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Tolkien and the Sea: Proceedings of the Tolkien Society Seminar 1996, edited by Richard Cranshaw and Shaun Gunner

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Abstract

Review of the book *Tolkien and the Sea: Proceedings of the Tolkien Society Seminar 1996*.

Additional Keywords

Sea

Ethical issues in the books include Edward's reluctance to turn Bella into a vampire. There are issues regarding Bella's loyalty, lack thereof, and friendship with Jacob. There are ethical issues regarding roles of the three focalizing characters within the conflicts between vampires and werewolves. Also, the question of how to treat Bella's own life-threatening pregnancy of a half-human, half-vampire child is part of the dramatic presentation of ethics in the book. About the Twilight series Guanio-Uluru writes, "The base line message of the series in terms of its progression, then, is that it makes a strong case for following one's deepest romantic inclinations or obsessions with no regard for the personal cost or immediate consequences of such a path as 'all will be right in the end'" (181). A thoughtful and understated comment regarding the books by Guanio-Uluru is, "Given the nature of vampires, however, it may seem overly optimistic to expect healthy relationship dynamics in a vampire romance series" (208).

In conclusion, *Ethics and Form in Fantasy Literature* would sit nicely on the shelf with *Following Gandalf: Epic Battles and Moral Victory in "The Lord of the Rings"* by Matthew Dickerson and "The Lord of the Rings" and *Philosophy: One Book to Rule Them All* edited by Gregory Bassham and Eric Bronson. Guanio-Uluru does a fine job of exploring her topic in the works of her three chosen authors. The book is particularly strong in describing and discussing the plots and characters of *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Harry Potter* series. Guanio-Uluru's book would be appropriate for undergraduate and advanced high school literature students or metropolitan libraries, and I also think it would be very good for book discussion groups.

— Phillip Fitzsimmons



TOLKIEN AND THE SEA: PROCEEDINGS OF THE TOLKIEN SOCIETY SEMINAR 1996. Edited by Richard Crawshaw and Shaun Gunner. Tolkien Society; Luna Press Publishing, rev. ed. 2021. xi + 99p. 978-1-913387-55-6. £9.00. Peter Roe Memorial Series VII.

*T*OLKIEN AND THE SEA IS A RECENT REPRINT of Tolkien Society proceedings featuring five papers delivered at the 11th Tolkien Society Seminar held at the George Hotel in Colchester on June 15, 1996. Originally published as *Tolkien, The Sea and Scandinavia* (Telford: The Tolkien Society, 1999) as a folded and stapled paper booklet, this revised edition is available as an e-book or a paperback. I was provided with a PDF copy for review, so I cannot evaluate the book's final formats, but I'm familiar with a number of other recent Tolkien Society proceedings published by Luna Press and I like the handsome, small

(5"x7") paperback format. The order of the papers has been altered from the original publication, and the text has been further edited with corrections by the Society's Shaun Gunner. The title has also been amended to better reflect the contents of the papers included. These five papers are more or less in harmony with the theme as they analyze such narrative elements as the ineluctable Wave of Tolkien's self-described "Atlantis-haunting" (see Tolkien, *Letters* 347, #257), the changes to the coastlines of Middle-earth, and the sea as a road to various fairy realms and Earthly paradises.

Patricia Reynolds recapitulates the many dreams and visions in Tolkien's masterwork in her paper, "The Great Wave and Other Dreams in *The Lord of the Rings*," categorizing them as inconsequential or portentous, memory or future vision. The first part of the essay is primarily a list of dreams in the story. The second part is a discussion of various beliefs about dreams (e.g., communications from the gods, cultural archetypes, personal symbols, wish fulfillment, foresight, or memory). Along the way, Reynolds explores Tolkien's comments from *On Fairy-stories* on dreams as narrative devices, and the dreams in Tolkien's *The Notion Club Papers*. She concludes that several dreams in *The Lord of the Rings* were sent by the Valar (21). Tolkien, she writes, believed both dreams and creative writing were subcreations under God, and were, therefore, divine revelation (29). However, aside from the "Great Wave" dream of Faramir (and Tolkien), this essay is not specifically related to the sea-theme of the book's title.

