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How to Misunderstand Tolkien: The Critics and the Fantasy Master by Bruno Bacelli

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How to Misunderstand Tolkien: The Critics and the Fantasy Master by Bruno Bacelli

Chronicles further into discussion where Lewis's medieval planetary thoughts are discussed.

Starr's *C.S. Lewis's Theory of the Real* opens the door for new and exciting avenues for Lewis studies, such as inquiry into Lewis's influences for his theory of Reality. Lewis scholars can also use this theory as a lens when reading Lewis's fiction, bringing to light new elements in his narratives. Future studies might also further the discussion on Lewis's layers of reality and its connection with our modern-day multiverse fascination. Starr's study fits nicely next to Mineko Honda's *The Imaginative World of C.S. Lewis: A Way to Participate in Reality*, a text which also explores Lewis's thoughts on the relationship between fiction and reality. Considering Honda published in 2000, I think the time is ripe for Starr's book to enter the Lewis conversation. Margaret L. Carter, reviewing Honda's book, wrote, "The benefits a reader derives from Honda's study will probably depend on the degree of the reader's familiarity with Lewis" (313). I argue the same is true for Starr's readers. Those who have read much of Lewis's corpus will delight in a reinvigoration of Lewis's vision of reality and those new to Lewis will be introduced to a thinker who goes further up and further into the Christian faith.

—Mark-Elliot Finley

Carter, Margaret L. "Honda, Mineko. *The Imaginative World of C. S. Lewis: a Way to Participate in Reality* [Review]." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2000, p. 311–13.

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HOW TO MISUNDERSTAND TOLKIEN: THE CRITICS AND THE FANTASY MASTER. Bruno Bacelli. Illustrations by Silvia Bacelli. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2022. 195 pp. ISBN 9781476686943. \$29.95.

A READER MIGHT THINK FROM THE TITLE AND COVER that this is a fan's defense of his favorite writer. The reader would be mistaken. This is a serious attempt to grasp the nature of Tolkien's work, primarily *The Lord of the Rings*, based upon what critics have said about it. What is *The Lord of the Rings*? Why

do so many people have such differing opinions about it? Bacelli's technique is to summarize a critic's view, perhaps following this with a word or two of commentary, or by supplying an opinion from another critic. Many (though by no means all) of the selected criticisms are negative. The criticisms have been organized into chapters by themes, although some may appear under more than one heading.

According to the back cover blurb, "Bruno Bacelli is a fantasy literature enthusiast who was a columnist for the online *Fantasy Magazine* from 2007 to 2016. He has written several novels and short stories. He lives in Milan, Italy." Thus Bacelli brings a slightly different perspective to Tolkien's work.

The first chapter, "Criticism of Tolkien's Style and Themes" (37 pages), starts with two infamous negative criticisms, Edmund Wilson's "Oo, Those Awful Orcs!" and Michael Moorcock's "Epic Pooh." This chapter is largely a catalogue of negative reviews, with a few comments. As the book progresses, the number of criticisms will decrease, and the amount of commentary will increase.

For the most part Bacelli takes a gentle approach, (usually) refraining from pointing out obvious mistakes. Although sometimes he will chide or question ("one has to wonder in how much detail Wilson read the book" [9]) or "strangely, the more a critic dislikes Tolkien, the more likely he or she is to get some details in the author's books or life wrong" (43). Often he will say that the reader must judge for himself, or that a critic is entitled to his personal opinion.¹ Nevertheless as this book progresses a picture of Tolkien's work develops.

Bacelli makes an important observation: "Do we need to put the critics 'in context,' too, as we do authors?" (11). The first critics were reading *The Lord of the Rings* soon after it was published—1954-5 in England, 1954-5-6 in the United States. The 1950s was a period of progressive modernism—in art, architecture, and literature—Hemingway and Sartre, the anti-hero, stream-of-consciousness, gritty realism, and so forth. Tolkien's book did not fit this pattern. This baffled many progressive critics, who had little information about Tolkien or his life (and the "high fantasy" genre had yet to develop). Though this did not justify the sheer nastiness of some criticisms. Such ignorance cannot be excused today. Complaints about "style and themes" center around a lack of detailed characterization, lack of realistic detail, bland storytelling, lack of drama, predictable outcomes. Others—Moorcock among them—decried Tolkien's world as a static, birth- and class-ridden system, without any room for advancement; for its nostalgia about an unrealistic and unobtainable past, for

¹ All of the critical sources are listed in the Chapter Notes and Bibliography. While the reader may wish to ignore these on an initial reading, paying attention to the dates and sources can reveal much about the critics being cited.

promoting conservative reactionary views (we will see these complaints again). And there was the ideological barrier: leftist critics (and the intelligentsia are generally left-leaning) were incensed by Tolkien's conservative view.

