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The Great Tower of Elfland: The Mythopoeic Worldview of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, G.K. Chesterton and George MacDonald (2017) by Zachary A. Rhone

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The Great Tower of Elfland: The Mythopoeic Worldview of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, G.K. Chesterton, and George MacDonald, by Zachary A. Rhone. Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2017. xiv, 186 pp. \$45.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9781606353295. [Also available in ebook format.]

Dr. Rhone's study sees far because it stands on the tall shoulders of giants of scholarship. One of the many books made up of gobbets from many other books, it is a puissant pastiche that treads turf well-known to scholars of the four writers herein surveyed.

"MacDonald, Chesterton, Lewis, and Tolkien are concerned with both the fallibility and the power of language," Rhone begins. "Linguists have repeatedly argued whether the signifier and signified are united or they are arbitrarily assigned. In the former, each of these authors posit an original unification of signifier and signified, a structuralist move that Jacques Derrida resists in his theory of arche-writing with its repeated 'movement of the *sign-function* linking a content to an expression'; in the latter, the power of language is utilized by separating signifier and signified by having refer to a different signified or, perhaps, as Derrida suggests, by having no true signified but only a series of signifiers. The power, of course, comes from the one who assigns the meaning: the God who created language or the politician who declares the meaning of a certain constitutional right" (15-16).

The four writers surveyed had similar viewpoints, but there were differences as well. While C.S. Lewis admired the other three men, Tolkien was more circumspect. Priscilla Tolkien wrote me in 1994, saying that her father enjoyed Chesterton's poetry and *The Colored Lands*. Dr. Clyde S. Kilby, the founder of the Wade Collection at Wheaton College, told me in 1978 that Tolkien had a deep dislike of MacDonald that is revealed in the character Nokes in *Smith of Wootton Major*, adding that "in some sense, he disliked C.S. Lewis. They were close friends but Tolkien was hard to please in the best sense of the statement. Lewis turned out seven Narnia books in nine years while he was struggling with one. He did in some sense jump on Lewis. 'He used things of mine [Numenor—Lewis's Numenor] that he never did acknowledge'."

One instant quibble: Rhone, an adjunct professor of English at several institutions, refers to Inklings physician Robert Emlyn Havard as "E. Humphrey Havard." (142). While many pre-eminent Tolkien scholars are included, conspicuous by their absence are award-winning authors like Douglas A. Anderson, John D. Rateliff, and Wayne Hammond and Christina Scull. And Rhone consistently refers to Tolkien's seminal scholarly study as "On Fairy-Stories," not "On Fairy-stories." While hardly capital crimes, these errors should have been detected and rectified. Whatever virtues Rhone's book might have, flaws like this are an impediment to admiration.

Early on, Rhone states:

“The concern for the innate value of the text begins where Lewis left off on the problem of criticism—that critics too often see what is not even present in the text. Tolkien disapproved of critics on the whole for their imitative, malicious blabbering. . . . Chesterton, in *The Everlasting Man*, claims that ‘Criticism is only words about words. . . . I have never taken my books seriously; but I take my opinions quite seriously’ ” (29).

“All That Is Human,” Rhone’s second chapter, succeeds in its superb synthesis of the four authors’ doctrine of mercy and justice to all species, from Lewis’s *hnau* to the birds and beasts of Tolkien to the characters in MacDonald’s *Curdie* books. Perhaps the domination of selfishness, whether that of Lewis’s Weston and Devine or Tolkien’s Melkor and Saruman and Wormtongue or MacDonald’s Lilith—“a pale, cold vampire living on the blood, lives, and souls of humans” (59)—and Lord Chancellor, is evil’s only root.

One who would gaze from the great tower of Elfland must be prepared to travel to arrive there. “The Journey,” this book’s third chapter, spells that out. “Paths and roads are, indeed, a common literary motif for a journey or a quest—whether the protagonist takes the common path or, as Robert Frost calls it, ‘the one less travelled,’ Rhone writes. “Tolkien, Lewis, Chesterton, and MacDonald each utilize the motif in their literature. Even for one like Anodos in *Phantastes*, whose name means “pathless,” he eventually finds his way—his path—for, believes Chesterton, ‘I have always felt that life first is a story, and if there is a story, there has to be a storyteller,’ one who knows all the best paths to take and sometimes sends the characters down a fated road.” (65).

