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Winter 12-15-2023

Middle-earth, or There and Back Again, edited by Łukasz Neubauer. Reviewed by Hamish Williams.

Hamish Williams

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Recommended Citation

Williams, Hamish, "Middle-earth, or There and Back Again, edited by Łukasz Neubauer. Reviewed by Hamish Williams." (2023). *Mythprint Book Reviews*. 24.
https://dc.swosu.edu/mpr_rev/24

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L. Neubauer, ed. *Middle-earth, or There and Back Again*. CORMARÉ Series No. 44, Walking Tree Publishers, 2020. 130pp. \$21.40 paperback. Reviewed by Namish Williams.

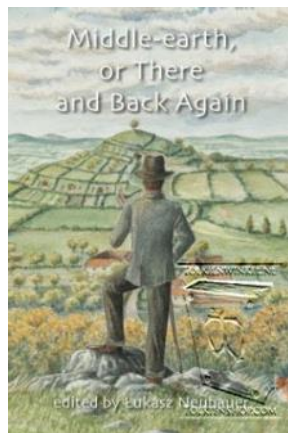
Just as Bilbo Baggins wandered there (to the Lonely Mountain) and back again (to Bag-end), so as readers of Tolkien's works we drift between the sub-created world of Tolkien's works and the culturally constructed worlds from our 'real' histories (although for many of us, the world of Tolkien attains greater, Bag-endish familiarity than those of our inherited traditions). With the aid not

of a dozen dwarves but half-a-dozen Polish researchers, this work of scholarship facilitates our understanding of such an imaginative journey. I believe it will be of interest to researchers and readers in general literary studies, fantasy and popular fiction studies, medieval studies, classical reception, the history of cultural ideas, as well as religious studies and theology. The volume is careful and accurate on methodological grounds. In the tradition of source studies and those reception studies which undertake close readings, rather than more liberal comparative literature studies, the authors of this volume all engage with material with which Tolkien was certainly familiar, and yet they are not afraid to move beyond an illustrative mode of correspondence, that is, treading the lines between 'source' and 'target', and to show, therefore, how the reception studies can aid in enhancing our understanding of key themes in Tolkien's works. The volume ticks all the boxes for providing a diversity of subject matter which bring up important themes and concepts in Tolkien's writings, such as heroism (Neubauer), fellowship (over solipsism) (Kowalik), wisdom (Wicher), mythmaking (Leśniewski), and subcreation (Błaszczewicz; Szyjewski).

Leśniewski's chapter discusses Tolkien's reception of Plato's Atlantis myth, as represented in the *Critias* and *Timaeus*. It is clear that Tolkien knew about the dialogues of the Athenian philosopher from his schooling (p. 14). For Leśniewski, the key question to answer is why the exercise in Platonic mythmaking was of such interest to Tolkien (p. 6). Leśniewski's paper discusses how Tolkien's reception of the Platonic myth 'was owing to his lifelong passion for mythmaking' (p. 21): Leśniewski shows, for example, how the narrative framing which Plato uses to situate Atlantis in the distant past (through generational memories, geographic distancing, depositories of lore) is similarly employed by Tolkien in constructing a present-day Middle-earth which remembers its mythic, but fragmented Númenórean past (see p. 19–20). Tolkien walks the line between myth and history, often submerging the latter in the former, chal-

lenging historical expectations of truth, and arguing for the primacy of the mythic mode of belief. On similarities between the actual stories of the downfall of Númenor and Atlantis, rather than their mnemonic legacies, Leśniewski disregards more trivial points of details (such as geographic details) and notes both writers' interests in the moral character of their ill-fated islands, an examination of causality of the fall (p. 14–18). While I agree with Leśniewski's comments on moral decline in Tolkien's work in ipso, the question of why Atlantis falls in Plato's account has remained something of a scholarly enigma, and although Leśniewski mentions the fragmented state of the *Critias* (p. 14), he is in danger of misrepresenting Plato's essentially non/pre-Christian 'lapsarianism': one might note in the Platonic dialogue that both the 'corrupt' people of Atlantis and its noble Athenian adversaries suffer the 'divine punishment' of an epoch-ending global catastrophe, a great earthquake.

Neubauer 'bridges' our transition from prehistorical myth to history, in discussing how Tolkien rewrote certain ideals of Germanic heroism through a Christian prism, with a close reading of how the English writer received the Anglo-Saxon poem 'The Battle of Maldon', a work of literature based on the historical conflict between Anglo-Saxons and invading Vikings. After providing a useful summary of the Old English poem for the non-specialist (p. 26–28), Neubauer illustrates Tolkien's familiarity and interaction with the poem through his Platonic-like dialogue (again a welcome bridge to the previous paper), 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son' (p. 28–31). From this basis, Neubauer interprets the 'Bridge of Khazad-dûm' sequence inside Moria from *The Lord of the Rings* as illustrating a reworking of selfish Germanic ideals of *ofermod* in favour of a more Christian view of heroism, which is most clearly evidenced through the actions of characters such as Gandalf, who 'selflessly sacrifice their lives for the benefit of the common good' (p. 34). I appreciated Neubauer's



discussion of the different historical-cultural influences on the character of Gandalf, as embodying the Germanic, the Catholic, and the modern 'pragmatism of military leadership' stemming from Tolkien's WWI experiences (p. 34).

