understood by other people in this group. It's also evidence of early humans' ability to store information outside of the human brain.

> **It almost certainly had some meaning to the maker.**
>
> *Christopher Henshilwood, professor of African prehistory*

CONVERSATION AFRICA: Does it tell us anything else about the people who made it? And do we know which group they belonged to on our ancestral tree?

MR. HENSHILWOOD: The drawing was made by Homo sapiens: people like us, who were our ancient direct ancestors. They were hunter-gatherers who lived in groups of between 20 and 40 people.

The discovery adds to our existing understanding of Homo sapiens in Africa. They were behaviorally modern: They behaved essentially like us. They were able to produce and use symbolic material culture to mediate their behavior, just like we do now. They also had syntactic language–essential for conveying symbolic meaning within and across groups of hunter-gatherers who were present in southern Africa at that time.

CONVERSATION AFRICA: Blombos Cave is a really significant archaeological site. Can you explain why?

MR. HENSHILWOOD: Blombos Cave is situated 50 meters (about 55 yards) from the Indian Ocean, elevated at 35 meters (almost 40 yards) above sea level and 300 kilometers (about 185 miles) east of Cape Town. It's very small–just 55 square meters (about 65 square yards). It was used as a temporary living site by hunter-gatherer groups; they'd spend a week or two there at a time before moving on.

The archaeological layer in which the Blombos drawing was discovered has also yielded other indicators of symbolic thinking. These include shell beads covered with ochre and, more importantly, pieces of ochres engraved with abstract patterns. Some of these engravings closely resemble the one drawn on the silcrete flake.

In older layers at Blombos Cave, dated at 100,000 years, they also discovered a complete toolkit consisting of two abalone shells filled with an ochre-rich substance–a red paint–and all the artifacts associated with making it, including seal bone used to add fat to the mixture. This discovery proves that our early ancestors could also make paint by 100,000 years ago.

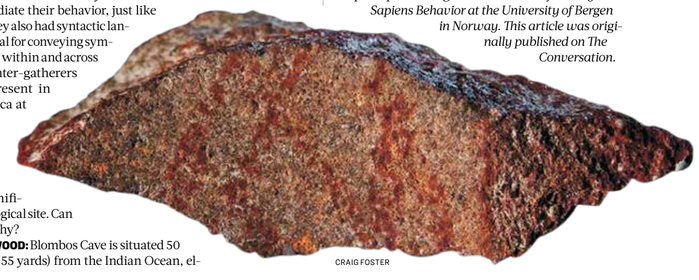
Engraved ochre slabs with various designs, including cross-hatched patterns, were also found in these older layers.

Christopher Henshilwood is a professor of African prehistory and Karen Loise van Niekerk is a principal investigator at the Center for Early Sapiens Behavior at the University of Bergen in Norway. This article was originally published on The Conversation.

MAGNUS HAALAND

(Top) The outside of Blombos Cave, in South Africa, where the drawing was discovered.

(Bottom) The drawing found on silcrete stone in Blombos Cave.



CRAIG FOSTER

LITERATURE

THE CREATIVE BRILLIANCE OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN

TOLKIEN: MAKER OF MIDDLE-EARTH' EXHIBITION AT THE MORGAN LIBRARY & MUSEUM

LORRAINE FERRIER

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien's fantastical world of Middle-earth may be make-believe, but for Tolkien it had a real purpose: It was a land where he could create a rich tapestry of myths and legends for England—specifically, for an England that he felt had been robbed of its cultural heritage by the Norman Conquest.

In fact, Middle-earth is a world complete with its own geography, time, languages, and history. Everything in Middle-earth was created by Tolkien, the Oxford don (similar to a U.S. professor) and renowned scholar of Old and Middle English, and the author of "The Hobbit" and the epic "Lord of the Rings."

"I do not remember a time when I was not building it," Tolkien said of Middle-earth. Indeed, he spent nearly 70 years creating his ancient world based on our own at a far earlier time.

