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## ***The Fantastic of the Fin de Siècle.* Eds. Irina Grubica and Zdeněk Beran**

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## Online Winter Seminar

February 4-5, 2022 (Friday evening, Saturday all day)

<https://www.mythsoc.org/mythcon/ows-2022.htm>

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## Online Winter Seminar



### Online Winter Seminar

The Inklings and Horror: Fantasy's Dark Corners

February 4-5, 2022 (Friday evening, Saturday all day)

Via Zoom and Discord

## Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico; July 29 - August 1, 2022

<http://www.mythsoc.org/mythcon/mythcon-52.htm>

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- Balthasar, Hans Urs von. *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetic I: Seeing the Form*, translated by Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, Ignatius, 1982.  
— . *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetic IV: The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity*, translated by Brian McNeil, et al., Ignatius, 1989.



**THE FANTASTIC OF THE FIN DE SIÈCLE.** Ed. Irena Grubica and Zdeněk Beran. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016. vi, 289 pp. ISBN 9781443897426. US \$90.95 (hc).

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PUBLISHING WAS FOUNDED about fifteen years ago by some former lecturers and researchers from the University of Cambridge. The publisher is based in Newcastle upon Tyne. Over the last decade it has published a number of collections of academic essays pertaining to J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Mervyn Peake, and to fantasy literature across the board. Most of these collections have been smallish in size, elegantly produced but published at prices rather high for any casual reader. Distribution in North America has been very spotty, but the usually strong representation of European scholarship gives an added reason to seek out these volumes.

*The Fantastic of the Fin de Siècle* is a collection of fifteen essays (and thus somewhat larger than the usual Cambridge Scholars book), with an introduction by the editors. The majority of the contributors are based in continental Europe. The authors whose works are discussed run a wide range. They are mostly British, but two American authors are covered, as well as one from Canada and one from Australia. Of course the remit of this volume predates the writings of Tolkien, Lewis and Williams, the central figures of interest in the Mythopoeic Society, but this volume has relevance in that it covers the generation of writers of the fantastic who preceded Tolkien, Lewis and Williams. (I noted only one mention of an Inkling. In a discussion of “The Rajah’s Diamond” by Robert Louis Stevenson, the evil and accursed diamond of the title is described as “a semi-magical object, like the magical ring of J.R.R. Tolkien,” which releases the magic of chance [83].)

The cover blurb notes that “the essays included here examine how the *fin de siècle* reflects the fantastic and its relation to the genesis of aesthetic ideas, to the concepts of terror and horror, the sublime, and evil, to Gothic and sensation fiction, to the Aesthetic Movement and Decadence.” Which is a good description of what to expect from this book, in terms of content as well as tone

(the blurb continues in this academic voice for a total of some three hundred words).

The introduction by the editors (“(Re)Searching for the Fantastic of the Fin de Siècle”) sets the stage with the theories of the fantastic by Tzvetan Todorov, Christine Brooke-Rose, and Nancy H. Traill. Many of the subsequent chapters follow the editorial lead and bring up Todorov or Rosemary Jackson, but critical theory does not dominate the essays.

As to the essays themselves, Tamás Bényei uses Richard Marsh’s “A Set of Chessmen” and Oscar Wilde’s “The Canterville Ghost” to exemplify the shift towards the importance of meaning in the ghost story. Elisa Bizzotto analyses the use of the fantastic in relation to the aesthetic movement of the late nineteenth century, noting that the fantastic genre gave writers more freedom than other modes. Elena Pinyaeva discusses how both Wilde and Vernon Lee, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and “The Virgin of the Seven Daggers” respectively, combine (via different treatments) two mythic figures (Faust and Don Juan) into one image.

