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Sub-creating Arda (2019), edited by Dimitra Fimi and Thomas Honegger

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Sub-creating Arda: World-building in J.R.R. Tolkien's Work, Its Precursors, and Its Legacies, edited by Dimitra Fimi and Thomas Honegger. Zurich and Jena: Walking Tree Publishers, 2019. [x], 464 pp. \$32.00 (trade paperback) ISBN 9783905703405.

The subject of constructed fictional worlds is one of those classic new–old topics that, in recent years, has generated a massive surge of critical interest. On one hand, discussing how authors authenticate (or question) their imaginary worlds is nothing new—for example, nearly all J.R.R. Tolkien's best-known techniques predate *The Lord of the Rings*; narrative theory has long analyzed fictive world construction; and postmodern fiction often forefronts “ontological” issues in its paradigm texts. On the other hand, not until the last decade has world building itself become a principle object of study. Since the landmark publication of Mark J. P. Wolf's *Building Imaginary Worlds: The History and Theory of Subcreation* (2012), a host of articles and conference papers on world building have proliferated, as well as special issues and themed sections: for example, *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* (vol. 13, 2016) and *Fastitocalon* (vol. 7, 2017). Edited collections and monographs, too, have appeared, even extending the subject across multiple media, as in Harvey Colin's *Fantastic Transmedia* (2015) or Dan Hassler-Forest's *Science Fiction, Fantasy and Politics: Transmedia World-building Beyond Capitalism* (2016). As such, it was only a matter of time before this upsurge of critical interest was channeled into a volume dedicated to fantasy literature's most famous creator of imaginary worlds, Tolkien himself. The happy result is *Sub-creating Arda*, a book which will certainly set the stage for future discussions on Tolkien's most famous legacy.

Although not reflected in the table of contents, editors Dimitra Fimi and Thomas Honegger have divided their volume into three sections: (1) the theory of world-building, (2) specific applications of world-building to Tolkien, and, judging from the volume's sub-title, the (3) “legacies” of Tolkien's world-building, although this last section is easily the book's most uneven and unfocused. Yet the overall task the editors have set themselves is a hefty and worthwhile one. According to the introduction, Fimi and Honegger wish to “open up the debate of theorizing world-building and sub-creation” as well as to “illuminate hitherto neglected aspects of [Tolkien's] sub-creation” (ii). The first section does an especially admirable job raising questions related to the theory and practice of world-building. Indeed, the issues raised by Massimiliano Izzo and Péter Kristóf Makai in particular create theoretical tensions at odds with most of this volume's other contributions—and, it should be noted, with Tolkien's own practice of subcreation itself.

For example, both Izzo and Makai tackle the virtues (or rather the vices) of creating maximally complete imaginary secondary worlds, indirectly challenging Wolf's claims in *Building Imaginary Worlds* that believable, interesting secondary worlds should all strive for the criteria of invention, completeness, and consistency (33). Of the two, Makai presents the stronger case.¹ Izzo attempts, albeit unconvincingly, to separate the term "world-building" from "sub-creation." As he notes, Wolf had used both interchangeably, but Izzo seems to equate world-building with the encyclopedic accumulation of fictional "facts," or maximally complete imaginary worlds, whereas he sees sub-creation as evoking less "complete" worlds that, through mythopoeisis, create a greater sense of enchantment. Izzo sees fantasists such as Robert Jordan or Brandon Sanderson exemplifying the first approach (shared world fantasies such as the *Dragonlance* books also come to mind), and fantasists such as Tolkien and Patricia A. McKillip apparently exemplify the latter—even though, of course, Tolkien (and his Appendices and his legendarium) is often cited as the paradigm example of a maximal world-builder. Really, though, although Izzo demonstrates an impressive knowledge of post-Tolkien fantasy, his distinction might just be one of fantasy style (as discussed by Ursula K. Le Guin in *The Language of the Night*) rather than world-building technique, and a distinction furthermore difficult to maintain in practice, especially as Tolkien seems to fall into both apparent categories equally. Izzo's prime motivation seems to be to delegitimize certain forms of popular epic fantasy against other forms.