In "Seas and Shores: A Study of Cataclysm in Middle-earth," Alex Lewis considers possible geological causes for the Drowning of Beleriand, the Drowning of Númenor, and the destruction of Mordor. For example, he concludes that the inundation of Beleriand at the end of the First Age was caused by simultaneous volcanic activity and plate movement with one "probably the trigger for the other" (35). The problem with applying real-world scientific principles to a fantasy world is that sometimes you can't. Finding no satisfactory geological explanation for the sundering of Valinor from Middle-earth and the re-forming of a flat world into a round one at the end of the Second Age, Lewis is forced to accept a metaphysical solution instead: that Valinor existed "within some other dimension of the Universe close to our own but far enough apart to make it very difficult for mortals to reach with their conventional physical means" (39). As a thought experiment, Lewis's essay is interesting and entertaining, but it's reminiscent of the *Beowulf* scholars who, Tolkien said, pulled down the tower to examine its stones. Lewis, like those scholars, focuses too much attention on the stones while failing to appreciate the sea.

Maria B. Kuteeva's essay, "Searching for an Earthly Paradise: Some Common Images in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis," compares Tolkien's *Notion Club Papers* and its inset poem, "The Death of Saint Brendan"

(later revised as “Imram”) with Lewis’s *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* and the reliance of both works on the medieval legend of Saint Brendan the Navigator. Kuteeva discusses several common images, most-strikingly Tolkien’s “three symbolic episodes—a Cloud, a Tree and a Star— [which] have a recognisable correlative in Lewis’s story” (52). A cloud in Tolkien envelopes Brendan’s boat “for forty days and ten” (qtd. 57), while a cloud envelops the mysterious and terrifying Dark Island in Lewis. The white tree covered with bird-like leaves in Tolkien is represented in Lewis by the banquet table at the end of the world covered daily with snow-white birds. Kuteeva links the star with Lewis’s Ramandu, a self-professed “star at rest” (qtd. 60), and with Tolkien’s third “fair kindred” (i.e., the Elves) (qtd. 60). But she entirely misses the point that Tolkien’s star is actually Eärendel, the legendary star-mariner who is woven throughout Tolkien’s legendarium. Ultimately, Kuteeva finds too many shared images for coincidence’s sake, and concludes that “Tolkien discussed the images of Saint Brendan’s legend and other journeys in search of the Earthly Paradise with Lewis, making an impact upon his practice of mythopoeia” (63). Although such views of the Inklings’ mutual influence are now commonplace, Kuteeva made her observations a full decade before the publication of Diana Pavlac Glyer’s *The Company They Keep: C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien as Writers in Community*. Kuteeva’s paper also predates other published scholarship comparing Lewis’s and Tolkien’s otherworld voyage tales, such as essays by Huttar (2007) and Swank (2019).

In “The Sea-Bell: A Voyage of Exploration,” Christine Davidson illustrates Tolkien’s poetic lineage by comparing the penultimate poem in his collection, *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* (1962 [*ATB*]), to other English sea- and fairy-poems by Malory, Masfield, Keats, Shakespeare, Tennyson, Allingham, and Coleridge, as well as Tolkien’s own “Errantry” and “The Song of Eärendil” (i.e., Bilbo’s poem in the house of Elrond). Davidson takes the poem’s late appellation as “Frodo’s Dreme” as indication that the voyager is a hobbit, an oddity she acknowledges:

One wonders why the sea should be ‘ever-present in the background of hobbit imagination’, a people that, so far as we are told, had their origins in the middle of a large continent and progressed from a semi-nomadic hunting and gathering way of life to settled agriculture. (70)

Of course, the appellation was added by Tolkien as he attempted to retrofit an older, non-Middle-earth poem, “Looney” (1934), into the conceit that the poems in *ATB* were written or transmitted by hobbits.¹ The conceit works well for some poems, like “The Last Ship” (revised from “Firiël,” also 1934) but

¹ “Looney” was written and published in 1934, *The Oxford Magazine*, vol 52, no. 9, p. 340.

not as well for “The Sea-Bell,” as its dark tone is discordant with the ebullient nature of other hobbit poetry in *The Lord of the Rings* and *ATB*.² Davidson does not address “The Sea-Bell’s” pre-Hobbit provenance as a likely source of the incongruity. (Interestingly, John Ellison’s paper in the collection does mention “The Sea-Bell’s” origins as “Looney.”) Overall, Davidson’s survey is thought-provoking, but ultimately she asks more questions than she answers, and readers may be further enlightened by pairing Davidson’s piece with Sue Bridgewater’s essay, “*What is it but a dream? Tolkien’s ‘The Sea Bell’ and Yeats’ ‘The Man who Dreamed of Faeryland’*” (2013).