Kowalik's chapter is the longest in the volume and, I think, the most rewarding for the general reader who wishes to understand some key thematic conflicts in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, along with their resonances in his broader mythology. After acknowledging the influence of the Middle English poem *The Pearl* on Tolkien (p. 39–40), Kowalik proceeds to give some broad influences of *The Pearl* on Tolkien's writing, focusing primarily on the Christian symbolism behind, for example, numbers, colours, light, and, most importantly, precious stones in the respec-

tive works (42–44ff.). Like *The Pearl*, which explores the relationship between precious material objects and the people who possess them, Tolkien's 'stories revolve around jewels and precious objects, be it the Silmarils, the Palantiri, or the Rings, with the One, Ruling Ring at the centre' (p. 46). While jewels in these works are not necessarily bad, perhaps at best ambiguous (p. 51–54), what is most important is the relationship or interaction of characters with these objects: in short, these material objects become

a way of measuring social virtues and vices on a gamut between fellowship/friendship and solipsism – realised, respectively, through a contrast between Samwise (p. 64) and Gollum (p. 61). Like many others, I have always viewed *The Lord of the Rings* as a xenophilic epic which cherishes ideals of fellowship across cultures, and Kowalik's chapter manages to back up this perspective of the social morality of Tolkien's work (e.g. virtues such as 'merriness') in an original and interesting comparative fashion.

The chapters by Błaszczewicz and Szyjewski seem appropriately placed alongside one another since they both entail important, innovative studies which explore Tolkien's subcreational methodologies. There is also in these two papers a

pleasing engagement with some of Tolkien's lesser-known works: namely, 'The Story of Kullervo' (Szyjewski) and 'The Fall of Arthur' (Błaszkiwicz), which are oftentimes neglected in favour of studies which are centred on Middle-earth. To return to my point on methodology, these chapters were particularly interesting from a reception-studies point of view since they focus on a complex, messy, developmental, dialogical mediation, in an area between Tolkien's creative works and the inherited real-world mythic traditions. These two studies provide something of a bridge in our understanding of how Tolkien migrated from reading real-world mythologies to creatively amending and appropriating these stories, and, ultimately, to cementing his own legendarium inside Middle-earth. An exploration of a key textual engagement within this genetic process is indeed the main reason behind Szyjewski's chapter, which he proves most convincingly through a study of the development of Tolkien's angelic beings, the Valar, from a model presented in the Finnish Kalevala (p. 98ff.). Szyjewski's chapter also acts as a useful introductory guide for scholars unacquainted with the oral development of the 19th-century constructed epic and its relevance to Tolkien's construction of *Túrin Turambar*. Błaszkiwicz's chapter was informative in showing the literary cultural traditions which informed Tolkien's *The Fall of Arthur*, including two distinct medieval currents and an Enlightenment version by John Dryden (p. 72–73); I also enjoyed Błaszkiwicz's discussion of the psychologising and dramatic (theatrical) functions of space which Tolkien employs in his Arthurian work.

Far more than a work of philosophy, which prescribes a coherent, fixed system of truth and knowledge, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* seems to be a work which is fundamentally concerned with wisdom, concerned with exploring correct ways of thinking in order to judge the best way to address the choices with which we are presented. Wicher explores the concept of wisdom through the multifaceted character of Galadriel. Wicher shows that Galadriel is no facile character to analyse, a mere archetype of one ideal of virtue (see p.

127), but that she is a complex character in Tolkien's legendarium, with a complex story of her own (p. 121–122). Because Tolkien creates such detailed internal story webs in his narratives, it is always a danger to reduce a character to a type: in the case of Galadriel, we detect moral ambiguity in her occasional appearances as a dangerous witch to members of the Fellowship (p. 125, 127); there is also a certain unsettling androgyny in her representations, between femininity and masculinity (p. 123–124). So what kind of wisdom does Galadriel preach exactly? A good part of her wisdom seems to be centred on Christian ideals of wisdom which shuns earthly ('classical', 'Greek') concerns with wisdom as being inextricable from power hierarchies, an idea which Wicher traces to Saint Paul's Corinthians (p. 114–115); Galadriel, appropriately, refuses the ring and accepts decline, fading, and a kind of death (p. 125–126). Another important division which Tolkien seems to make is between scientific knowledge (propositional knowledge) and logic, on the one hand, as demonstrated by, for example, Denethor, and, on the other hand, a more intuitive, faith-governed form of cognition, which is Galadriel's wisdom (cf. p. 120).