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The Inklings and King Arthur (2017), edited by Sørina Higgins

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The Inklings and King Arthur: J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, C. S. Lewis, and Owen Barfield on the Matter of Britain, ed. by Sørina Higgins. Berkeley, Apocryphile Press, 2017. x, 555 pp. $49.99 (trade paperback) ISBN 9781944769895. [Also available in ebook formats, including Kindle $9.99 eISBN 9781947826588.]

The publication of J.R.R. Tolkien's incomplete narrative poem *The Fall of Arthur* in 2013 was exciting for Arthurian scholars: here was a newly-available Arthurian text from the mid-twentieth century, composed by one of the world's most popular English-language authors, in a form and style not previously used in any other Arthurian work. But the publication of *The Fall of Arthur*, first written in the 1930s, was even more exciting for Inklings scholars, who had previously only been able to read an outline and access a few lines in the Bodleian: here, at last, were all 954 lines of the fragment, and another Arthurian text to add to the collection produced by the Inklings, written by one of the group's most influential and prolific members. References to the Arthurian legend are found throughout the work of Inklings authors, but there aren't many Inklings texts that use the setting, characters, or objects from the legend in their plots. Charles Williams's volumes of poems, *Taliessin through Logres* (1938) and *The Region of the Summer Stars* (1944), are the most notable exceptions. We could also include C.S. Lewis's *That Hideous Strength* (1945)—which features the wizard Merlin, and a man who is said to continue the work of Arthur as the head of a spiritual organisation, in its cast of major characters—and Owen Barfield's unpublished (but accessible to researchers) poem "The Quest of the Sangreal." The publication of *The Fall of Arthur* completes the set, as it were; we can now read substantial Arthurian works by all the major Inklings authors.

The time is ripe, then, for a new analysis that covers the work of all the major Inklings authors, including the newly-published Tolkien and the previously-neglected Barfield, rather than only Lewis and Williams (as Charles Moorman's *Arthurian Triptych* did in 1960). *The Inklings and King Arthur* is that new analysis, considering, for the first time in a full-length book, the Inklings as a group of writers who contributed to, and were influenced by, the Arthurian legend. It covers the major Inklings—which editor Sørina Higgins limits to Tolkien, Williams, Lewis and Barfield—in twenty-one essays (including Introduction and Conclusion) and 555 pages. Three of these essays focus on Tolkien, five on Williams, three on Lewis, and seven on the work of the four Inklings together, including Barfield. There is also an essay on the Arthurian poetry of G. K. Chesterton, one on Arthurian elements in the work of George MacDonald—these two authors chosen because of their influence on the Inklings—and another summarising the medieval sources of the legend. The inclusion of MacDonald and Chesterton makes sense, but it is a shame there is no essay on

Roger Lancelyn Green, an Inkling who retold the Arthurian legend for children, or William Morris, who wrote several Arthurian poems and also influenced the Inklings, although both authors are at least referenced throughout the book.

Each essay is written by a different author selected from a varied range of backgrounds and expertise. There is also an eight-page list of Arthurian works by Inklings authors at the beginning of the book, a twenty-page list of related sources at the end, and bibliographies after each essay.

The first essay to examine *The Fall of Arthur* is by Cory Grewell, Associate Professor of Literature at Patrick Henry College (ch. 8, 16pp). Grewell argues that the medievalism of *Arthur*, like the medievalism of *The Lord of the Rings*, is a response to twentieth century modernism, discussing three strands of medievalist imagery in the poem—natural, martial, and Christian—in the context of similar images from *The Lord of the Rings* as well as Tolkien's concepts of "recovery" and "consolation" from "On Fairy Stories." Grewell also compares Tolkien's depiction of Arthur's reign with Barfield's account of a medieval worldview: an example of the type of intertextual analysis found throughout *Inklings and King Arthur*. The essay aids understanding of the poem by situating it in the context of Tolkien's wider work and thoughts, but the parts when Grewell argues that the poem responds to "the muddiness of the twentieth century, with its entangling alliances, mixed political motives, and cultural moral relativism" (231) seem weak, when the story Tolkien is basing his poem on is itself full of mixed alliances, motives, and moral uncertainty.

The second essay on Tolkien's *The Fall of Arthur* is by Taylor Driggers, a doctoral student at the University of Glasgow (ch. 10, 13pp). Driggers reads the poem as a post-World War I text that raises questions about the place and purpose of mythic stories, when the idea of heroism presented in those myths has been discredited by the brutality of war and a violent world seems to make violent stories, which are inherent to these types of myth, unsuitable material for escapism. Driggers—like Grewell—uses Tolkien's "On Fairy Stories" and sections from *The Lord of the Rings* in his essay, and argues that Tolkien is not attempting to escape from a violent, war-ravaged world in *The Fall of Arthur*, but rather use an escapist story to recover clearer perceptions of violence and warfare. In addition, Tolkien's Arthur is not necessarily intended to be heroic, and Driggers makes the case that his analogue in *The Lord of the Rings* is not Aragorn nor Frodo, who both risk their lives without hope of personal gain, but Denethor and Saruman, who are easily seduced, as Arthur is, into going to war. This approach to the poem reveals some valuable insights, both to *The Fall of Arthur* and the nature of heroism and warfare in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Signum University graduate Alyssa House-Thomas wrote the third essay on *The Fall of Arthur* (ch. 13, 34pp), discussing Tolkien's depiction of Guinever who she describes as "strong-willed yet vulnerable" and "a powerful and powerfully

imagined figure" (334, 362). House-Thomas argues that the Guinever of *The Fall of Arthur* is part Germanic queen and part Celtic fairy woman, comparing her to other literary characters such as Queen Skuld from *The Saga of Hrolf Kraki* and Morgan le Fay, who is notable by her absence in Tolkien's text. House-Thomas also situates Guinever amongst Tolkien's other female characters, noting that she is most like Shelob. The essay is detailed and well-researched, and worth the price of the book alone.

