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Dinah Hazell, *The Plants of Middle-earth: Botany and Sub-creation*  
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Dinah Hazell, *The Plants of Middle-earth: Botany and Sub-creation*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2006. x + 124 pp. ISBN 978-0-87338-883-2.

*The Plants of Middle-earth* is a gorgeous little volume on a neglected branch—forgive the pun—of Tolkien studies. A slim hardcover, the book looks like it will stand up to many years of reading, and it is a pleasure to hold such a solid book, to turn its heavy pages (sewn together in signatures, not glued), and to enjoy its two dozen or so beautiful illustrations. The layout, typography, and other design elements are quite attractive, more the kind you would find in a coffee table book than a scholarly monograph. It is a pleasant surprise to find that books are sometimes still made this well.

So much for judging a book by its cover; what of its contents? At a glance, the book is loosely organized into five chapters, two appendices, plus the usual front and back matter. The first chapter surveys some of the many flower-names to be found in the Shire. The choices are arbitrary and there would have been ample room for more, but perhaps it doesn't matter; we know next to nothing about most of the hobbit-lasses discussed, so Hazell—so aptly named herself—could not have found much more to say. The second chapter is presented almost as a kind of guidebook to a country walking tour. It roughly follows the path of the Fellowship of the Ring on their journey, this time stopping to smell the roses. The third chapter is devoted entirely to Ithilien, and Hazell's detailed descriptions bring its 'dishevelled dryad loveliness' (Tolkien, *LotR*, 650) into sharper focus. Chapter 4 deals with the major forests of Middle-earth and roots out the role and significance of trees in *The Lord of the Rings*. The final chapter touches on 'Restoration and Recovery', attempting (all too briefly) to reach some conclusions about the importance of flora to Tolkien and their narrative purposes in his fiction.

Following the book proper, there are two appendices. Appendix A offers a very short historical primer on plant lore, from ancient times through the Middle Ages and reaching into more recent periods. Appendix B is a simple list of plants and trees mentioned by Tolkien. The author does not say whether these are drawn from all of Tolkien's writings on Middle-earth or are limited to *The Lord of the Rings* and

perhaps *The Hobbit*, though I suspect the latter. She furthermore admits the list may be incomplete but cleverly invites ‘observant travelers’ to note omissions and ‘add them to the list’ (103). I think I can add a few that Hazell did not include: flax, strawberry, sorrel, rockrose, and ‘[e]specially there was clover, waving patches of cockscomb clover, and purple clover, and wide stretches of short white sweet honey-smelling clover’ (Tolkien, *Hobbit*, 103).

In most of the chapters, Hazell alternates between expounding on the lore of real-world plants (she has little to say about Tolkien’s invented flora); offering banal summaries of episodes from *The Lord of the Rings* and occasionally *The Hobbit*; and making meager, abortive attempts at critical analysis. The first is the real reason to read this book. For that—and for that alone, I am sorry to say—it is a rewarding read. Hazell has many fascinating things to share about flowers, shrubs, trees, and their uses and lore. She touches on subjects as diverse as runes, medicine, and superstition, all of which is well worth reading. But her plot summaries and critical analyses are usually a bit too obvious, lacking any real insight, as well as making almost no effort to engage with the larger body of scholarship on Tolkien. There are one or two exceptions, but for the most part, anyone even moderately well read in Tolkien criticism has seen better.

For one example of the kind of critical depth I feel the book is lacking, I would have liked to see some discussion of the tension between natural and cultivated flora. The Old Forest and Fangorn are wild in every sense, while the gardens and orchards of the Shire are a deliberate act of controlling, ordering, and directing the course of nature. Lothlórien is probably somewhere in between. Gardens may be beautiful, but they are not *natural*. I would have enjoyed reading Hazell’s thoughts on this, and any guesses she might have ventured as to why Tolkien chose one or the other at each point in his tale(s). A reference to Verlyn Flieger’s essay ‘Taking the Part of Trees’ would have been a welcome addition.

These parts of the book, the summary and critical sections, are also riddled with errors. These are usually small mistakes, but they tend to have a cumulative effect and could have been so easily avoided. A few examples will suffice. It was Bungo Baggins who built Bag End, not the Old Took as claimed (19). The Orcs’ attack on the Fellowship occurs at Parth Galen, near, yes, but not ‘at the Falls of Rauros’ (37). Minas Anor means Tower of the Setting, not the Rising, Sun (91). And so on. Nor are errors and misreadings limited to Tolkien; Hazell mischaracterizes a pivotal plot device in Shakespeare as well. ‘Macbeth [is astonished] to find that the prognostication of a fiend could fail’, she writes (79). But the prognostication did not fail. That’s just the point: it succeeded. The prognostication would have failed if

Macbeth had been vanquished and a wood had not come to Dunsinane. The fact that the weird sisters' words were misleading or that the Scottish King simply heard what he wanted to hear doesn't make their prophecy untrue. What else should one expect from 'juggling fiends [...] that palter with us in a double sense' (V.vii, ll. 49–50)?

It feels a bit unkind to dwell on such errors, since Hazell clearly does not mean the book to be rigidly academic (read, 'stuffy'), and it is quite enjoyable to read otherwise. Perhaps inveterate nitpickers like me weren't Hazell's target audience, though I daresay we make good reviewers! But her more conspicuous mistakes will assail attentive readers, like weevils in the garden. The book is semi-scholarly in its presentation—footnotes, bibliography, appendices, quotations in Middle English, and so forth—which makes me wonder whether Hazell wasn't quite sure exactly what sort of book she wanted to produce, or whether her reach perhaps exceeded her grasp. The same could be said for the publisher. Kent State's other Tolkien titles—notably Verlyn Flieger's four books and Diana Pavlac Glyer's *The Company They Keep*—have aspired to and attained a much higher critical standard than *The Plants of Middle-earth*. Judging by its production and design, the book is intended to be more a picture-book and keepsake, almost an *objet d'art*, than a scholarly monograph. I say this not to criticize Hazell's work so much as to guide readers' expectations for it. *The Plants of Middle-earth* is a *discursus*: not in the academic sense, but in the original sense of its underlying Latin meaning: 'running about, to and fro', stopping now and then to admire the view.

So read *The Plants of Middle-earth* for its herb-lore and its beautiful illustrations, not for the plot summaries and critical analyses. It's not really a scholarly book, in either the good or the bad connotations of that word. What it is, and really all it ought to have aspired to be, is a little handful of flowers brought inside from the garden and placed on our bookshelves. Whose library couldn't use a little color?

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#### Works Cited

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