Yet, in his critique of maximal world-building, Izzo also invokes author M. John Harrison's mildly scandalous polemic—made in a 2007 post on his weblog—against completeness in world-building, and this is also the theme taken up by Makai's contribution. For Makai, the knowability of an imaginary world is too often "fetishised" (60), by which he means that readers—encouraged by the profiteering contemporary media landscape *a la* the Disney juggernaut—have come to expect maximally complete secondary worlds that reduce an active readerly participation in world-construction. For Makai, this fetish for world-building indicates an "authoritarian high modernism" (68) with potentially regressive political potential. Makai's two exemplars of the less-is-more approach to world-building are M. John Harrison's Viriconium and Jeff VanderMeer's Area X from his *Southern Reach* trilogy. Both abandon and frustrate the logic of internal world consistency, which leads to Makai's surprising claim that these worlds are "more faithful to Tolkien's original conception of the story-world of fairy-stories than the uber-consistency of *The Lord of the Rings*" and other

1 Here and throughout, I will leave off repeating the titles of individual essays, as such a practice, in my view, makes reading the review unnecessarily more clunky. At any rate, the table of contents can be easily googled, and it can also be found here (with abstracts): http://www.walking-tree.org/books/sub-creating_arda.php#contents.

carefully wrought post-Tolkien fantasy worlds (84). Although Makai and Izzo's lines of argumentation are never resumed by this volume's other essays, except implicitly by Renée Vink, they arguably presage a future intense debate for those who study world-building.

As for the three other essays in *Sub-creating Arda's* first section, Mark J. P. Wolf raises the fascinating question of how far an invented secondary world can stray from our real primary world before becoming unintelligible. Worlds that have no interest in relating a coherent narrative, Wolf discovers, such as the video game *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013), can actually stray much further than worlds that do. Even in relatively narrative-free worlds, though, the *conceptual* realm of the Primary World remains intact—including such basic concepts as *time* and *space* (12). As the lead essay in *Sub-creating Arda*, free from specialized terminology or the many secondary references rife in Wolf's longer work, this article functions as a good, non-technical introduction to world-building. Next, Allan Turner tries to revive the familiar question of why using hobbits as Tolkien's main characters was a good narrative choice; unfortunately, his use of focalization from narrative theory seems superficial. For example, Turner invokes none of the useful and well-known *types* of focalization; he also incorrectly equates focalization with “point of view” (21), which traditionally collapses the question of “Who sees?” with questions of “Who speaks?” Finally, N. Trevor Brierly borrows from architecture the concept of “design patterns,” which are standard subject-specific problems for which a core—yet endlessly variable—solution exists. Common design patterns for fantasy include culture design patterns (a creation story, earlier peoples, migrations of peoples), detail design patterns (historical references, minor characters, natural details), and more. While design patterns reveal nothing new for experienced readers of fantasy, the concept can still be a useful short-hand for the world-building lexicon.

For those readers with a more narrow focus on Tolkien himself, the middle section of *Sub-creating Arda* will perhaps provide the most rewarding reading. The opening essay by John Garth, for example, contains several gems. First, in a self-correction, Garth now dates the first version of Tolkien's “The Music of the Ainur” [“Ainulindalë”] to early 1917, or contemporary to “The Fall of Gondolin,” about two years earlier than previously thought. Garth also tackles the question of why Tolkien choose “music”—in particular fugal music—as the mode of creation, which is “a major departure from Judaeo-Christian traditions” (125). Tolkien himself had little musical aptitude, so Garth argues that Tolkien's inspiration came from his new wife Edith Bratt as well as Christopher Wiseman, thus making “The Music of the Ainur” something of a collaboration. Garth also credits Peter Gilliver with pointing out the profound similarities between Tolkien's creation story and Benjamin Britten's musical composition *The Company of Heaven*, which eventually—after some intrepid scholarly sleuthing—

leads Garth to conclude that early Quenya drew some partial inspiration from Mesopotamia's ancient Akkadian language. Garth also suggests that, in addition to the Great War, the Fall of Babel was Tolkien's "chief rational for using Mesopotamian divine names" (140).