"The world in which these stories happen is so real—it's completely true within it—you have a sense that you're not just reading a story, but you are seeing part of this world," said John McQuillen by phone on Feb. 20. He is an associate curator in the printed books and bindings department at The Morgan Library & Museum in New York.

McQuillen is also the curator of "Tolkien: Maker of Middle-earth," an exhibition that explores Tolkien's ideas, ideals, and life's work.

The exhibition is on display at The Morgan Library & Museum through May 12. Exhibits include Tolkien's family photographs and mementos, along with Tolkien's original illustrations, maps, and draft manuscripts for his major literary works: "The Hobbit," "The Lord of the Rings," and "The Silmarillion."

The exhibition was organized by the Bodleian Libraries, at the University of Oxford, in collaboration with The Morgan Library & Museum and is supported by The Tolkien Trust.

But what motivated Tolkien to create such an intricate legendarium full of hobbits, dwarves, elves, and wizards?

THE TOLKIEN TRUST 1977

Edith Bratt, aged 17, 1906, by The Victoria Studio. Black and white photograph. Tolkien Trust.

THE TOLKIEN TRUST 1977

J.R.R. Tolkien, January 1911, by the Studio of H.J. Whitlock & Sons Ltd. Black and white photograph. Bodleian Libraries.

Tolkien's Early Influences

Tolkien was born in 1892 in Bloemfontein, South Africa, after his parents, Arthur and Mabel, emigrated from Birmingham, England, in order to better their lives.

Sadly, for the Tolkien family, life took a tragic turn.

In April 1895, Tolkien went back to England with his mother and brother, Hilary, to visit family. It was a journey Tolkien's father was unable to make due to his job. Aided by his nurse, the then 4-year-old Tolkien wrote to his father, "I am so glad I am coming back to see you." Visitors can see the note in the exhibition, but Tolkien's father never read it. It wasn't even mailed. On that very day, news arrived by telegram that his father had a serious illness, and the following day he died.

After losing his father, he and the family stayed in England, in the Birmingham area in the small town of Sarehole, which Tolkien later described as "a kind of lost paradise," reminiscent of the Shire in "The Hobbit." "I took the idea of the hobbits from the village people and children," Tolkien once said.

Mabel educated the boys at home for a period, and that's what piqued Tolkien's interest in poetry, alphabets, handwriting, etymology, and comparative philology (the comparison of two languages in order to find a common root language). Tolkien went on to study at the prestigious King Edward VI School in Birmingham, where it was noted that he had a particular talent for languages.

In 1904, tragedy struck again. Tolkien became an orphan at just 12 years old, after his mother died. Both Tolkien and his brother were then taken under the guardianship of Father Francis Morgan, a Roman Catholic priest and close friend of Tolkien's mother who had converted to Catholicism.

Tolkien was a devout Catholic, and a lot of the themes in "The Lord of the Rings" are based on Christian ethics and morals. Bilbo showing mercy to Gollum is one example, and Gollum helping to destroy the ring is the outcome of that mercy, said McQuillen. Although, he adds, the language is not as overtly Christian as in C.S. Lewis's "Chronicles of Narnia."

In 1909, Tolkien fell in love with Edith Bratt, who was also an orphan. Father Morgan knew that Tolkien was easily distracted, and that as an orphan he had limited prospects. So to protect Tolkien's future, Father Morgan forbade him to speak to Edith until he was 21 years old, which was nearly three years away, so he could fully concentrate on his studies.

On the eve of his 21st birthday he wrote to Edith, who by then was engaged to someone else. But Tolkien's patience and perseverance prevailed, and they married in 1916.

Adulthood and War

At Oxford University, Tolkien started to learn the classics, but then he switched to study languages. Besides his studies, he taught himself Finnish, as he liked its sound, shape, and structure, and that strongly influenced his linguistic inventions such as the Elvish language. Language was extremely important in Middle-earth. "The 'stories' were made rather to provide a world for the languages than the reverse," Tolkien said.

