

Tolkien and the Classical World

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Thanks to Humphrey Carpenter, readers of Tolkien have been impressed for 41 years with Tolkien as a classicist in school, not only because he debated in Latin, but also because "in one debate taking the role of Greek Ambassador [...] spoke entirely in Greek", and moreover played Hermes in a performance in Greek of Aristophanes' *The Peace*. Seven years ago, John Garth showed us a picture of the latter. And now we have a collection of fourteen essays in five parts (with introduction and afterword) on various aspects of *Tolkien and the Classical World* edited by Hamish Williams. And Walking Tree Publishers shows us online not only the contents of the book, but also the summary of each essay.

If you share the impression that the contribution to Tolkien's fiction of "the classical world - the literature and thought of ancient Greece and Rome - has received far less attention" than other influences (blurb text), the bibliographies of all sixteen volumes and the authors' vigorous use of the works noted therein nevertheless provide a detailed picture of earlier attention to it. Readers will be grateful that there is an index, created with the help of professor Graham Shipley (though I was quick to add keywords). By the way, as often happens, Professor Shipley's lively epilogue can also be read as a preface. The five parts are:

- Classical Lives and Histories (3-68);
- Ancient Epic and Myth (73-189);
- In Dialogue with the Greek Philosophers (193-268);
- Around the Borders of the Classical World (273-348);
- Shorter Remarks and Observations (353-63).

The 'biographical analysis' by Hamish Williams makes grateful use of printed works - but also of the help of "John Garth, Alison Wheatley, and the King Edward's School Foundation" (32, 34 n. 46) - to give a richly detailed picture of Tolkien's school days, up to and including quotes from evaluations of his test work, e.g. (12), Greek prose writing ("excellent in all respects") and Roman history ("Tolkien gave signs of a more acute and independent judgement than anyone else; his style also was more matured" - but "he seemed to have no control over it and sometimes became almost unintelligible!").

If one wants to know more about Plato's Atlantis and Tolkien's Númenor, Michael Kleu provides a thorough overview - and furthermore pays attention to "Tolkien's story [...] with regard to the post-Platonic Atlantis tradition", not least when it comes to "striking analogues to and correspondences with Ignatius Donnelly's extremely popular *Atlantis*" (208), and "the possible utilization of Thucydides' report on the island of Atlanto" (211). Ross Clare also surprises by focusing on Herodotus and Thucydides and the development of Athens as a naval power as one similar to Númenor, to add two further similarities: first, a treatise on 'parallels with classical Roman biography' (56) where Númenor's kings are concerned, and second, one on 'the Númenórean Faithful' and 'the early Christians under Rome' (59).

Excellent is Giuseppe Pezzini's 'The Gods in (Tolkien's) Epic: Classical Patterns of Divine Interaction' with comparisons of a "narrative topos" (76) from book four of Homer's *Iliad*, book twelve of Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Tolkien's original application of the "epic scene of the arrow-shot, found in *The Silmarillion* and, more covertly, in *The Lord of the Rings*" (99), with detailed attention to seven "different patterns of interaction, often interrelated" (79). We can look forward eagerly to his '(forthcoming) *Tolkien and the Mystery of Literary Creation*' (81).

Benjamin Eldon Stevens describes the way in which "Tolkien's fiction consists of variations on ancient themes such as the 'underworld journey' (Greek *katabasis*) and the related 'encounter with the dead' (Greek *nekyia*)" (105) and concludes: "This is a rewriting of ancient Greco-Roman stories so dramatic that we could follow Tolkien's neo-linguistic example and call the result [...] *eucaatabasis*" - a kind of 'pilgrimage' (111).

Austin M. Freeman takes a different book from the *Aeneid* of Virgil than Dr Pezzini, the second, to put the fall of Troy 'in conversation' with that of Gondolin and with the siege of Minas Tirith, with special attention to *pietas* among the virtues, including the true *pietas* of Faramir, Beregond and Pippin in

contrast to "Denethor as Anti-Priam and Anti-Anchises" (146). He sees Virgil's *pietas* as "the *praeparatio evangelica*, in a sense, for an English Christian epic" (158) and Tolkien's *estel* as a synthesis of *pietas* and "Northern (indomitable will) and Christian (*pistis* or 'faith/trust')" thoughts (131).

Yet another Virgilian comparison is made by Alley Marie Jordan: between the shepherds of the *Eclogae* and the "pastoralism of Tolkien's hobbits" (353), not least in the face of threats. Here the history of Cincinnatus in Livius' *Ab urbe condita* (and in the Old Roman history of Dionysius of Halicarnassus) is compared with the life and character of Sam (but also with that of Sam's future father-in-law).