Yet the volume's most compelling contribution arguably comes from Gergely Nagy, who incisively argues *against* the existence of "magic" in Middle-earth (at least under that secondary world's mature conception). Nagy distinguishes between two types of magic: the cultural historical (or anthropological) type, which involves coercing supernatural agents through rituals, objects, or actions, and the type that involves any deviation from a purely scientific worldview. As Tolkien developed his narrative, he gradually excised the former kind of ritualistic magic from his texts. Many critics of the fantastic, however, beginning as Nagy notes with Tzvetan Todorov, often assume the second kind of magic, the deviation from a scientific worldview (sometimes called post-Enlightenment consensus reality, though not by Nagy). That unthinking assumption about post-Enlightenment consensus reality is precisely what Nagy wishes to challenge. When figures such as Gandalf or Galadriel manifest apparently non-realistic powers, those powers are actually "manifestations of one's 'inherent power': the position in the theological hierarchy that assigns that power" (168). Hence, Nagy dubs Middle-earth a *pansemiotic world model*—perhaps the most useful world-building coinage in *Sub-creating Arda*. In a pansemiotic world model, everything in the secondary world is a sign that points back to the world's creator, who ultimately guarantees the sign's monological meaning (165). Or, to put matters another way,

Tolkien's choice of a pansemiotic world certainly is quite unfitted for realism [and a scientific worldview], because it presupposes meaning everywhere, while realism infuses with meaning (by the characters, their actions, their thoughts) a world that is otherwise meaningless. (171)

Indeed, this pansemiotic world concept might enjoy a greater applicability than even Nagy acknowledges. For example, epic fantasy literature frequently alludes to "true" histories and "true" mythologies whose meanings, though not necessarily theological, are rarely open to question or doubt. Hence, one can imagine a typology of fictional worlds where inherent world meanings are ranged between divine guarantees to the increasingly uncertain or even nihilistic. While Nagy's later attempt to completely divorce fictional worlds from the Primary World seems more problematic (see pg. 170), this essay marks an especially noteworthy advance on Tolkien's world-building.

Although not invoking the wider range of arguments marshalled by Izzo and Makai, Renée Vink wades into similar territory, lamenting the "increasing

primacy of worldbuilding over mythmaking and storytelling in Tolkien's post *The Lord of the Rings* writings" (186)—an argument, implicitly, on the aesthetic limitations of maximal completeness in world-building. For Vink, Tolkien's increasing need for world-building consistency not only doomed the legendarium to incompleteness but also signaled the beginning of Tolkien's literary "decline" despite such a late literary success like *Smith of Wootton Major* (193). Yet the essay by Anahit Behrooz demonstrates the deep-rooted challenges faced by arguments against maximal world-building: both critics and fans tend to share a commitment to completeness. For example, Behrooz marshals geological theory and a reading of Tolkien's many maps—a burgeoning area of critical studies for fantasy literature; see also Stefan Ekman's *Here Be Dragons*—to argue that Tolkien employs a "catastrophic," rather than a uniformitarian, view of geological change. Often tied to a Young Earth theory of the world, the catastrophic view sees change as arising from massive cataclysmic events, not gradual change. Such a view, Behrooz argues, emphasizes a linear rather than cyclical view of time, leading to "a very fatalistic character" to Tolkien's sub-creation and his legendarium (223). Given this connection between geology and time, an analysis of Tolkien's maps reveals "Men's uneasy relationship with time and their mortality" as well as the Elves' resistance to "the changing of the world by fixing it materially in a moment in time" through maps (229-30). Overall, if the critical effort to think more deeply about a secondary world helps nudge it along to greater completeness, as Behrooz's article seems to imply, then we can see the continual struggle that authors in the anti-maximal completeness crowd must always face.

Next, Jonathan Nauman provides the observation, hardly original, that for Tolkien composition was "a revelatory phenomenon emanating from his response to the history of language at large" (213). Nauman's several examples on the literary emergence of Treebeard and Aragorn, however, are well-taken. The following essay by Robin Markus Auer, which sees water as Tolkien's most "subversive" element, may also be one of *Sub-creating Arda*'s least developed. In short, water is supposed to function in Tolkien as a "structural landscape" through which major events play out, but what exactly hinges on this claim? According to Auer, water allegedly signals a decision "between choice and fate," and "eastward journeys and generally an expression of free will" (250, 254), but this seems like a case of overreach. Any perceived association could easily be coincidence or a result of other factors, such as the nature of Tolkien's historical sources. Unfortunately, Auer has a tendency to mention—rather than use—secondary sources that might bolster the argument. For example, the poetics of water devised by French philosopher Gaston Bachelard is footnoted, not explained or employed. Much the same happens with Auer's distinction between *locus amoenus* and *locus terribilis*.