While Tolkien was at Oxford, World War I broke out and he was sent to France in 1916 as a second lieutenant. The war didn't stop Tolkien's creativity. From the war emerged Middle-earth's Morgoth and the history of the Gnomes, with inspiration flowing even under shellfire.

A bout of trench fever may have saved his life, as he was recalled to England to recuperate while many of his friends died on the battlefield.

The exhibition features "The Book of Lost Tales," which contains the stories Tolkien dictated to Edith while he recovered.

For the Love of Family

Despite his busy workload as an Oxford don, Tolkien always had time for his four children. He was "the only grown-up who appeared to take my childish comments and questions with complete seriousness," said his son Michael after his father died.

Tolkien's study was always open to his children. He worked from home, marking papers, writing lectures, seeing students, and creating Middle-earth.

Photographs in the exhibition show family afternoon teas in the garden, and summer holidays spent at the seaside or harvesting fruit at Tolkien's brother Hilary's fruit farm.

For 23 years, Tolkien designed Christmas cards and stories from Father Christmas for his children, some of which are in the exhibition. As the years went by, the content of those tales darkened to stories of goblins and elves, perhaps in line with the development of "The Lord of the Rings" trilogy. Tolkien originally wrote "The Hobbit" for his children, and he read it in installments to them when they would gather in his study at night.

"Tolkien always thought that children's literature was a very bad misnomer, that kids shouldn't just be given insipid, very sugary, and weird little stories; they had an interest in topics as broad as any adult. It was just the scale of the vocabulary that had to be scaled down for younger readers," said McQuillen. That's why nothing is sugarcoated in "The Hobbit," he added.

After Tolkien's friends and colleagues read "The Hobbit," they urged him to publish the manuscript. It was never intended for publication, and his children were none too happy that their very own bedtime story was to be shared with the nation.

When "The Hobbit" was published in 1937, reviewers deemed it a children's classic; the publishers wanted to hear more about the hobbits and their adventures.

The book was a success, but Tolkien thought otherwise.

"I don't much approve of 'The Hobbit' myself, preferring my own mythology (which is just touched on) with its consistent nomenclature ... and organized history, to this rabble of Eddaic-named dwarves out of Voluspa, newfangled hobbits and gollums (invented in an idle hour) and Anglo-Saxon runes," he wrote in a letter to Geoffrey E. Selby, a colleague at Oxford. Here, Tolkien refers to the Old Norse poem "Voluspa," from which the name "Gandalf" was taken, and where some of the dwarves' names originated.

But Tolkien did manage to weave more of his myths into "The Lord of the Rings," including his reimagined version of the Atlantis myth, which he called Numenor, and which became the second age of Middle-earth.

In 1949, the hobbits resurfaced in "The Lord of the Rings," a tale that took 12 years to emerge due to the fact that Tolkien had to take snippets of time to write between his many commitments, which included committee meetings, air raid duties, and of course family.

Tolkien reflected that "writing stories in prose or verse has been stolen, often guiltily, from time already mortgaged."

The Art of Tolkien

The exhibition draws together many different styles of Tolkien's illustrations: There are his rather abstract renderings from when he was a student at Oxford; then there are some early black-and-white images (10 were originally included in "The Hobbit"). There are also watercolors, such as a rather picturesque one of Hobbiton; and later drawings of botanical art in a style similar to traditional Japanese or Chinese black-ink paintings. And then there are the alphabets, and the lettering that spills out in flourishes of beautiful script of wonderful, otherworldly languages.

And of course the maps.

Tolkien's first map of Middle-earth is on display at The Morgan and was essentially a working map that was never intended for the public.

"I wisely started with a map and made the story fit," Tolkien said. The map therefore created the story—not the other way round—the map led the narrative, McQuillen explained.

This well-loved and well-used map gives us insight into Tolkien's working practice, as he navigates the narratives. Here, pieces of paper are taped together in an almost higgledy-piggledy fashion as new terrain outgrew the confines of each page, and the edges of the pages have curled over time. The map even has burn holes from Tolkien's pipe tobacco.

