Journal of Tolkien Research

Volume 11 | Issue 2

Article 4

2020

Tolkien and the Classical World (2021), edited by Hamish Williams

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Recommended Citation

Tolkien and the Classical World, edited by Hamish Williams. Zurich and Jena: Walking Tree Publishers, 2017. [10], xxvi, 414 pp. $32.00 (trade paperback) ISBN 9783905703450.

Tolkien and the Classical World is a gargantuan—or, rather, colossal—volume, comprising fourteen essays arranged into five sections, plus an Introduction (by the editor) and an Afterword (by D. Graham J. Shipley, Professor of Ancient History at the University of Leicester).

The Introduction (by editor Hamish Williams), "Classical Tradition, Modern Fantasy, and the Generic Contracts of Readers" (xi-xvi) provides several of the requisite landmarks, positioning this volume on Tolkien's reception of the Classical world alongside studies of the medieval Tolkien, the ecocritical Tolkien, and so forth; defining the temporal and spatial range of "Classical"; and noting "contemporary unease about the intrinsic association of Classical studies with the study of the classic, as the realm of the 'cultural pluperfect'" (xv). Williams goes on to examine how many contemporary readers, because they do not share the exposure to Classical literature common to Tolkien and *his* similarly-educated contemporaries, may have responses to reading his texts significantly different from theirs, and may, as well, have different concepts of the fantasy genre. He points to the 2008 film adaptation of *Prince Caspian* as an example of a fantasy reimagined with its Classical elements (Bacchus, Silenus, Maenads, etc.) excised, leaving a work that fits more comfortably within the quasi-medieval understanding of the high fantasy genre which Tolkien's work has done so much to create. (The phrase "Moving from Lewis to Tolkien, from Cambridge don to Oxford don" [xxiv] strikes me as a bit forced, as Lewis was an Oxford don for twenty-nine years, a Cambridge one for only nine.)

Section 1, "Classical Lives and Histories," begins with a biographical essay by Williams, "Tolkien the Classicist: Scholar and Thinker" (3-36). The chapter pulls together information from familiar sources (Carpenter, Hammond and Scull) and more recondite ones (reports on exam results sent to King Edward's School) to give a thorough picture of three phases of Tolkien's relationship with the classics—"from an early phonoaesthetic love of Latin and Greek [. . .] to a boredom with Classical education [. . .] to a return of Classics-based novels as favoured leisure reading" (31).

The second essay in the section, Ross Clare's "Greek and Roman Historiographies in Tolkien's Númenor" (37-68) considers the resonances in Tolkien's work of the culture-wide impact of Classical historians (as opposed to direct influence or flat-out borrowing from those sources). This sort of work strikes me as having, in general, a high potential for nebulosity, but Clare presents three reasonably solid examples: Númenor's imperial growth and decline as parallel to those of Athens, the "good/bad paradigm" (63) applied to the

Númenórean kings as parallel to that applied to Roman emperors, and the persecution of the King's men during the last days of the kingdom as parallel to stories of Christian persecution in the empire. I might quibble that the good/bad paradigm of kings of Israel and Judah (particularly the latter) fits the Númenórean situation equally well.

Section 2, "Ancient Epic and Myth," consists of four essays. In the first, "The Gods in (Tolkien's) Epic: Classical Patterns of Divine Interaction" (73-103), Giuseppe Pezzini identifies five modes of divine dealing with mortals in Homer and Virgil (Theophanies, Mediated Interactions, Natural Entities, Dreams, Inspiration) and shows how these figure openly in *The Silmarillion* and more covertly in *The Lord of the Rings* (cf. his 2019 article for the *Journal of Inklings Studies*, "The Lords of the West: Tolkien, Freedom and the Divine Narrative in Tolkien's Poetics" volume 9, pp. 115-153). As Tolkien deploys these classical elements, however (Pezzini argues), he changes them to reflect the fundamental nature of the Valar as 'gods' motivated (unlike the Olympians) by seeing the Children of Iluvatar "as objects of love *per se*" who possess "created freedom" which the Valar increasingly learn to respect (99). It should be noted that Pezzini's linkage of the Eagle and Child pub to the story of Zeus and Ganymede (87) is apparently incorrect, as the name is said to represent, rather, the crest of the Stanley Earls of Derby.

