

2023

The Road to Fair Elfland: Tolkien On Fairy-stories: An Extended Commentary (2022) by Giovanni Carmine Costabile

Janet Brennan Croft
janet.croft@uni.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch>

Recommended Citation

Croft, Janet Brennan (2023) "The Road to Fair Elfland: Tolkien On Fairy-stories: An Extended Commentary (2022) by Giovanni Carmine Costabile," *Journal of Tolkien Research*: Vol. 16: Iss. 2, Article 9.
Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol16/iss2/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Tolkien Research by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at scholar@valpo.edu.

The Road to Fair Elfland: Tolkien On Fairy-stories: An Extended Commentary, by Giovanni Carmine Costabile. Palermo, Italy: Phronesis Editore, 2022. [xxx], 214 pp. €18,00 / \$16.83 (trade paperback) ISBN 9788897328247. Also available in ebook format.

Giovanni Carmine Costabile's *The Road to Fair Elfland*, a commentary on Tolkien's seminal essay "On Fairy-stories," is, alas, not as useful as one might have hoped. Like Hammond and Scull's *The Lord of the Rings: A Reader's Companion*, it is meant to be read with the text on which it is a commentary open at hand. It is keyed to the paragraph numbers in the Flieger and Anderson expanded edition *Tolkien On Fairy-stories* (that is, to the paragraphs of the final published version of the essay—none of Tolkien's drafts are studied); sometimes Costabile devotes several pages to one paragraph, or contrariwise responds to several paragraphs in the original in just one short paragraph of his own.

But it leaves me, at least, a bit disappointed. From the title and the back cover blurb, I expected more of a general commentary and guide: much annotation and explication, and the promised "extension of" Flieger and Anderson's excellent "Editors' Commentary" in *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*. I was hoping for more of "sources for [his] themes" and "reference to Tolkien's precedents." Often, though, I felt that what I was getting instead was just "R.G. Collingwood got here first, and though Tolkien never refers to Collingwood, here's a wall of text to prove it."

Now that may not be entirely fair, because there are many sections where I *do* get what I expect from a commentary, but far too much of the book does consist of extremely long quotations, over which one skims in search of the meat of the argument and its relevance to the OFS paragraph at hand. I'd estimate that well over 60% of the text in this volume consists of exceedingly long block quotations from other sources (which would certainly make most publishers very nervous about fair use guidelines). There are good arguments here—Costabile could have gotten any number of fascinating stand-alone papers out of the comparisons and digressions he makes throughout the book. For example, the discussion of Dante (28-31), which Costabile keys to OFS paragraph 12, is a survey of and response to existing scholarship on Tolkien and Dante—but not entirely relevant here, because in fact, Dante never comes up in OFS at all. The long entry on sin, mercy, justice, and law, inspired by paragraph 61 (113-119), or the investigation into blue moons and green flashes inspired by the phrase "the green sun" (129-139), are other such opportunities for stand-alone articles.

The book is then not really a general commentary on the text, but instead reveals how Costabile as an individual responds to each paragraph in OFS, drawing on his own particular interests and scholarly background. Approached in that way, it can be rewarding—especially if you are intrigued by the same things as Costabile. Simon J. Cook's long "Preface" is like that, too. He places OFS in dialogue with

Hobbes's *Leviathan*; an odd pairing perhaps, but both are concerned with names, definitions, and imagination, and that interests Cook. But the "Preface" is basically a stand-alone article by Cook that has next to nothing to do with Costabile's text.

There are some lacunae. For example, on p.55 Costabile claims that none of Tolkien's stories are beast-fables, in part because there are no explicit moral lessons stated. Perhaps this is true of the stories in the *legendarium*, but what of *Roverandom*, in which the little dog learns many lessons, especially not to sass powerful wizards? On p.4, where I was still expecting a general commentary in the work, there's no mention of Tolkien's clever puns on his own name in "rash adventure" and "overbold" (as Jason Fisher has pointed out, 75 et seq.). And the aforementioned section on Dante leaves out John R. Holmes's very informative 2021 *Mythlore* essay on Tolkien's involvement in the Oxford Dante Society.

Unfortunately, the book is extremely poorly produced from a technical standpoint, and that's a shame. For the sensitive, it's painful and distracting to see two fonts mixed in the same sentence, line returns missing at the end of paragraphs, text in various shades of black and grey, mixed curly and straight quotes, and hyphenation that follows no known logical rules, among other sins against good design and proofreading. The table of contents is labelled as page 1, but appears at the end of the book. The bibliography suffers from inconsistent formatting and alphabetization. And the index! It's simply a list of terms, with no page numbers, and it alphabetizes under the articles *a* and *the* rather than treating them as non-filing characters (as we call them in the library field) and starting with the next word. Perhaps these are hyperlinked somehow in the Kindle edition? But no printed scholarly book is entirely useful without a full and accurate index.

If this was an advanced reader copy I might forgive some of this, but it's not—it's the final version for sale. This is all, alas, an indication that no editor was involved in its production. That's a shame, because an editor could have reined in some of the over-use and repetition of quotation and helped the author keep the text more relevant to the matter at hand, resulting in a tighter, sharper-focused book—or perhaps even better, restructured the book into a collection of chapters on aspects of "On Fairy-stories" such as overlap with Collingwood, parallels with Chesterton, and echoes of Dante, rather than a commentary where these themes are perforce broken up throughout the book. A proper index, though, would at least draw together references to these individual threads of thought.

As Costabile notes in his Acknowledgments, this is his inaugural effort at editing a line of Tolkien-related works for Phronesis Editore, and I know to my own sorrow that it is never easy to edit one's own work, so I will hope to see more skilled productions as he settles into this role.

Janet Brennan Croft
The University of Northern Iowa

Bibliography

- Fisher, Jason. "J.R.R. Tolkien: The Foolhardy Philologist." *A Wilderness of Dragons: Essays in Honor of Verlyn Flieger*, edited by John D. Rateliff, The Gabbro Head Press, 2018, pp. 72-93.
- Hammond, Wayne G. and Christina Scull. *The Lord of the Rings: A Reader's Companion*. Houghton Mifflin, 2005.
- Holmes, John R. "How Tolkien Saved His Neck: A *lusinghe* Proposition to the Oxford Dante Society." *Mythlore*, vol. 40, no. 1, #139, 2021, pp. 193–207.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. *Roverandom*. Houghton Mifflin, 1998.
- . *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*. edited by Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson, HarperCollins, 2008.