Apart from those incidental marks, nothing on this map is accidental. Tolkien produced meticulous scale drawings of the contours of his imagined land and annotated some of the places with real places that inspired them.

McQuillen believes Tolkien made the geography specific in order to maintain the truth of Middle-earth as a complete world. He even created ancient flora for Middle-earth based on his love of botany.

The maps that were published in the books were often details of certain areas taken from the working map, and it was Tolkien's son Christopher who helped complete them.

But what would Tolkien think if he knew this working map was on show? "I think he'd be horrified that any of this would be going on—the popularity of the story, and the books, the material, and the movies—all the inspirations that have come from him." Tolkien was very good at self-deprecation, McQuillen explained: "He really didn't like his illustrations for 'The Hobbit,' and yet those are the most iconic images in English literature."

As early as the 1960s, Tolkien was approached by a graduate student who wanted to do her master's thesis on Middle-earth, but Tolkien thought it was the worst idea ever; he thought it was ridiculous, McQuillen said.

> **Tolkien always thought that children's literature was a ... misnomer, that kids shouldn't just be given insipid, very sugary, and weird little stories.**
>
> *John McQuillen, associate curator, The Morgan Library & Museum*

Tolkien, the Legend

Tolkien's publisher recognized "The Lord of the Rings" as a work of genius, yet there was little expectation of profit due to the length of the fantasy novel.

Both Tolkien and his publisher were surprised, then, at the success of "The Lord of the Rings."

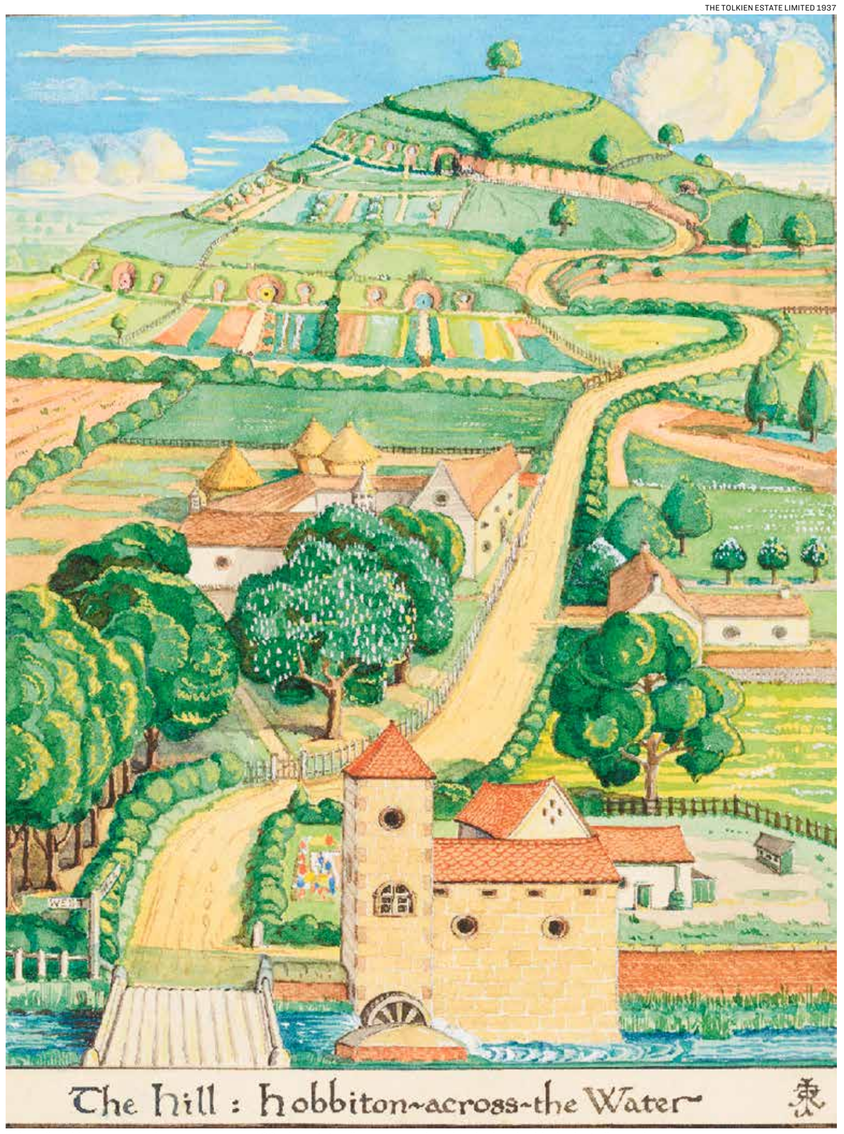
It was "like lightning from a clear sky," said C.S. Lewis of "The Fellowship of the Ring."

