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Tolkien and the Classics (2019) edited by Roberto Arduini, Giampaolo Canzonieri and Claudio A. Testi

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Tolkien and the Classics, edited by Roberto Arduini, Giampaolo Canzonieri and Claudio A. Testi. Zurich and Jena: Walking Tree Publishers, 2019. [10], xx, 245 pp. \$24.30 (trade paperback) ISBN 9783905703429.

Upon receiving my copy of *Tolkien and the Classics* for review, I was only aware of the title. I have to admit that I was pleasantly surprised by the range of topics covered in the volume. To me, and to many American and British readers, the title *Tolkien and the Classics* conveys the idea that the text will exclusively cover older texts (usually from earlier Latin, Greek, and Roman sources). The title, then, is an unfortunate oversight because I suspect that a title like *Tolkien and the Canon* would have broader appeal in America and Britain, and would be a more accurate description of the book's content to audiences there. The book is concerned with comparing J.R.R. Tolkien's writing with the work of notable authors across literary periods and cultural boundaries. This is an admirable goal and one which will help situate Tolkien within a larger literary framework.

This volume is a collection of essays chosen from two previously-published Italian texts and then translated into English. Their goal was, in their words, "to create a collection that, without betraying its Italian origins, could be of interest also for English-speaking readers" (xviii). The broadening of the audience for scholarship is understandable, obscuring the Italian origins of the volume was not necessary and, in the event, did not prove possible. The selection of authors for comparison, as well as the topics discussed, are invariably influenced by the culture in which the scholars are writing, and we should celebrate what makes these perspectives unique and interesting, not hide it. To this end, I am very grateful that the editors have included short biographical passages about each of the contributors. I should note that there are times when the translation has led to a slip in grammar or punctuation, but I am hopeful that these will be rectified in any subsequent editions.

It is important to note that the editors claim in their introduction that their intent was to "offer a publication that could be enjoyed, and made actual use of, by students and teachers alike" (xvii). If the reader were to miss this significant caveat then they may find the volume unsatisfying. The editors have kept each chapter very short, which means that some of the comparisons are only surface-level; however, this enables the text to function very well as a kind of primer, an introduction to the kinds of comparisons that can be made and substantiated with research. The editors have created a volume that encompasses a very broad spectrum of literary comparisons. This is a laudable achievement. The volume helps to situate Tolkien within a chain of authors who influenced him as well as within a broader literary context of the twentieth century. While this overarching goal has been thoroughly achieved in the text, the quality of the individual contributions is inconsistent.

The first two essays in the collection can serve as a good example of this vacillation in quality. The first chapter by Gloria Larini is entitled “Giant, Solitary, and Anarchist, The Trolls in *The Hobbit* and Polyphemus in the *Odyssey*.” The chapter spends too much time pointing to similarities between *The Hobbit* and *The Odyssey*, and not enough time justifying the claim that this comparison has moral implications, which is presented at the very end and left unsubstantiated. The second contribution is Leonardo Mantovani’s “Renewing the Epic: Tolkien and Apollonius Rhodius.” This chapter has much more support for its argument throughout than the first, though the writer should have used a scholar other than Joseph Pearce (whose focus is much more on reception and interpretation, particularly of Christian/religious elements) for biographical information.

One of the more interesting examinations in the text is Gloria Larini’s “To Die for Love: Female Archetypes in Tolkien and Euripides.” Her examination of Lúthien and Arwen alongside Alcestis is a well-crafted argument which concludes that Tolkien’s women represent “the failed attempt to reconstruct the primeval eternity of Man, destroyed by Evil, through the power of a pure and absolute love. Lúthien and Arwen are extraordinary women and, at the same time, pagan metaphors of an unfinished salvation” (32). This is certainly one chapter that is useful to scholars as well as students.

Several chapters stand out for their clarity and insight. Claudio A. Testi’s contribution on Thomas Aquinas, simply titled “Tolkien and Aquinas,” is informative and clearly written. It would certainly be helpful for the purpose outlined in the introduction. The chapter succinctly summarizes the evidence that Tolkien was aware of Aquinas’s writing, and then goes on to diagnose several similarities and differences between the writing of the two. Chiara Bertoglio’s “Dante, Tolkien, and the Supreme Harmony” is also very clear and insightful. This chapter gives a nice, if brief, bibliographic paragraph to steer interested readers to other works, then dives into a specific argument concerning the way that each author employs music to “narrate the Christian history of salvation” (84). The significant conclusion of comparing Tolkien’s Music of the Ainur to the music throughout Dante’s *Comedia* is that this element serves to underscore the importance of language in the meaning-making endeavor of man for both writers.

One of the most intriguing and engaging chapters is Amelia A. Rutledge’s “Tolkien and Sir Walter Scott: Critiques of the Chivalric/Heroic Imaginary.” Rutledge concludes that “the two most striking correspondences [between Tolkien and Scott] remain the critiques of empty chivalric deeds in the context of responsibility and an awareness of the destructive effects, both physical and moral, of unchecked fanaticism” (128). The chapter is well supported and the argument is clear and astute. My only complaint is that this chapter is far too

short, by which I mean that the author could have easily held my attention for a piece three times as long and with much more detailed analysis.

Sara Gianotto's "Tolkien and Alfieri. Fëanor and the Characters of Alfierian Tragedy" seeks to demonstrate similarity between the two authors by showing how they both have "archetypes which represent fundamentals of human nature" (p.144). While this thesis seems to be fairly generic, the argument itself becomes specific enough to support some meaningful one-to-one comparisons between the two authors. Namely, Gianotto sees resonance in the themes of "creative power and moral freedom", a "moment of choice and solitude", and the ideas of "fate and free will." Cecilia Barella's essay "Tolkien and Grahame" is also very good, presenting a close analysis of the similarities in the authors' writings. The chapter largely focuses on close readings of Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* and Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Unfortunately, the conclusion becomes a little convoluted with the claim of the two inventing the genre of "animal fantasy or animal epic" and a discussion of Richard Adams's *Watership Down* as a successor to the two. This latter argument should perhaps be saved for a lengthier analysis and not squeezed into an otherwise good close analysis of the two authors.

My largest concern about the text is the chapter from Tom Shippey at the end. The chapter is entitled "William Morris and Tolkien: Some Unexpected Connections" and it compares the writings of Tolkien and William Morris. The essay is well-written and certainly makes a strong argument for Morris's direct influence on Tolkien. My complaint, then, is that the content of the chapter simply does not fit with the rest of the text. In a volume whose goal is to help contextualize Tolkien with other authors who have been placed in the literary canon, this chapter takes a seemingly opposite approach. It discusses why neither Tolkien nor Morris have been placed in the canon. In a way, it valorizes Tolkien's set-apart status and vilifies the literary elite, the assumptive creators of the literary canon. While this chapter makes a strong argument and shows depth of research, it is out of place, and one wonders why the editors chose to include it.

Tolkien and the Classics would be a useful text to have when teaching a course on Tolkien that focuses on either textual criticism or cultural history. It helps to expound upon the influence of other writers on Tolkien and the ideas that were circulating among writers who were Tolkien's contemporaries. It is approachable for a wide audience and the research presented is credible. It would also be a helpful tool for novice scholars who would like a reference which provides quick overviews of Tolkien's relationship with other notable authors; however, these novices should treat the text as a starting point to guide them to deeper research, not as a final word on the subject.

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