

PAGAN SAINTS IN MIDDLE-EARTH

Review by John Houghton

Pagan Saints in Middle-earth by Claudio A Testi, translated by Chiara and Giampaolo Canzonieri. Foreword, Veryln Flieger; afterword, Tom Shippey. Cormarë Series 38, Zurich and Jena: Walking Tree, 2018. Pages x + 100. Paper, \$24.30.

Dr. Testi, who has been quite active in Tolkien scholarship as a speaker, writer and editor, is President of the Institute of Thomistical Studies of Modena and Vice President of the Italian Association for Tolkien Studies. With this excellent book, Thomas Honegger and Walking Tree Press make available in English (with some minor updates) Testi's Sancti Pagani nelle Terra di Mezzo (2014); that book was itself an expanded version of his essay in Tolkien Studies, "Tolkien's Work: Is It Pagan or Christian? A Synthetic Approach", [TS 10 (2013), 1-47], on which I commented for "The Year's Work in Tolkien Studies 2013". [TS 13 (2016), 267-270]¹

The book is an invaluable contribution to the (sometimes rather heated) debate over Christian and pagan readings of Tolkien; indeed, it is the sort of contribution that's meant to end the debate once and for all. Testi's argument, put succinctly, is that "Tolkien's world is not Christian but Pagan: therefore his work is fundamentally Catholic". (vii) It is, he says, equally wrong to argue either (a) that, given Tolkien's well-attested commitment to the Roman Catholic Church and his various statements about the Catholic nature of his writing, we are entitled to read the *legendarium* in Christian terms or (b) that, given Tolkien's life-long interest in the North and his avowedly deliberate exclusion of virtually all religious practice from his stories, we are entitled to read the *legendarium* in pagan terms or (c) that we must simply accept that Christian and pagan elements co-exist throughout Tolkien's work. Instead, we should take a synthetic approach, understanding that "the terms 'pagan' and 'Christian'" are not "mutually exclusive" (9), but rather related (as in the case of the Primary World's "virtuous pagans") in a way that is analogous to the relationship between Nature and Grace. Finally, Testi asserts, this harmony of Nature and Grace, and thus of pagan and Christian, is a distinctively Roman Catholic doctrine, and it is by exemplifying that doctrine that the *legendarium* is "truly Catholic". (9)

Testi develops this argument in painstaking and highly organized detail, perhaps reflecting the fact that one of his other academic specialities is formal logic. The result is a notably dense text, though the author provides a number of aids to the reader, with as many as three levels of running subheadings and an array of bulleted or numbered lists. The first three chapters (pp 1-26, 27-42, 43-63) analyse and answer the Christian, Pagan, and co-existence positions. Chapter 4 (67-73) defines the terms of Testi's proposed synthesis, while Chapter 5 (75-125) makes the case for the synthetic position, first by identifying relevant "poetic and hermeneutic principles" (75) of Tolkien's own academic work and then second by showing the "actual application and implementation of these principles" (75) in the *legendarium*. The sixth chapter (127-136) gives the argument that all this is distinctively Catholic, while a two-page Conclusion (139-140) summarizes and restates the whole.

The very fact that Testi makes so extensive and detailed an argument invites a certain degree of quibbling. To take just one example: he comments

the terminology used in the *Legendarium* is pagan because the term "Providence" is never used. It is true that, in the development of Western thought, the concept of "fate" is what moves closer to towards the idea of Christian Providence [he cites Augustine, On the City of God, to the effect that the word "fate" is not an adequate synonym for "the will of God"]. (117)

But this overstates the case: while "Christian Providence" as such obviously doesn't antedate Christianity, the concept of "providence", as much as "fate", certainly occurs in pre-Christian Western thought. For instance, Cicero observes in On Divination that

If we maintain that theory [about the nature of the gods] we shall establish the very point which I am trying to make: namely, "that there are gods; that they rule the universe by their foresight [*providentia*]; and that they direct the affairs of men - not merely of men in the mass, but of each individual" (1.117),²

while Seneca later wrote an entire dialogue "On Providence". I am quite sure Testi knows all this: my point is, rather, that the presentation sometimes misses a beat or two.

More significantly, I am not entirely persuaded by the last stage of Testi's argument, that the harmonious relationship between Nature and Grace (to which the status of "Virtuous Pagans" in the Primary World and of the good characters in the *legendarium* corresponds) is distinctively Roman Catholic. His discussion of this idea in other religions and Christian denominations (131-133) focuses on Luther, but one might point to the Anglican theologian Richard Hooker for an example of a non-Roman Catholic who notoriously (his Puritan contemporaries accused him of Popery) defended the idea that Paul had taught by word and example that "nature hath need of grace, whereunto I hope we are not opposite, by holding that grace hath use of nature". (Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, III.viii.6) Certainly, Roman Catholic doctrine is as Testi says: but the idea is not *uniquely* Roman.

What Dr. Testi provides in Pagan Saints is not a book for casual reading (though he takes pains to make its somewhat rarefied subject accessible to the non-specialist): it is, however, one which will prove to be of vital importance to all further discussion of the Christian-pagan question in Tolkien studies.

¹ I should also note that I am myself cited once in the text, and twice in the bibliography. Curiously, the Index seems to credit me not only with the actual reference but also for several instances of the corporate name "Houghton Mifflin"!

² Cicero: De Senectute, De Amicitia, De Divinatione. Translated by William Armistead Falconer, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923.