Tolkien's tales endure as they're full of "ubiquitous emotions and ideas, so people are drawn into the reality of the characters. They're not people without problems; they have to deal with the same issues many of us face," McQuillen said.

In "The Hobbit," the hobbits have to return home after being away for some time, but they realize that they cannot stay at home because they're not the same as they were before. So there's that idea of being grateful for what you have, and not always wanting more, or better, McQuillen explained.

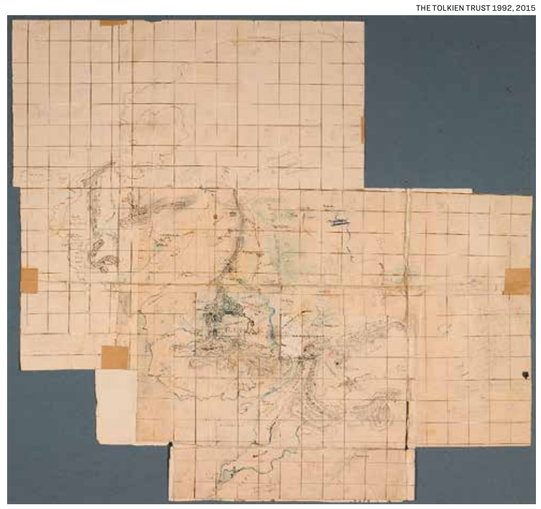
Tolkien's intent for England was to create a mythological landscape in which legends and myths played out. His dream—and more—may have been posthumously realized. Although the films and merchandise may not be what Tolkien envisaged, the popularity of his work has reached far beyond England's shores: Middle-earth is a global mythology.

THE TOLKIEN ESTATE LIMITED 1937



"The Hill: Hobbiton-across-the Water," August 1937, by J.R.R. Tolkien. Watercolor, white body color, black ink. Bodleian Libraries.

THE TOLKIEN TRUST 1992, 2015

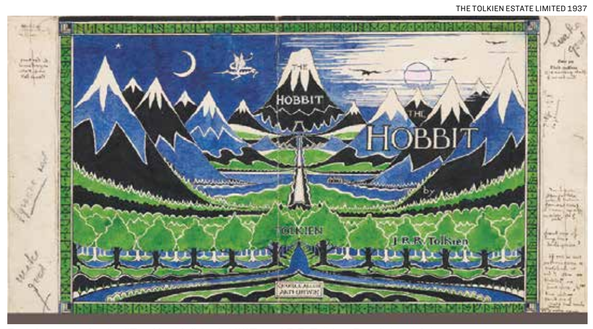


"The first map of The Lord of the Rings," circa 1937–1949, by J.R.R. Tolkien. Black, red, and blue ink, pencil, colored pencil. Bodleian Libraries.