This chapter’s discussion of free will and individual choice in Tolkien beggars summary in a short review like this, but readers of this journal will find it valuable.

“Like Wilfred Owen, a trench warfare poet who considered his primary focus to be pity rather than heroism, Tolkien’s characters struggle largely with problems of fear and pity . . . It is only through his earlier practices of patience and mercy toward Gollum that saved Frodo, shining over his failure. Arguably, it was his fear, no doubt misplaced, of losing the Ring that brought about his decision to keep it. He had forgotten the greater fear of Sauron’s evil . . . Compassionate for this protagonist, Tolkien claims that Frodo’s failure to drop the Ring into the fires of Mt. Doom was not entirely his fault, having exhausted all of his strength, in both body and mind, for the task. Rather, the story’s logic is how Tolkien clarifies that problematic destruction of the Ring via the bitten finger and Gollum’s fall:

that is, Gollum refused redemption through love, causing his fall into the fire and the completion of the quest. Tolkien admits to having the final parts of the Lord's Prayer in his mind: 'Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil' " (78-79).

In *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Problem of Pain*, and *Mere Christianity*, "Lewis . . . agrees with Tolkien and his forerunners that unhealthy fear must be combatted with courage; otherwise, the focus turns inward, and the person is corruptible by hate" (79).

Politically, "in agreement with Chesterton and Lewis, Tolkien was as much an anarchist as a monarchist . . . He argued that rarely is one fit to lead a country constitutionally via a monarchy . . . We return, cyclically, to what MacDonald models in his fairytales: a king, a country, and a people who go about their lives with obedience to royalty but with higher obedience to the divine. Lewis would argue that someone sits on the throne to satisfy the desire for inequality, for without a crown, culture will idolize the wrong forms of inequality . . . the wealthy, athletic and film stars, even criminals. 'For spiritual nature, like bodily nature, will be served; deny it food and it will gobble poison' " (101).

In the spiritual quest, Rhone argues, "humanity's aspiration to achieve perfection—to be like God—is of particular concern to MacDonald, Chesterton, Lewis, and Tolkien . . . the purpose of Christianity is to battle and fight to be like Christ and to advocate God to the world around it. By embracing the characteristics of God as the personal goals of the human journey, people act as God-bearers to others" (142-143). "Each of these authors embraced a sense of community—whether with like-minded individuals or those they disagreed with. MacDonald's circles extended from Mark Twain, with whom he agreed to write a book, to Charles Dodgson to Matthew Arnold to John Ruskin; Chesterton debated with George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells when he was not having tea with Henry and William James or at the pub with his fellow news-writers and Belloc; before the Inklings, Tolkien shared in the TCBS and Lewis engaged in various clubs with the student body and the professoriate. In his *Autobiography*, Chesterton overturns modern society's belief that one must develop their own ideas apart from other people, for people, like flowers, grow better in a garden than in the wilderness." (150)

In his final chapter, Rhone writes:

"MacDonald, Chesterton, Lewis and Tolkien each felt that his part in the story of human history to be one of passing Christian myth on. The Great Tower of Elfland was not for them, alone." (154)

“Specifically, what occurs within myth and true fairy story is what these authors believe to be what leads most to salvation: joy . . . [Tolkien] admits that his discovery of eucatastrophe came with the revelation that it produces ‘a sudden glimpse of Truth, your whole nature chained in material cause and effect, the chain of death, feels a sudden relief as if a major limb out of joint had suddenly snapped back.’ Fallen humanity, thus, has a chance of being pushed back into place—of salvation for humanity” (155).

“Therefore,” Rhone concludes, “it is on this Great Tower of Elfland, upon the foundation of Christianity, that these writers perceive time, progress, science, and civilization and write with the hope of creating eucatastrophe and joy in the human spirit” (155).

Tolkien, Lewis, Chesterton, and MacDonald may deserve a better book than this. For all of its many excellences, including the author’s mastery of both primary and critical sources, this work is finally more theological than literary. While readers who admire an exclusively Christian approach to mythopoeic writing may find Rhone’s study worth the time and money, others may not. *Caveat lector.*

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