

## Middle-earth, or There and Back Again

Edited by Łukasz Neubauer  
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Near the end of 2020, a notably bleak year, Walking Tree Publishers released a collection of well-written, accessible, and thought-provoking essays by Polish scholars that will delight scholars and non-academics alike. Edited by Łukasz Neubauer, this collection looks at the medieval source materials that inspired Tolkien's imagination. Combined with Tolkien's lived experience and Catholic faith, these materials influenced, modified, and helped him create something original, according to these scholars. The essays show Tolkien's treatment of these sources as synergistic, creating work that bridges the medieval and the modern, not only keeping these stories alive, but also imbuing them with potency for audiences today.

The first essay, 'Tolkien and the Myth of Atlantis', written by University of Warsaw historian Michał Leśniewski, looks at the 'Platonic myth of Atlantis ... [playing] a highly significant role in the development of Tolkien's legendarium' (p. 1), his interest in the development of myths, and the connection of Tolkien's own recurrent dream in which a 'stupendous and ineluctable wave' was 'advancing from the Sea or over the land' (*Letters*, p. 361). Leśniewski writes:

[Tolkien's approach to] history and its correlations with mythology ... are essentially stories, narrative constructs made up from the available scraps of information which reflect not so much the historical truth (or mythical 'truth'), as the author's notion of it. After all, what matters is not whether the account is true or not, but whether it is captivating and ... plausible to the reader. (p. 11)

Tolkien, according to this essay, considered Plato's weaving of 'the threads available to him' to create the Atlantean myth and saw its potential as 'indubitably moralizing' (p. 12). Leśniewski posits this possibly helped Tolkien develop the story, found in the 'Akallabêth', of the Edain who are rewarded by the Valar for their courage with a new land created near Valinor. Leśniewski argues that the flawed nature of man sees the Edain reject the laws of the Valar (like the Atlanteans rejecting their better natures) and 'despite all their knowledge and awareness of certain historical factors and issues, the Edain are still inclined to make the same mistakes, over and over again' (p. 17). (As Tolkien says in Letter 256, 'the most regrettable feature of [man's] nature' is his 'quick satiety with good' [*Letters*, p. 344])

In "'You cannot pass": Tolkien's Christian Reinterpretation of the Traditional Germanic Ideals of Heroism and Loyalty in *The Lord of the Rings*', Łukasz Neubauer compares two specific characters: Byrhtnoth, the Anglo-Saxon leader in the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon*, and Gandalf the Grey on

the bridge of Kazad-dûm (*FR*, II, v). In Byrhtnoth, Neubauer says, we find a leader who is more careful of his reputation than of the lives of the people he serves. Furthermore, the essay claims Tolkien admired the indomitable northern heroic spirit, but found it at odds with the Christian doctrine of sacrifice for the greater good. Tolkien took this heroic ideal, and rather than imitate it, refocused it away from the vainglorious toward a leader like Gandalf:

[who] knows he has an enormous responsibility both upwards (the fulfillment of the mission to save Middle-earth) and downwards (his companions) ... (I)t should come as no surprise that the fatigued wizard ... sacrifice(d) what seems dearest to every living creature and ultimately [made] a gift of his life. (p. 31)

Neubauer argues that Tolkien uses Gandalf to reveal his 'deep sense of moral and social responsibility shaped by (his) Catholic principles', elevating a heroic character with 'universal and unchanging ethical values' (p. 35).

Tolkien translated the Middle English poem *Pearl*, and its influence upon the treatment of jewels in his works is the topic of the essay by Barbara Kowalik. According to her, the symbolism of jewels suggests that an obsession with smithcraft can progress from joy in the work of creation, something to be mutually and communally enjoyed, to something to be envied, guarded and that can ultimately corrupt one's desires. Also, Kowalik considers the One Ring as the unadorned symbol of binding and domination (and a fun etymology of the word *bagel*), and explores the word 'precious' with its historical double meaning.

In the fourth essay Bartłomiej Błaszkiwicz discusses the composition of Tolkien's *The Fall of Arthur* and the medieval conventions that Tolkien followed, as well as his unconventional use of secondary characters in more active roles.