The final paper in the collection is “Tolkien-on-Sea: The View from the Shores of Middle-earth.” Here, John Ellison considers the “crucially important image” of the sea in Tolkien’s work and relates it to the German Romantic movement (87). Ellison makes the fascinating observation that, despite Tolkien’s preoccupation with “sea-longing,” otherworld voyages, and ships and sailing in general, a characteristic of Tolkien’s writing is, “There are descriptions of arrival or departure, but none of actual days at sea. [...] [T]here is no single major scene in any of his writings actually set on board ship” (90-91). He attributes this to Tolkien’s romantic view of the sea as a liminal space:

it is the seashore, the sea’s margin, that represents reality; the sea itself is a symbol. [...] The sea stands for everything that divides the real world from the unseen, imagination from reality, the unconscious, dreaming mind from waking experience, myth from history, and above all, this life from the hereafter. (86-87)

Ellison compares this view from the shoreline, gazing out to sea with longing, with the German Romantic painters such as Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840) (“of whom Tolkien almost quite certainly never heard” 98) whose work frequently shows figures “sitting or standing on the seashore gazing on over the sea at spectral ships which advance towards the picture plane or recede from it, and which are thought to symbolise ‘the stages of life’ (the title of one such painting) [...] or man’s relationship with death and the hereafter” (98). The paper abruptly stops before making a proper, English-literature-class conclusion, but Ellison leaves enough bread-crumbs for readers to make their own. As an early exploration of the relationship between Tolkien and the German Romantics, Ellison pre-figures Julian Eilmann’s groundbreaking *J.R.R. Tolkien, Romanticist and Poet* (2017).

Overall, the collection has a few limitations. Some typos remain (in my PDF review copy, at any rate) despite Gunner’s re-editing. The focus of a couple

² “Firiell” was published in 1934 in *The Chronicle of the Convents of the Sacred Heart*, vol. IV.

of the papers is only tangentially related to the sea. And, of course, Tolkien scholarship has moved on since these papers were first presented in 1996.

Nevertheless, *Tolkien and the Sea* remains an interesting and illuminating little collection. Ostensibly available as a stapled booklet since its 1999 publication, this new, more accessible and higher quality edition will bring these papers to much wider attention and appreciation. Anticipating several directions Tolkien scholarship would take in succeeding decades, this small volume is enlightening and inexpensive (as well as supportive of a good cause: proceeds from the sale of books in the Peter Roe Memorial series go back into the Society's fund to support and disseminate Tolkien-related scholarship). All-in-all, the book's merits outweigh its limitations, and anyone interested in Tolkien's thematic uses of the sea, or in Tolkien scholarship in general, should enjoy these five vintage papers from the vault of the Tolkien Society.

—Kris Swank

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PAGAN SAINTS IN MIDDLE-EARTH. Claudio A. Testi. Zurich and Jena: Walking Tree, 2018. 196 p. ISBN: 978-3-905703-38-2

CLAUDIO A. TESTI'S STUDY OF THE CONTESTED ISSUES surrounding the religious implications of J.R.R. Tolkien's legendarium consists of a deeply researched, well-thought out, and well-reasoned appraisal of existing scholarship in this area. Testi's objective revolves around reconciling the Catholic and Christian implications of Tolkien's work with the intentions of the author. Testi attempts to examine all existing arguments and his own in light of the entire body of Tolkien's work. In doing so, Testi relies heavily on Tolkien's own words on the matter, which is one of the great strengths of this scholarship. Testi proposes his own original theory of Tolkien's work, espousing what Testi