The second chapter in this section, Benjamin Eldon Stevens' "Middle-earth as Underworld: From *Katabasis* to Eucatastrophe" (105-130) works from a similar premise, that Tolkien's belief in the *eucatastrophe* of Resurrection (and his incorporation of that belief into his fiction) results in his transmutation of the Classical tropes of descent into the underworld and meeting with the dead, "a rewriting of ancient Greek and Roman stories so dramatic that we might follow Tolkien's neolinguistic lead and call the result by a new name: *eucatabasis*, a kind of 'evangelical' or 'pilgrimagic journey below'" (111). The journey of the Fellowship and the adventures of Beren and Lúthien clearly display such a structure: but, Stevens argues, Middle-earth's overall elegiac character, the sense of "long defeat," of fall and loss, makes it an "underworldly or deathly" place, the necessary setting for "redemptive or resurrective" stories (115). This, in turn, allows it to be a "'middling-point,' a symbol of death mistaken for stasis and of mortality confused with morbidity" (117). Even actual underworlds, like Moria and the Halls of Mandos, reflect Tolkien's Christian understanding of death as "a perfection of being" (120). Ultimately, Tolkien becomes Virgil to the reader's Dante, Lúthien to Beren, Orpheus to Eurydice, in a story in which "looking back into death is no tragedy since the world, for all its underworldliness, is divine comedy" (123).

In the third chapter, "*Pietas* and the Fall of the City: A Neglected Virgilian Influence on Middle-earth's Chief Virtue" (131-163), Austin M. Freeman,

building on previous studies of conjunctions between Virgil and Tolkien (of which he gives a thorough overview, with attention to *Aeneid* II, the Fall of Gondolin, and the Siege of Minas Tirith), argues that Tolkien's cautions about the northern virtue of courage slipping into self-centered *ofermod* apply equally to Homeric *kleos*. The duty ethos of Virgilian *pietas*, however, counters that turn into self. Courage thus modified can be read as *pistis*, the loyal trust and hope in God which leads to Christian action, and this active mixture of trust and hope is what Tolkien designates in *Morgoth's Ring* as *estel*.

While Tolkien's debt to *Sir Orfeo* in the Beren-Luthien / Ronald-Edith complex has been widely examined, Peter Astrup Sundt, in "The Love Story of Orpheus and Eurydice in Tolkien's Orphic Middle-earth" (165-189), considers several echoes of the Virgilian and Ovidian versions of the myth. After examining points of resemblance, he notes that while poets have often invoked Orpheus as a symbol for their own subcreative art, this is one area where Tolkien does *not* map himself into the myth (even though he does something similar with "Leaf by Niggle"). Further classical Orphic similarities can be identified in the stories of the Ents and the Entwives and of Tom Bombadil.

Three essays make up section 3, "In Dialogue with the Greek Philosophers." "Plato's Atlantis and the Post-Platonic Tradition in Tolkien's Downfall of Númenor" (193-215) by Michael Kleu considers Tolkien's self-diagnosed "Atlantis complex" (210, citing *Letters* 213) with the methodological tools of reception studies. The result not only illuminates familiar correspondences between the two versions of the downfallen island but also examines Tolkien's relationship with post-Platonic writing about Atlantis, particularly Ignatius Donelley's 1882 *Atlantis, The Antediluvian World*. The essay does fall into the common error of situating Sauron's Temple of Morgoth "on the Meneltarma mountain" (200), whereas Tolkien writes "Sauron caused to be built *upon the hill in the midst of the city* of the Númenóreans, Armenelos the Golden, a mighty temple" (*Silmarillion* 327, emphasis added).

Łukasz Neubauer, in "Less Consciously at First but More Consciously in the Revision: Plato's Ring of Gyges as a Putative Source of Inspiration for Tolkien's Ring of Power" (217-246), undertakes a close study of both narrative and thematic similarities between Plato's ring and Tolkien's, giving careful attention to existing work on the subject. Despite all such similarities, however (Neubauer argues), Bilbo's moral of the value of pity is a Christian, rather than a Platonic, one. This detailed examination is somewhat marred by taking Gyges to be the actor in the story in the *Republic*: Plato in fact says that the ring's power of invisibility came "to the *ancestor* of Gyges the Lydian" (τῷ Γύγου τοῦ Λυδοῦ προγόνῳ, 359 d).

Julian Eilmann, "Horror and Fury: J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Children of Húrin* and the Aristotelian Theory of Tragedy" (247-268) is a translation and expansion of a

chapter originally published in Oliver Bildo, Julian Eilmann, and Frank Weinreich (eds), *Zwischen den Spiegeln. Neue Perspektiven auf die Phantastik* (Essen: Oldib-Verlag, 62-90). Applying familiar categories from Aristotle's discussion of tragedy in *Poetics* (and explicitly prescinding from discussion of parallels with Kullervo), Eilmann shows first how Túrin fits the model of a man who can be the subject of a tragedy and then how the key elements of such a drama manifest themselves in the narrative, especially how Tolkien evokes fear and pity in the reader in the siblings' recognition (*anagnorisis*) of their incest and in the reversal of circumstances (*peripeteia*) that follows.