Michal Peprník notices that Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The New Arabian Nights* and *The Dynamiter* contain extraordinary phenomena that function as the fantastic, and Stevenson accomplishes this by experimentation with narrative techniques. Sophie Mantrant considers that the themes of evil and diabolism are pervasive in Arthur Machen’s writings, so that he is often associated with Decadence, though Machen himself was interested in the expression of the inexpressible mysteries. Philip Healy, as per his essay’s title, has “a host of reservations” about Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, a major one being how the growing body of criticism is indifferent to the text’s spiritual dimensions, particularly in Van Helsing’s use of the consecrated Host in the conflict with the vampire, which is explicitly Catholic rather than (like Stoker himself) Protestant. Claire Bazin discusses chaos and order in *Dracula*, noting that geographically and culturally the novel moves “from order (West) to chaos (East) back to order (West)” (127).

Željka Švrljuga looks at an American writer of a small number of Gothic stories, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and at how her story “The Giant Wisteria” prefigures her most famous story, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” published a year later. Lizzie Harris McCormick discusses imaginative women, often coded as hysterical (like the governess in Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*) in works by Mathilde Blind, Vernon Lee, and Una Ashworth Taylor. Emma Domínguez-Rué discusses the gothic stories of the American writer Ellen Glasgow, and in particular the use of the *doppelgänger* motif in “Dare’s Gift” and “The Past.” Anna Enrichetta Soccio looks at how Charlotte Riddell plays with the haunted house motif in *The Uninhabited House* and in three of the six stories in her collection *Weird Stories*.

Éva Antal discusses the presence of the fantastic in the science fiction of H.G. Wells (*The Time Machine, When the Sleeper Wakes*) and Edward Bellamy (*Looking Backwards 2000-1887*). Iva Polak looks at *The Last Lemurian: A Westralian Romance* (1898), by George Henry Firth Scott, a lost-race fantasy of Western Australia which mixes elements from H. Rider Haggard's *She* and Ernest Favenc's *The Secret of the Australian Desert*.

Klára Kolinská looks at the odd case of *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* (1888), posthumously published by a Canadian author, James de Mille, who was largely seen as a writer of cheap fiction until the New Canadian Library reprint of the book in 1969. Finally, Tom Hubbard discusses a number of Scottish artistic figures, including Robert Louis Stevenson and lesser known ones like John Davidson and Patrick Geddes.

Overall, I found the minutiae of the various essays more interesting and accomplished than the collection as a whole.

—Douglas A. Anderson



**LAUGHTER IN MIDDLE-EARTH: HUMOUR IN AND AROUND THE WORKS OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN.** Edited by Thomas Honegger and Maureen F. Mann. Walking Tree Publishers, 2016. 242+ pp. ISBN 978-3-905703-35-1. \$24.30.

TOOD SHIPPEY, IN HIS FOREWORD TO THIS ESSAY COLLECTION, reminds us that “Laughter [...] is not the same as ‘funny bits’” or “comic scenes” (1). As he points out, there are around two hundred and forty mentions of laughter in *The Lord of the Rings*, about fifty in *The Hobbit*, and even thirty in *The Silmarillion*. But laughter (bitter or mirthful), humor (sunny or black as orcish jests), satire, and the comic have been very little studied in previous scholarship on Tolkien. Of course, there is always the risk, with humor, of breaking a thing to find out what it is and thereby leaving the path of wisdom, as Gandalf reminds Saruman (*LotR* II.ii.259). But for the most part, these essays avoid that trap.

Maureen F. Mann's lead paper, which I encountered in its earlier form at the *Return of the Ring* conference at Loughborough in 2012, tries to determine what ‘nonsense’ means to Tolkien by examining both his texts and his letters. Tolkien grew up on the high Victorian nonsense found in the Alice books and Edmund Lear's poetry, as well as nonsense in nursery rhymes and folktales, and these roots are readily apparent in his work. In “‘Certainly not our sense’: Tolkien and Nonsense,” Mann characterizes such early work as poems in his invented language Animalic as “full of ludic fun and a giddy enjoyment of pricking the pomposity of polite decorum” (12), exhibiting a “delight in