Chapter 2, "The Anti-Modernist and Political Tolkien" (which at 57 pages is the longest), takes up the conservative, petty-bourgeois, sentimental Medievalist attack again, along with a fear that Tolkien's work will be read as be propaganda for Conservative political parties. Or that it may be war-mongering. Here Bacelli points out that Tolkien was apolitical ("My political opinions lean more and more to Anarchy" [*Letters* 63, #52]), and that he was neither militaristic nor patriotic (nationalistic), having experienced the horrors of war firsthand. Yet Tolkien does present an older, "glorified" view of warfare in *The Lord of the Rings*. Bacelli notes that the Free Men of the West fight a defensive war, and cites the "just war" theory.

In this chapter Bacelli also discusses fascism and Tolkien, especially the appropriation of Tolkien's work by the neo-fascist Hobbit Camps (*Campi Hobbit*) in Italy, a subject usually omitted from English and American discussions. The Italian political situation had a lot to do with the leftist dominance of post-WWII Italy, and with it a lack of conservative reading material. Rightists saw in Tolkien's agrarian-utopian Shire an antidote to aggressive modernism. (Even though Tolkien himself was utterly opposed to totalitarian regimes.) Bacelli also notes the squabble over the newest Italian translation of *The Lord of the Rings*, again pitting traditionalists vs. modernist progressives.

Others—environmentalists, Chestertonian distributionalists, religious—have tried enlist Tolkien's work as a spokesman for their views as well.

Next Bacelli very briefly touches on the very different reception of Tolkien's work in Russia. Then he sums it all up: Tolkien disliked industrialism, modernity; he hated environmental destruction; he was apolitical, his conservatism was not the platform of any conservative political party. In *The Lord of the Rings* he depicted an idealized, mythical past, not the real Middle Ages. In other words, Tolkien was an artist, not an ideologue.

The next three chapters are much shorter. Bacelli will select a few critics to represent each view, rather than trying to cover the entire critical literature. Here the reader needs to bear in mind that several years can elapse from the time a manuscript is accepted for publication until the book appears on the bookshelves, so the reader will not find the most recent race- and gender-oriented assessments. Thus Chapter 3, "Race Issues" (15 pp.) covers "The Case of the Orcs" and "Dwarves as Jews." Bacelli observes that Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* films highlighted the differences between the light-skinned Free Peoples and darker-skinned Servants of Sauron ("but let us remember, however, that there are also bad guys with fair skin" [103]). The critics (and Bacelli) are

more concerned with the depiction of Orcs as irredeemably evil; that the good guys kill Orcs with impunity; and that, while a good guy can fall into evil, there are *no* cases of an Orc coming over to the side of good. Yet most readers do not view this depiction of Orcs as racist. This argument also brings up ideas of Manichaeism (good vs. evil), and prejudice and co-operative behavior among the good guys.

Then there is the idea that Tolkien modeled Dwarves upon Jews (Rebecca Brackmann), which makes him anti-Semitic. And that Tolkien later softened his views over time. Bacelli counters with citations from other critics who point out Tolkien's 1938 letter to his German publisher refusing to state that he was not Jewish (*Letters* 37, #30), that Tolkien modeled his Dwarves upon Norse sources, and that similarities (long beards, for example) do not necessarily mean derivation.²

The next Chapter, "Sex and Gender in The Lord of the Rings³ Trilogy" (27 pp.) follows the same pattern: an extreme criticism (Brenda Partridge) followed by rebuttals and discussion. Here we start with a highly sexualized Freudian interpretation (Sam's stabbing of Shelob as symbolic rape), Tolkien's work is misogynistic, and so forth. Many others have condemned the lack of sex in *The Lord of the Rings*, its traditional roles for women, or Tolkien's tendency to put women on a pedestal. Counter arguments cite the motivating factor of Love (Aragorn and Arwen, Beren and Lúthien), and that females (Galadriel, for instance) can exert considerable power. One also needs to consider women's roles in Tolkien's personal life and the culture of his time. A lengthy discussion of Éowyn's transition from shield maiden to Faramir's wife follows.

The other issue is "Homosexuality in The Lord of the Rings." Here again Bacelli observes that some of Tolkien's exchanges between Sam and Frodo as enacted in Peter Jackson's films can cause embarrassment today. Again one needs to consider male friendships during Tolkien's lifetime.⁴ As Bacelli says, "The customs, we must note, evolved quickly in the twentieth century, and Tolkien, despite being a 'modern' writer, from this point of view [sexual relations], is now a man of two or three generations ago. Let us keep this in mind" (146).