THE TOLKIEN TRUST 2015

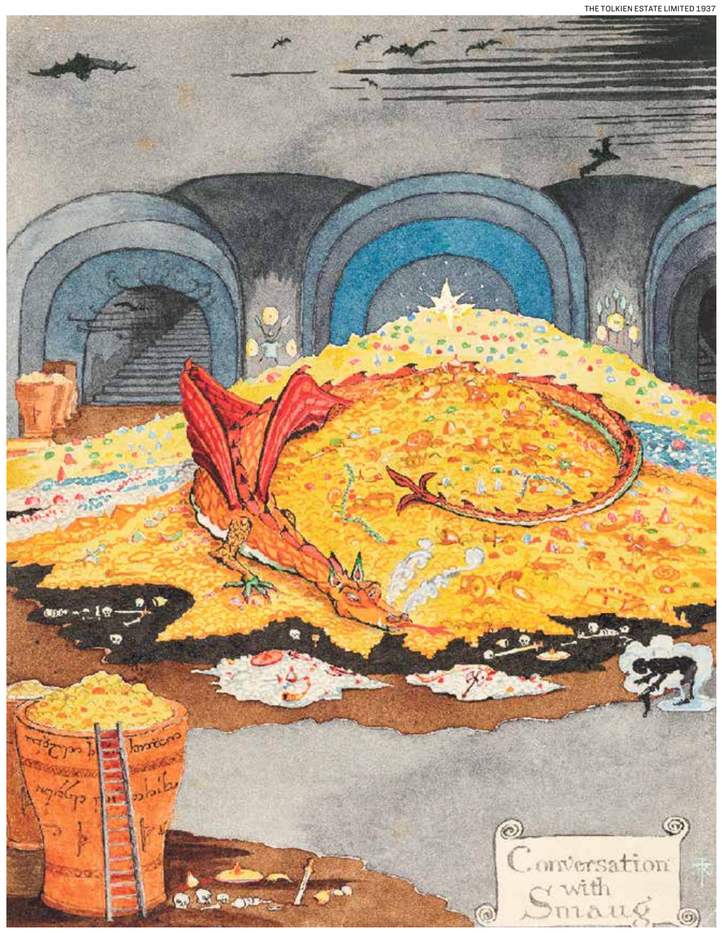
J.R.R. Tolkien in his study, circa 1937. Black and white photograph. Tolkien Trust.

THE TOLKIEN ESTATE LIMITED 1937



Dust jacket design for "The Hobbit," April 1937, by J.R.R. Tolkien. Pencil, black ink, watercolor, gouache. Bodleian Libraries.

THE TOLKIEN ESTATE LIMITED 1937



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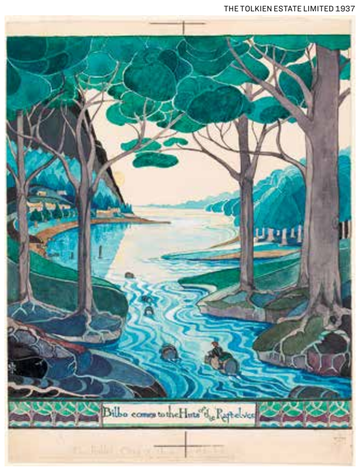

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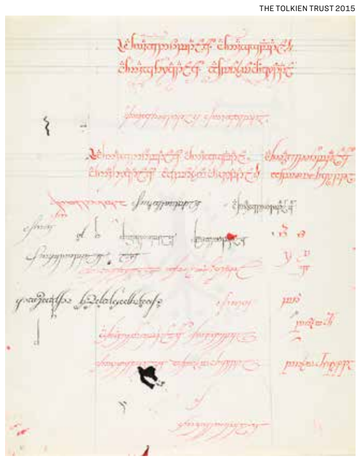

(Left) "Conversation with Smaug," July 1937, by J.R.R. Tolkien. Black and colored ink, watercolor, white body color, pencil. Bodleian Libraries.
(Top right) "Bilbo comes to the Huts of the Raft-elves," July 1937 by J.R.R. Tolkien. Watercolor, pencil, white body color. Bodleian Libraries.
(Bottom right) "The Fire-writing," 1953, by J.R.R. Tolkien. Red and black ink, pencil. Tolkien Trust.

ESSENCE OF CHINA

Two Stories From the Students' Rules

Humility Before Elders

DANIEL TENG

The "Standards for Being a Good Student and Child" ("Di Zi Gui") is a traditional Chinese textbook for children that teaches them morals and proper etiquette. It was written by Li Yuxiu in the Qing Dynasty, during the reign of Emperor Kangxi (1661–1722). These stories were excerpted from our online series "Stories From the Students' Rules"; they exemplify the valuable lessons taught in the "Di Zi Gui."