The essays that focus on multiple Inklings also contain insights into Tolkien's work. "Houses of Healing: The Idea of Avalon in Inklings Fiction and Poetry," (ch. 4, 33pp) by Charles A. Huttar, professor emeritus of English at Hope College, explores places of healing that parallel Avalon, the island where in some accounts Arthur goes to be healed, in the works of Tolkien, Lewis, and Williams. Huttar dedicates ten pages to Tolkien, examining his representations of the western sea, the Undying Lands, and islands in *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion* (which even describes a place called Avallónë), and his 1955 poem "Imram" about the legendary journey of the Irish monk Saint Brendan. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* series and science-fiction trilogy, and Williams's Arthurian poetry, are also discussed. Huttar sketches a shared vision, of what healing means and where healing places can be found, amongst three of the Inklings, whilst still highlighting differences between the writers when they occur.

The other essays analyse Tolkien's work more briefly. Yannick Imbert, professor of apologetics at the Faculté Jean Calvin, argues that Tolkien's *The Fall of Arthur* interweaves history and myth, in an essay identifying common elements in Tolkien's, Lewis's, and Williams's use of mythological history (ch. 6, 30pp). Jason Jewell and Chris Butynskyi—a professor of humanities at Faulkner University, and a lecturer in European History at Eastern University, respectively —discuss how Tolkien and the other major Inklings responded to the *zeitgeist* of their time, scientific secularism (ch. 9, 27pp). The book's introductory essay, by editor Sørina Higgins, includes five pages summarising Tolkien's Arthurian work, alongside summaries for Williams, Lewis, and Barfield (ch. 1, 35pp). Finally, Christopher Gaertner's "Shape and Direction: Human Consciousness in the Inklings' Mythological Geographies" follows Verlyn Flieger's *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World* (1983 and 2002) by using Owen Barfield's ideas as a theoretical framework, although Gaertner mainly focuses on Lewis's Arthurian work, rather than Tolkien's mythmaking, and refers to Barfield's ideas on consciousness rather than his theories on meaning.

The rest of the book contains valuable content as well: some essays, such as Benjamin Shogren's study of gender in Lewis's *That Hideous Strength*, approach texts in ways that reveal new layers of meaning (ch. 15, 26pp); others, such as Jon Hooper's "Narnia, *The Waste Land*, and the World Wars" provide a different perspective on historical events covered in other essays. This overlap between

essays was intended by the editor; in her introduction to the volume, Higgins writes that "several chapters are in dialogue with each other, offering variant perspectives on the same or similar questions" (3). On occasion this means that parts of the book repeat each other. We are told more than once that Mirkwood features in both *The Fall of Arthur* and Middle-earth (ch. 4, 130; ch. 8, 230-1), and that the Westward journey of the Elves mirrors Arthur's journey to Avalon (ch. 1, 44; ch. 4, 126; ch. 5, 158; ch. 8, 232). Generally, however, the essays *do* work in conversation with each other, the ideas overlapping but each approach distinct and offering a new perspective, and the small amounts of repetition that do occur mean that the essays can be read in any order without the reader missing relevant details.

The organisation of the essays was kept intentionally loose, as Higgins explains: "*The Inklings and King Arthur* is not structured according to some obvious principle, such as chronologically or by author. Such simplistic categorization is, in fact, contrary to the nature of the kinds of examination the chapters in this volume pursue. Many of the articles are large surveys [. . .] many follow a theoretical or ideological theme through multiple works" (3). The essays are, however, categorised under five headings—"Texts and Intertexts," "Histories Past," "Histories Present," "Geographies of Gender," and "Cartographies of the Sprit"—which give at least a sense of the content, although some essays could fit into multiple categories. This method of organisation might seem vague, even chaotic, but it is appropriate for a volume about four unique authors, writing about a complex, mutable legend; a more rigid structure may have reduced the subject matter to a level of false simplicity.

This is an attractive book, with a beautiful hand-drawn illustration on the front cover by Emily Austin showing images from the Arthurian legend appropriately shrouded by pipe smoke. Inside, the text is small but readable, and headings, chapter titles, and footnotes are clearly defined. However, the trim size is unusually wide—the dimensions of the book measure 7.5" x 9.25"—and this means that there are around 16-18 words per line which can make reading for long-stretches tiresome. The Kindle edition, of course, has much shorter lines depending on the font-size set by the user, but words at the end of the line are not broken up with hyphens, as they are in the printed version, and the justified formatting occasionally adds long spaces between words that can look jarring.

The Inklings and King Arthur is a large and ambitious volume. The amount of ground it covers, and the wide range of its approaches, is its strength as well as its weakness; whilst it achieves its aim to tackle a complex subject in comprehensive detail for the first time, on occasion the essays are too broad, attempting to address too many topics and authors, and the clearest and most informative parts of this volume are the ones that focus on a single idea or writer. It would be impossible to have a book that claims to cover both "the Inklings" and "King

Arthur" without it also addressing a wide range of topics, however, and in general Higgins has balanced the broad strokes with the fine details by pairing essays about specific authors with ones about all four authors, or the historical context. For Inklings scholars, this is an essential text, but Arthurian and Tolkien scholars will also find many useful insights in these pages.

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