Chapter 5, "Religion and Tolkien" (17 pp.) considers whether Tolkien was a Christian or pagan writer. It is true that Tolkien was a devout Roman

² None of the critics cited, pro or con, consider the context for Tolkien's "I do think of the 'Dwarves' like Jews" remark (*Letters* 229, #176)—see my Guest Editorial "Consider the Source" (Martsch 4).

³ Bacelli does not italicize *The Lord of the Rings*. He does italicize other book titles.

⁴ I think a study of the master/servant relationship is needed, for it is a subject now very unfamiliar to 21st Century Americans. A manservant by the nature of his job has an intimate relationship with his employer.

Catholic, although his work does not always follow the exactitudes of Catholic dogma; and it equally true that he derived much of his material from pagan Norse sources. Also *The Lord of the Rings* is set in a pre-Christian era. This leads to a consideration of Sub-creation and Free Will, and the importance of individual choices. The conclusion: Tolkien combines Christian morality with pagan elements.

Parts of Bacelli's "Conclusion" (7 pp.) have already been discussed here. Bacelli likes *The Lord of the Rings* but is not wholly a fan. He dislikes the treatment of Orcs as irredeemably evil: he thinks they should be treated better and allowed to repent. And the lack of any organized religion in Tolkien's world is unrealistic. We do not see a lot of character development. But Bacelli does not view Tolkien's work as reactionary propaganda (though it has spurred environmental preservationist movements). He believes that Tolkien has written a fairy tale, set in a distant land, with knights and kings, and a fight against evil (166). *The Lord of the Rings* is "an artistic expression, a literary myth" (160). And "Maybe he is even a bit of a moral authority" (169). The "Conclusion" is illustrated with a drawing by Silvia Bacelli, of Gandalf with the face of Tolkien.

Having summarized *How to Misunderstand Tolkien*, I think it is important to note a few errors and omissions. There are a few mistakes, generally of little consequence. Bacelli consistently refers "King Denethor," which describes Denethor's function though it is not his correct title. He says Sauron has "no physical form," is "not even corporeal" (24, 28, 121) but this is debatable. Éowyn is given a sword and "a breastplate" (131). And a few other bits. In other examples, such as Éowyn is "struck on the sword arm [by the Nazgûl]" (132) it is unclear whether the mistake is that of the critic or that of Bacelli the summarizer.

We have already remarked on the absence of recent race- and gender-oriented criticism. As an Italian, Bacelli cites from a variety of Italian and English sources, though he tends to take many of his English examples from *J.R.R. Tolkien: This Far Land* (negative and/or odd), *The Proceedings of the J.R.R. Tolkien Centenary Conference* (generally positive), and for religion, *The Ring and the Cross: Christianity and The Lord of the Rings*. With the exception of post-modernism, Bacelli ignores most academic literary theories. On the other hand, it is not necessary to cover the entire corpus of Tolkien criticism in order to observe significant trends. As it stands, Bacelli's survey provides more than enough material for a study of "critics 'in context,'" for anyone who wishes to delve more deeply into what people see in Tolkien's work.

—Nancy Martsch

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DEATH IN SUPERNATURAL: CRITICAL ESSAYS, edited by Amanda Taylor and Susan Nylander. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2019. 249 p. ISBN 9781476668611. \$29.95.

ALTHOUGH DEATH IS OFTEN CONSIDERED A TABOO SUBJECT among polite company, in The CW's long-running fantasy drama *Supernatural* (2005–2020) death appears as a concept—and sometimes as a character—in each episode. This collection by editors Amanda Taylor and Susan Nylander, *Death in Supernatural: Critical Essays*, explores how the series, and by extension Western culture in general, approaches death and dying. By concentrating on the single subject of death, this book trades breadth for depth, and the collection offers a valuable contribution to contemporary scholarship while making itself accessible to the fans who might be attracted to this book by the foreword by Julian Richings, the actor who plays Death (even though most essays focus on the concept, not the character). These twelve essays examine death from various angles. While some of the arguments may be contentious or exaggerated, others—especially the ones by Michail-Chrysovalantis Markodimitrakis, Rebecca M. Lush, and Susan Nylander—distinguish themselves by their nuanced and detailed readings of a subject sometimes difficult to discuss. Granted, not all essays are as accessible as the editors' introduction makes them seem, but Markodimitrakis in particular