

REVIEWS

ROBERTO ARDUINI, Giampaolo Canzonieri & Claudio A. Testi (editors). *Tolkien and the Classics*. Walking Tree Publishers, 2019. 245 pp. \$24.30. Reviewed by Megan B. Abrahamson and Daniel A. Bellum.

As Tolkien fans, it's both gratifying and heartening to see the extent to which his works are revered and carefully studied in languages other than his original English. The existence of this book no doubt speaks to a very robust Tolkien fandom in Italy, and the bibliography alludes to a broad variety of Italian scholarly works on the topic that many Anglophones are missing out on. The selection of what constitutes "classics," therefore, like any attempt at canon formation, reflect the authorship and emphasize Italian and other Continental European authors and voices, so this book provides a great entry point for broadening the horizons of Anglophone readers and scholars.

Tolkien and the Classics is an enjoyable read with twenty-one short, engaging chapters. The essays in this book grew out of study group meetings of the Associazione Italiana Studi Tolkieniani, and its goal is primarily to compare Tolkien to other authors (xviii) in a way that can be especially useful to students and teachers (xvii, xix). At this, it certainly succeeded. Although we cannot say that every piece contained the usual caliber of scholarly intervention we expect from these editors and this publisher, in most cases, merely pointing out the often unlikely similarities between Tolkien and other authors furnishes thought-provoking premises for further inquiry. The bulk of the chapters therefore tended to be structural in nature—probably not the most desirable approach for most avenues of literary criticism, but a great starting point for comparative mythology, mythopoesis, or studies focusing on narratology. Since there are twenty-one chap-

ters, what follows instead of an exhaustive summary are brief overviews of what we thought were the stand-out chapters:

Both of Gloria Larini's chapters are solid, but her chapter on Euripides displays an especially strong analysis of how Euripides and Tolkien present women sacrificing themselves, respectively, and employs a sensitive folkloric approach.

Leonardo Mantovani's chapter draws a parallel between Frodo and Jason in the Argonautica, which is thought-provoking, albeit a bit less convincing as a comparison (the piece tends to exaggerate the qualities Jason has in common with Frodo at the expense of some of his other traits). However, the chapter also provides an excellent summary of Tolkien's background in the Greco-Roman Classics.

Lavinia Scolari's chapter is the most ambitious in scope of the ancient chapters, framing the Aeneid as (proto-?) mythopoesis in the vein of Tolkien's fiction; both works paradoxically create a founding myth for a people. The chapter is necessarily brief (owing to the book's format, no doubt), and so makes a dizzying array of sweeping comparisons. The chapter does a wonderful job of setting a stage for more intensive study along the lines of inquiry it establishes. One wonders if Tolkien viewed the Aeneid, by far the most self-consciously constructed of the ancient epics, in this light.

The Malory and Dante chapters stand out as advancing clear arguments that in each case enrich understanding of both authors. Elisa Sicuri compares Tolkien and Malory on the basis of their mutual "search for an ancient and idealised image of one's own homeland in contrast with the horrors of war" (75). The way Sicuri argues how "both authors resort to 'sub-creation' and to myths in order to deal with adversity and loss" is compelling in its beautiful simplicity (76). It goes further than mere similarity because it speaks to the role of comfort in re-interpreting old myths for Malory and Tolkien's respective audiences. Such a reading enriches how we understand the literary productions of both authors as aiming to



“[unify] the nation in the face of the nihilism spread by...war” (78).

As with Shakespeare most famously, Tolkien’s stated dislike for “petty” Dante (84) proves fertile ground for discussing Tolkien’s interest in, if not enjoyment of, the author’s works. Bertoglio compares Tolkien and Dante through their fantasy world creations and in particular the divine aspiration of music strikes a chord that goes beyond mere comparison of similarities. The “creative game of music,” Chiara Bertoglio argues, has “theological and metaphysical value” since it affirms for both authors “the importance of *poiesis*, of narrativity and of language/communication in their enabling the human beings to understand and impart meaning to reality” (92). In mutually emphasizing the divinity of music in both authors, the role of play and poesis in that music yields a new reading of divine music for both texts.

Moving on to the modern classics, Amelia Rutledge’s chapter on chivalry and fanaticism in Tolkien’s works and Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* is among the most compelling in the book—the two authors prize the heroism of “mediocre, average” protagonists above those driven by glory or a desire to rule, and Rutledge places Tolkien’s work in the “medievalizing” tradition following Scott. It seems plausible, if not likely, that Tolkien was conversant with Scott’s work. Finally, Rutledge draws heavily from Tolkien’s *Ofermod*, a less popular but nonetheless revelatory work of his.

This text would be ideal for students of ours, especially for students interested in comparisons of Tolkien with other Modernists (the chapters on Great War poets and Morris stand out in this regard). For this reason it would be fantastic as assigned reading either in whole or in part by instructors of Tolkien (or of the compared authors) as these chapters shine best as starting points for inquiry, whether the authors are known or unknown. It would also be an excellent collection for Mythopoeic Society reading and discussion groups,

since the collection was borne out of such a group. Mythosoc discussion groups who already have a familiarity with Tolkien’s works could, for example, read a chapter and some short works by the new author, and build fruitful discussion on the comparisons.

