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Poetry and Song in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien Ed. Anna Milon

POETRY AND SONG IN THE WORKS OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN. Edited by Anna Milon. Proceedings of the Tolkien Society Seminar 2017. (The Tolkien Society; Peter Roe Series XVIII, Edinburgh: Luna Press, 2018). 94 p. ISBN 978-1911143499. \$10.50. \$5.99 Kindle format.

THIS BOOK DEALS WITH A VERY SPECIALIZED SUBJECT: Tolkien's less familiar poetic works. I was glad to learn about these, so I'm grateful to editor Anna Milon for this volume. Nor had I heard of the Peter Roe Series, which constitutes a memorial to a young Tolkien Society member who died in an auto accident far too young in 1979; this is the eighteenth in the series. For those not familiar with the Tolkien Society, it is a U.K. based educational and literary society. Their website is www.tolkiensociety.org.

Four articles fill this slim volume, but it contains valuable work, especially for the poet who appreciates the intricacy and skill of Tolkien's verse. The first piece, by Italian scholar Massimiliano Izzo, is "In Search of the Wandering Fire: Otherworldly Imagery in 'The Song of Ælfwine.'" Tolkien's poem has six revisions, beginning with "The Nameless Land," published in 1927. Much influenced by the 14th-century Middle English poem, *Pearl*, the first version describes a paradisiacal land which mortals can only reach through dream vision. Images of the will-o'-the-wisp lead an unnamed narrator to this place, but in subsequent versions, Tolkien links this land to Tol Eressëa, an ancient elven stronghold in his legendarium, setting the narrative's re-telling in the halls of King Edward, son of Alfred the Great. The unnamed narrator is now Ælfwine, wanderer and time-bridge to when Elves still lived in Middle-earth. A subsequent version appears in "The Notion Club Papers," where Alwin Lowdham appears in Tolkien's attempt to create a "scientifiction" time travel tale in the 1940's. Tolkien revised the poem a final time in the '60s, which was published in *The Lost Road and other Writings* in 1987 (44).

Izzo does a creditable job of tracing numerous versions, discusses revisions and changes, exploring the poetic diction in each. Most interesting, Izzo seeks out recurring images of "wandering fire" which grows more prominent and meaningful with each version. I would wish for better editing of this article, as numerous errors make for more guess-work than I would want in a scholarly piece. A full version of this poem of five stanzas would make for a nice addition.

Kristine Larsen, astronomer and professor at Central Connecticut State University, writes a very sweet and clear-worded short piece on Tolkien's treatment of astronomy in Middle-earth, showing how scientifically accurate he is. In "'Diadem of the Fallen Day:' Astronomical and Arboreal Motifs in the Poem 'Kortirion among the Trees,'" Larsen effectively traces changes of the season in this poem. She also mentions other poets (Tennyson, and Sadi, a 13th

century Persian poet), and compares their astronomical references to Tolkien's, but her writing approaches lyrical as she describes the trees and seasonal changes through the year. She makes me want to hunt down the poem in *Book of Lost Tales I* (33) and read it for myself. Brief and clear academic articles, such as this one, are a rare treat.

Szymon Pyndur's "The Magical and Reality-Transforming Function of Tolkien's Song and Verse" traces three Tolkien works which emphasize the power of language, and how the skilled use of words can sometimes change reality. The *Kalevala*, a poem with which Tolkien was very familiar, influenced Tolkien in numerous ways (without blunting the originality of the *legendarium*). In the "Oath of Fëanor" in the *Silmarillion*, he closely follows the *Kalevala* to create a most auspicious and deeply effective oath for Fëanor. Pyndur finds links between Lemminkäinen's curse in the *Kalevala* and Fëanor's oath. At the same time, the speaking of Fëanor's oath increases both meaning and impact on the story told here. The short tale of a prayer (a different formulation) from the *Kalevala* reflects more influence on Tolkien: Asemo, a smith, prays that his fiancée will stay away from town while he is gone. In Tolkien's adaptation of *The Story of Kullervo*, he has the wife curse the husband because she believes he has wasted his life. Lastly, the *Kalevala* pits a young arrogant poet against a much older (and wiser) one in a song-duel. In "The Lay of Leithian," Tolkien recasts the duel, between Felagund and Sauron (in a much earlier time). Each song affects the listeners, even to the point of physical changes. Find out who wins when you read this story! Pyndur's piece is clear, well-conceived, and reads quickly, maintaining interest, almost like a story itself.

The final article by Bertrand Bellet involves problems of translating a Tolkien lay: "Translating 'The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun' from English to French: Across the Channel Here and Back Again." Having studied various languages, I understand how translations can become problematic. Bellet describes the difficulties of translation, not only because he wishes to capture the tone of a French lay, yet keep Tolkien's Anglo-Saxon power. He summarizes the history of lays, and outlines differences between a consonantal-rich language and French, which relies more on vowels. Finding proper rhymes is one major hurdle. This is a very technical article with a limited audience (not as well edited as could be), but Bellet manages to keep one's attention.

Peter Roe's memory is well served in this memorial publication.

—Diane Joy Baker