A turn from water to mountains, though, shows more promise. Hamish Williams's essay puts the usefulness of sustained world-building analysis to Tolkien on full display. While some previous work has touched upon the cultural aspects of nature in Tolkien, Williams's ethno-topography more rigorously highlights how culture in Tolkien can be "determined and shaped by a dominant environment or natural sphere" (289). Williams's main example are orogenetic people, or those groups hailing from within or around mountain regions. Classical writers such as Herodotus, Plato, and Strabo had all opposed mountain peoples to coastal peoples, usually to the detriment of the latter, but Tolkien, as Hamish argues, reverses those classical associations by borrowing from 19th-century notions of race and culture. Now working with a dichotomy of "primitive" (mountain folk) and "civilized" (non-mountain folk), Tolkien—however unconsciously—racializes his mountain peoples as short and broad, usually grim, often dwelling underground, possessed of relatively unsophisticated language practices, and usually having great physical strength and strong manufacturing capabilities. Given the kind of unconscious assumptions that fantasy writers often bring to their world building, ethno-topographical study is something that many scholars of science fiction and fantasy might employ to good effect.

Michaela Hausmann stands out for her exemplary reading of Galadriel's poem "I sang of leaves," plus other poems, in *The Lord of the Rings*. As Hausmann points out, embedded poems—in contrast to stand-alone poems—can be one of those elements in a story that, although not advancing the narrative, greatly contribute to world-building. In particular, they invoke "lost lands" well, since these lands, being no longer extant, can hardly feature in the main body of the text (267). Such poems also add an "experiential" element that augments the authenticity of an imaginary world. Characters can have reactions to those lost lands and, as such, the speakers of poems (such as Galadriel) must be analyzed as much as the poems themselves.

After poetry, *Sub-creating Arda* then turns to quantitative analysis, and this volume's most technical contribution comes courtesy of Timo Lothman, Arndt Heilmann, and Sven Hintzen, who study dialogue in Tolkien's main texts with the help of computer analysis and linguistics. They discover that bantering dialogue, for example, has a high proportion of pronouns, and historicizing dialogue contains a high proportions of nouns. Story-propelling dialogue excels in verbs. The authors claim that their method is "meant to offer opportunities for the study of fictional literature beyond Tolkien's Middle-earth story cosmos" (328). Although I'm not sure what other kind of conclusions can be further drawn from their method, this approach is still an intriguing one, and I'd be curious to see how it relates (if at all) to the similarly quantitative "lexonomic" methods of study

being employed by Michael D. C. Drout and others.² This essay concludes the second section of *Sub-creating Arda*.

The third section on Tolkien's "legacies" comprises the most eclectic (and uneven) section of the book. For example, Bradford Eden Lee's contribution on possible "Third Spring" influences on Tolkien, i.e. early 20th-century British-Anglican converts to Catholicism, reads like—and essentially is—a conference paper, although his call for Tolkienists to "expand outside of their comfort zones and begin to discuss the wider social, cultural, political, and literary influences outside of Tolkien's documented sources" (359) is on point. Maureen F. Mann, for her part, offers a knowledgeable discussion on the (probably coincidental) world-building correspondences between Tolkien and the Brontës. Yet, although Mann notes that Tolkien sought an "illusion of historicity" while the Brontës sought an "illusion of literary culture" (335), little seems to hinge on this observation. Kristine Larsen, however, provides a much stronger justification for comparing Tolkien to Andrzej Sapkowski, the Polish author of the *Witcher* fantasy series, whose attempt to create a fantasy world redolent of his native country echoes Tolkien's own youthful project of creating a mythology for England. In this welcome attention to a non-English-language fantasist, Larsen concludes that Sapkowski creates "patriotic emotion" rather than a genuine mythology (390). Still, the essay runs into the same issue encountered by several other essays in this volume. Larsen spends an inordinate amount of words showing that Sapkowski's fantasy fulfills Mark J. P. Wolf's three main criteria for world building—namely, invention, completeness, and consistency. But, if Wolf's theory is a good and generalizable one, as seems to be the case, then one should simply *expect* all imaginary worlds to fulfill them to some degree. More interesting worlds are those that *challenge* or subvert those categories—such as Harrison's Viriconium or VanderMeer's Area X, as Makai argued in the first section.