While Dr. Stevens pays attention to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice (113-14), among others, Peter Astrup Sundt gives detailed attention to the verses of Virgil and Ovid as well as the medieval *Sir Orfeo*, in comparison not only with Beren and Lúthien (including "Lúthien as Virgilian Orpheus" (172)!) but also with the scions (including "The Entwives, Demeter, and Persephone" (183)) and even Tom Bombadil.

Lukasz Neubauer, aware of a variety of rings, and of works by David Day and Thomas Honegger on the subject, among others, makes a close comparison between "Plato's ring of Gyges" in the *State* and Tolkien's "One Ring", including an evocation of "the ancient mytheme of *katabasis*", also in the *State*, at least where Gyges finds his ring in a "*chasma*" (225-26). Not the least of these is his focus on "The Two Rings and the Corruptive Powers they Generate or Enhance" ("subsection" title, 229) and thus on the "wisdom" of Bilbo compared to both the "wisdom of Socrates" and the "wisdom of God" - though he also notes differences in the ring as found by Bilbo and developed in *The Lord of the Rings* (240).

Julian Eilmann has revised and expanded a German version of his essay, published in 2011, here, with minute attention to *The Children of Húrin* in the light of Aristotle's *Poëtica*. He believes that Guy Gavriel Kay is right when he says: "Túrin Turambar is Tolkien's most tragic character - perhaps his only tragic figure" (267). Furthermore, Dr Eilmann finds that "Tolkien consciously built a specific structure for his unsettling story to create a 'tragedy'", while warning against a loosely colloquial use of "tragic" (248-49). (Emphasizing this, he finds that Tolkien himself is wrong when he speaks of the "tragedy of Gollum" (252)!)

Philip Burton states that Tolkien not only places the 'classical world' in an Indo-European context, but that "he is deeply influenced by a group of German scholars, notably Victor Hehn and Otto Schrader" in this (273). His argument captivates with attention to (names of) plants, trees, wine, 'Oliphants', dragons and griffins.

Richard Z. Gallant looks to "Tolkien's migratory First Age" (324) and "our own Migration Era, a period approximately from 376 to 568" (305) to compare the developing relations between Elves and Men with those between Romans and Germanic people, though he uses not only Ammianus Marcellinus, Zosimus, and Jordanes, but also Tacitus for this. He states that a "Noldorin perspective [...] informs the entire *Silmarillion*" so that "the narrative of the events we read is filtered through the ideological 'prism' of the Noldor chroniclers of Elvish history" (308) and describes a "Fingolfin/Edain sapientia, whose purpose is 'to defend the Children of Eru, [...] all the Children and not the proud Eldar only!'" (324).

Juliette Harrisson developed an even broader and longer-lasting comparison between "the ancient Mediterranean world", including Egypt, Troy and Atlantis, and Númenor, but especially between "the Byzantine Empire" and Gondor and "northern Germanic peoples and, in particular, the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes" and the Rohirrim (330). She observes a "positive, eucatastrophic re-working of history and culture" (343), with vivid contrasts between "Frodo and Sam's encounter with the ancient statue and 'Ozymandias'" from Shelley and the "All that glitters is not gold" riddle from *The Merchant of Venice* "and 'Strider's Riddle'" (345) as examples.

In a richly filled nine-page essay, Oleksandra Filonenko and Vitalii Shchepanskyi discuss "Pythagorean concepts", "the Myth of Er" from Plato's *State*, Cicero, Proclus, Macrobius and Dionysius the Areopagite's *De Coelesti Hierarchia* on "Tolkien's musical cosmogony in the *Ainulindalë*" (365), and also later in *The Silmarillion* (1977), regarding "Ulmo's water music" and "Yavanna's song" in the *Valaquenta* (371), and also regarding the "tremendous musical power" of Lúthien (370).

Tolkien and the Classical World rejoices with a tremendous variety of approaches, whether it is (among other things) attention to the conscious - or perhaps unconscious - use of sources or the effect of influences, or the idea of something that does not constitute a "pattern that Tolkien set out to purposely introduce" (305), or the "reception of 'the Classical world' - that is, the history, literature, myths, philosophy, and society of ancient Greece and Rome - in Tolkien's life, thought, and writings" (xii). Time and again the contributions provide food for thought, and also (as it were) sparks for further thought.

Even before they open the book, readers can enjoy Jay Johnstone's playful black-and-white style illustration of "the replacement of the Greeks and Polyphemus with Dwarves and Trolls" (Acknowledgements) on the cover - large on the front, and smaller on the back, applied to the original amphora from the British Museum.