Section 4: "Around the Borders of the Classical World" again comprises three chapters. Philip Burton's "'Eastwards and Southwards': Philological and Historical Perspectives on Tolkien and Classicism" (273-304) addresses the periodization and regionalization implicit in the idea of "classicism," arguing that Tolkien, as a philologist, would have resisted the idea of an exemplar Mediterranean culture, detached from the rest of the world. Burton's argument is itself philological, drawing on the etymologies of words for trees and plants in general, wine, oliphaunts, and dragons to show how Tolkien would have been aware of the many links between Mediterranean culture and the wider world.

In "The Noldorization of the Edain: The Roman-Germani Paradigm for the Noldor and Edain in Tolkien's Migration Era" (305-327), Richard Z. Gallant sets out extensive parallels between the encounters of Rome and the Germanic tribes and the relationships of the three houses of the Edain to the Fingolfian Noldor. The histories—written in each case by the more developed civilization—show the barbarians passing through three similar stages on their way from being tribes to becoming a kingdom: incorporation into the higher culture's army, entrance into a state of association with that culture, and adoption of the other culture's legal framework (in the secondary world, the "social norms and values" of the Noldor, 321).

The last essay in this section, Juliette Harrisson's "'Escape and Consolation': Gondor as the Ancient Mediterranean and Rohan as the Germanic World in *The Lord of the Rings*" (329-348) also draws on elements of Romano-Germanic relations, applying them in this case to the Rohirrim: but the essay moves in a significantly different direction from Gallant's, making a persuasive and illuminating argument that the Gondor-Rohan relationship provides a eucatastrophic recasting of primary world history, one in which Minas Tirith, as Rome, is rescued, rather than sacked, by the Germanic tribes, and the early English become rejuvenating allies of the older Mediterranean civilization.

Two further chapters make up Section 5, "Shorter Remarks and Observations." The first, "Shepherds and the Shire: Classical Pastoralism in Middle-earth" (353-363) by Alley Marie Jordan, draws out parallels between the situation of the Arcadian shepherds in Virgil's *Eclogues* and that of the hobbits of

the Shire, arguing that recourse to pastoral life as an anticipation of a golden age in the face of war and imperial expansion is a specifically classical type of the larger pastoral form.

In "Classical Influences on the Role of Music in Tolkien's Legendarium" (365-374), Oleksandra Filonenko and Vitalii Shchepanskyi note that discussion of Tolkien's use of music have concentrated on the medieval and Christian: their aim is to cast a similar light on classical, particularly Pythagorean and Neo-Platonist, influences. For example, the Fates and Sirens (divided into "celestial, terrestrial, and subterranean" [369] in the commentary of Proclus) in Plato's "Myth of Er" (*Republic* X, 616b-617c) roughly correspond to the Valar and Maiar, the latter being divided into those who remained with Eru, those who entered Eä, and those who followed Melkor. The authors do not mean to refute previous work, but rather to show a "continuity of ideas and concepts" (373) between the ancient and medieval worlds.

The essay cites Chiara Bertoglio's 2018 *Tolkien Studies* article, *"Dissonant Harmonies: Tolkien's Musical Theodicy"* (volume 15, pages 93-114), but appears to me to ignore Bertoglio's important distinction between *dissonance* (a component part of harmony) and *discord* (a disruption of harmony), the latter being the term that Tolkien frequently associates with Melkor. Filonenko and Shchepanskyi state "Tolkien produces a specific aesthetic theodicy: discord is a necessary part of the Music—there would be no music (and no Eä) at all without it. Thus, Melkor seems to be the Ainu who was conceived to be in charge of discord" (372). But the text explicitly (and repeatedly) contradicts this: until Eru intervenes, Melkor's music is *opposed to*, not part of, the celestial harmony, e.g., "And it seemed at last that there were *two* musics progressing at one time before the seat of Ilúvatar, and they were *utterly at variance*" (*Silmarillion*, 5, emphasis added).

Finally, Shipley's "Afterword: Tolkien's Response to Classics in Its Wider Context" (379-394) resurveys the contributions to the book in the course of comparing and contrasting Tolkien, Lewis, and Williams, particularly with respect to Tolkien's understatedness, e.g., his discussion of values without manipulating the reader, his recasting of materials from older cultures without becoming "literary" (389).

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