A similar problem affects the next contribution. Andrew Higgins opens with a captivating (though not strictly necessary for the argument) account of the history of paratexts before outlining the paratextual elements in Austin Tappan Wright, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Tolkien. As might be expected, no short essay can do justice to such a broad comparative topic—and maps and invented languages are so prevalent in 20th-century fantasy that why Higgins grouped these three particular authors together remains unclear. Afterwards, Łukasz Neubauer, in an overly long and highly skimmable compare-and-contrast, employs a type of "theological anthropology" (461) to describe the different spiritualities in Tolkien and George R. R. Martin. To make a long story short, Tolkien is a devout Catholic who creates a monotheistic world whereas Martin is an atheist/agnostic

² For example, see Michael D. C. Drout, Namiko Hitotsubashi, and Rachel Scavera. "Tolkien's Creation of the Impression of Depth," in *Tolkien Studies* 11, 2014, pp. 167-211.

whose fictive world is polytheistic. Of the two, Neubaer considers Tolkien more “theologically accurate” (460), but Neubauer’s essay nonetheless has clear and problematic essentialist leanings. He writes that “the invisible being [is] what should constitute the very foundation and essence . . . of all religious practices” (460), a definition that unaccountably disparages non-theistic religions or even more phenomenological methods for studying religious practice.³ Yet his observation that Westeros’s four major religions strangely lack any “common roots” or “mutual influences” (451) is an accurate and potentially useful one.

Finally, Tom Shippey deploys his usual acumen in “The Faërie World of Michael Swanwick,” though this essay arguably has little to do with world-building *per se*. Instead, his prime target seems to be “the rhetoric of modern criticism” (415) and knee-jerk praises for “subversion” (a trap fallen into by at least one other essay in this volume), especially the subversion of allegedly standard fantasy conventions. As Shippey shows, Swanwick demonstrates several clear and unapologetic allegiances to fantasy genre and fairy tale motifs. Shippey then suggests that Swanwick, a master of “cognitive estrangement” (428), employs the combined strategies of portal-quest and immersive fantasies in guiding readers through his imaginary worlds.

Overall, though, *Sub-creating Arda* provides an exciting and important new contribution to Tolkien studies, despite several essays that, in a book already 450+ pages long, could probably have been omitted without loss. Essays by Nagy, Behrooz, and Williams provide useful new coinages or ways of approaching Tolkien’s world-building, and the book’s opening section highlights an important debate about the desirability of completeness in world-building. At this point, a few general observations might be in order. First, *Sub-creating Arda* is decidedly author-centric. It focuses on world-building *by Tolkien*, and it bypasses how fans, critics, and different media (such as film or video games) construct or change his imaginary world. Middle-earth may have begun as Tolkien’s private hobby, but it has hardly ended up as only that. Second, this book has little interest in *complicating* the common conception of Tolkien’s world-building as maximally consistent and complete. Nagy’s essay comes closest, and perhaps also Izzo’s, but no secondary world—including Tolkien’s—is free of fissures, gaps, aporias, contradictions, or unresolved tensions. Conceivably, the study of such things in world-building (and what they might mean) might become as important a topic for study as their opposites. Nonetheless, these observations need not be construed as criticisms; after all, no one volume can do everything, and *Sub-creating Arda* more than achieves its worthwhile stated goal of opening up debates on world-building. As such, given the booming critical interest in the

3 For a recent example of the phenomenological approach to religion in fantasy literature, see Weronika Łaskiewicz, *Fantasy Literature and Christianity: A Study of the Mistborn, Coldfire, Fionavar Tapestry and Chronicles of Thomas Covenant Series*, McFarland, 2018.

subject, *Sub-creating Arda* might well become one of the more influential volumes in Walking Tree's voluminous Cormarë series.

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