Although the influence of *The Story of Kullervo* on Tolkien has been well documented, Andrzej Szyjewski's essay explores how Tolkien took the patchy model of Kullervo's universe and 'smooth[ed] out the inconsistencies', which he later used in his approach to 'the Valar and their relationship to Ilúvatar' (p.83). For an essay of such brevity, this is a dense and thoughtful exploration of Tolkien's adaptation. Szyjewski claims that the genius of Tolkien was that he took mythological aspects of *The Story of Kullervo* and incorporated them into his own imaginarium – one of the many skills modern writers who imitate his work struggle with.

Being somewhat familiar with the writing of St. Paul, I was most interested in the last essay, 'The Wisdom of Galadriel: A Study in the Theology of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*', by Andrzej Wicher. He argues that the wisdom of St. Paul comes from lived experience, his journey from sinner to disciple of Christ, rather than secular sources. Moreover, as Wicher says, St. Paul invites us 'to turn away from what is commonly called wise, for the purpose ... of finding the genuine or true wisdom' (p.114). He proposes that Galadriel possesses this same paradoxical wisdom, the cutting insight of learning tempered with the wisdom of experience and observation. His

essay includes several bonus insights into Galadriel's adhering to and resisting gendered expectations; her refusal to take the One Ring in knowledge that in doing so she would accelerate her diminishment; and comparisons to the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene.

Walking Tree Publications continues to set the standard for excellent scholarly work in this volume of engaging considerations of Tolkien's work and sources of influence.

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Entering the fourth section ('Around the Borders

of the Classical World'), we move beyond the ancient Mediterranean to Northern Europe – more familiar territory for Tolkien studies – for a look at how cultural exchanges between the Greco-Roman and Germanic peoples in the real world served as templates for similar exchanges within the Middle-earth legendarium. Each chapter in the section has its merits, but Richard Z. Gallant's excellent comparison of the Romanization of Germanic settlers in the late Roman Empire with the 'Noldorization' of the Edain in First Age Beleriand is, on its own, enough to justify a look at the volume.

The final section contains two shorter studies grouped by length rather than theme. The first, by Alley Marie Jordan, connects the ideals of pastoralism in Virgil with the values of *Hobbits*. The second, by Oleksandra Filonenko and Vitalii Shchepanskyi, discusses classical theories of music (including the lovely Pythagorean concept of the 'music of the spheres') as inspirations for the musical cosmogony of Tolkien's *Ainulindalë*. Both chapters are fascinating introductions to topics deserving further exploration. Though very different in subject matter, taken together they close the volume beautifully by reminding the reader that Tolkien's interests tended to the celestial as well as the terrestrial – that the author who gave the world *Hobbits* and *Ents* and *whatever Tom Bombadil* is also wrote about flying star-vessels and angelic voices singing in timeless heavens. This is J.R.R. Tolkien: a 'man of antitheses,' as Carpenter tells us (p. 95); and so it's no surprise that he retained some influence from the classics despite devoting his professional and creative life

to the medieval world.

As noted in Graham J. Shipley's afterword, the fundamental claim of *Tolkien and the Classical World* is not that the ancient Greco-Roman tradition 'provided the most important foundation for Tolkien's imagination' (p. 392), but that it formed a *part* of the 'leaf-mould of the mind' (Carpenter, p. 126) in which the seeds of his stories took root. The volume makes that claim convincingly, and dispels any notion that Tolkien forgot all of his classics training when he changed majors. It is certainly a welcome addition to the bookshelf of any Tolkien reader interested in the classics. However, even among Tolkien fans who don't know their Aeschylus from their Aristophanes, the book should prove an accessible and engaging introduction to the study of the classics: a gateway to ancient Greece and Rome through the back door of Middle-earth.

#### Works Cited

- Carpenter, Humphrey, *Tolkien: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000).  
 Fisher, Jason, 'Tolkien and Source Criticism: Remarking and Remaking,' in *Tolkien and the Study of his Sources*, ed. by Jason Fisher (North Carolina: McFarland, 2011), pp. 29-44.

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