It is stated in the "Di Zi Gui":

When addressing a distinguished elder,
Do not use his personal name.
When before a distinguished elder,
Do not show off your talents.

Aside from requiring the use of proper salutations when speaking with elders, an important aspect of traditional Chinese etiquette is modesty.

An ancient calligrapher from the Jin Dynasty, and Han Dynasty founding hero Zhang Liang famously respected their elders in their youth. They learned to be humble and hence acquired knowledge and skills from their elders.

Renowned calligrapher Wang Xizhi, known as the "Sage of Calligraphy" in China, lived during the Jin Dynasty (303–361) and had seven children, among whom his youngest son, Wang Xianzhi (344–386), was also a distinguished calligrapher.

By the time Xianzhi was 15 years old, he had already achieved a great level of skill in calligraphy and often received praise from his father and other elders. Xianzhi hence became arrogant and lazy, thinking that his ability was already excellent and that he no longer needed to put in the effort to improve himself.

There is a story about how Wang Xizhi helped his son realize the foolishness of his arrogance and understand the importance of diligence. One day, Wang Xizhi was summoned to the capital, and to bid him farewell, his family held a lavish dinner. Fine food and wine were served at the feast. While slightly intoxicated, Wang Xizhi had a sudden inspiration to write some words of wisdom as guidance for Xianzhi.

Wang Xizhi wrote a poem on the wall, called "Precepts Against Arrogance" (戒驕詩), advising Xianzhi to work hard. Xianzhi, however, was not entirely convinced. He copied the poem dozens of times each day, and just before his father returned home, he erased his father's words when no one was looking and rewrote it in the same location on the wall, imitating his father's calligraphy.

Xianzhi was very proud of himself. In his arrogance, he thought his calligraphy was just as good as his father's and that no one would be able to tell the difference.

When Wang Xizhi came home, he looked intently at the poem on the wall for a long time, then scratched his head and sighed. "I must have drunk too much wine that night to have written such clumsy characters!" he exclaimed.

His son instantly blushed, feeling uneasy and deeply ashamed. Wang Xianzhi finally realized that only through diligent study and hard work could he eventually become a renowned calligrapher.

Zhang Liang and a Shoe of an Old Sage

EPOCH TIMES STAFF

Zhang Liang respected the elder and put his shoes on for him.

During the childhood of Zhang Liang (around 262–189 B.C., courtesy name Zhifang), on a windy, snowy winter day, he happened upon Yishui Bridge in the town of Xiapi. There he met an old man who threw one of his shoes down to the bridge on purpose and said to Zhang Liang: "Little boy, please go to pick my shoe back up for me."

Zhang Liang did not hesitate. Regardless of the danger of slipping into the river and being exposed to the cold wind, he went down to the bridge and picked up the shoe for the old man. The old man did not take the shoe, but offered his foot to Zhang Liang and asked him to put the shoe on for him. Zhang Liang did not mind and respectfully did what the old man told him to do. The old man smiled and said: "Boy, I see much promise in you. Come here tomorrow morning and I will teach you some things."

The next day, before the crack of dawn, Zhang Liang came to the bridge and saw that the old man was already there. The old man said: "You came here later than me. I cannot teach you the Tao today." It happened like this again.

The third time, Zhang Liang finally got to the bridge earlier than the old man. The old man finally gave Zhang Liang a book and said: "When you fully understand this book, you will be able to serve as the chief military counselor for a king in the future. If you need my help in the future, come to see me. I am the yellow stone at the foot of Gucheng Mountain."

Zhang Liang went back home and studied the book very carefully. Finally, he mastered its essence. He was able to understand all of its intricacy and became very familiar with military tactics. Later, he assisted Liu Bang, the first emperor of the Han Dynasty, to found the Han Dynasty and unite China.