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***The Great Tower of Elfland: The Mythopoeic Worldview of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, G.K. Chesterton, and George MacDonald* by Zachary A. Rhone, foreword by Colin Duriez**

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Abstract

Zachary A. Rhone argues that G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, George MacDonald, and J. R. R. Tolkien share a Christian worldview that is the foundation of their uniquely Christian mythopoesis.

Additional Keywords

Christianity, Mythopoesis

Cover Page Footnote

I am indebted to Shawn White for his knowledge of Chesterton.

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THE GREAT TOWER OF ELFLAND: THE MYTHOPOEIC WORLDVIEW OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN, C.S. LEWIS, G.K. CHESTERTON, AND GEORGE MACDONALD. Zachary A. Rhone. Foreword by Colin Duriez. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2017. 186 p. 9781606353295. \$45.00

IN HIS PREFACE TO THIS BOOK, COLIN DURIEZ characterizes Zachary Rhone's purpose succinctly: "to convincingly set out a worldview in common between two of the Inklings: C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien" and to conclude that "there is a shared and unified worldview" between Lewis, Tolkien, G.K. Chesterton and George MacDonald (x). Rhone argues that the four authors build a "Great Tower on which they all stand: their Christian mythopoeia" (117). Deploying and repurposing symbols from all four authors, Rhone offers an alternative analytical structure to the conventional academic argument that integrates and responds to contemporary literary theory as well as to biographical and theological scholarship of the four authors.

The book presents an experiment in inductive argumentation in line both with Lewis's own *Experiment in Criticism* and with Tolkien's discussions of the scholarly tradition of Beowulfiana. Rhone uses Tolkien's "allegory of the tower" from "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*" as his guiding image and

the inspiration for the title (Tolkien 7-8). Rather than analyzing individual building blocks from the four authors to identify influences from their sources or to argue for their influence on one another, Rhone attempts to uncover the foundation upon which the four authors built their own literary towers—their “Great Tower of Elfland” where “these authors would undoubtedly argue that the view [...] is the most important part, for by this view, they can glimpse the Sun and the sea” (152). In order to do so, Rhone uses an inductive method, arguing from statements the four authors make toward the general principle that all four share a common Christian *Weltanschauung* that is unaffected by differences in confession or denomination. By doing so, Rhone successfully counters scholars who zealously assert that the differences between the authors, particularly Lewis and Tolkien, are more significant than their shared Christian beliefs.

The introduction sets out the “Problem and the Purpose” of the book and provides a survey of scholars who reject the possibility of a unified worldview, particularly between Lewis and Tolkien. At the foundation of this critical tradition is Humphrey Carpenter’s rejection that the Inklings shared an academic foundation that might merit their identification as a coherent literary school—as the “Oxford Christians” (2). Rhone is also not alone in examining MacDonald and Chesterton alongside Tolkien and Lewis. While Rhone provides a brief summary of the scholars who have treated three or more of the authors, his book does not seem to engage the full range of scholarship, particularly literary criticism, about MacDonald, Chesterton, Lewis, and Tolkien, relying instead considerably on Donald T. Williams, Verlyn Flieger, Alison Milbank, and Tom Shippey (6).

The gap in Rhone’s engagement with literary criticism is most startling in his discussion of Jadis. He says “Elizabeth Baird Hardy, for instance, believes Lewis’s Jadis is a model of Spenser’s Duessa; however, given Mr. Beaver’s assertion that Jadis is a descendent of Lilith, I believe Lewis’s source is more likely MacDonald’s *Lilith*” (21). In an essay that predates Hardy’s, Jean Graham makes exactly this argument, providing compelling evidence that links MacDonald’s *Lilith* not only to Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia* but also to Pre-Raphaelite representations of Lilith in visual art and to Charles Williams’s novel, *Descent into Hell* (36). Moments like these reassert that Rhone’s purpose is not necessarily literary criticism but to assert that the four authors have an explicitly religious mission.

Once Rhone establishes his rhetorical purpose, he asserts the resemblance and commonality of the four authors’ “foundation” for their tower, to “examine the stones” within their corpora “not for their source but for their purpose” (14). These “foundation stones” establish the structure for each of the following chapters, although Rhone does provide a guide at the opening of the

first chapter. He begins with “language and literature” which provide the medium “through which humanism, existence, civilization, and all other aspects of life,” that form the authors’ “essential understanding of the universe” are discussed (15).

Although Rhone’s method rejects the theoretical grounding that motivates much contemporary literary criticism, he does not ignore psychoanalysis, structuralism, or post-structuralism. Instead, he suggests the ways in which MacDonald, Chesterton, Tolkien, and, especially, Lewis, either anticipate or parallel many theorists, particularly Derrida and Levi-Strauss, in their concerns or their conclusions, although they may have been skeptical of them as they emerged after World War I (28). While these suggestions may be no surprise for discussions of the prolific literary critic Lewis or the philologist Tolkien, they are particularly insightful when applied to discussions of Chesterton. Rhone suggests that “Chesterton, in *The Everlasting Man*, posits that language, though dynamic in signification, bears an underlying meaning that is static” (18). Rhone’s application of the theory of the signified/signifier binary adds considerably to his analysis of linguistic and literary concerns and suggests productive engagements with literary theory. Rhone does declare a “resistance to standardized criticism” that leads him “to offer a set of concerns shared by MacDonald, Chesterton, Lewis and Tolkien that help one to ‘read well’” (29). Unfortunately, since this statement follows his characterization of the state of literary criticism in Lewis’s time, it is unclear whether he is describing his own resistance to “standardized criticism” or his subjects’.

Rhone moves from a discussion of language and literature to a consideration of “the mysteries of the human being” as they appear in the works of the four authors (42). He follows Tolkien’s lead in adapting the term *hnau*, which Lewis uses to describe the sentient beings of Malacandra in *Out of the Silent Planet* (Glyer 173; qtd. Rhone 45). This chapter provides a sustained exploration of the nature of humanity and its contrast to the bestial and the angelic in works by all four authors, although Rhone elaborates most thoroughly on the position of the goblins in MacDonald’s *The Princess and the Goblin*. Rhone identifies a number of shared philosophical positions among the four authors in this chapter: that “life is storied,” and that “purpose is of the utmost importance” (49); that all four authors have a sense of humans as members of a hierarchy with social, religious, and political consequences (54); and that the Fall results in “the bentness and brokenness of humanity” as a result of disruption in hierarchy (60). This chapter’s discussions of the notion of “discipleship” as it relates to the natural world are some of the most compelling of the book. Critics interested in the relationship between people and the natural world, particularly in Lewis’s work, will find his observations useful.

Rhone links the purposefulness of “hnau’s existence” to the concept of “journey” as it appears across the four authors (64-89). This chapter draws connections between the structure of the fairy story and notions of fate, providence, and *wyrd* as understood by the four authors. Although he is not a direct subject of Rhone’s analysis, Charles Williams, particularly as interlocutor for Tolkien and Lewis as they refine their myths, appears in this chapter. Rhone addresses the subject of the virtues and vices as well in this chapter and concludes with a discussion of joy, which “is a virtue embraced more than any other by these authors because it has that direct relationship with Heaven” (87). Virtue and Vice, on the individual level, provide the transition for Rhone’s discussion of civilization and culture.

The fourth chapter, “Civilization and Origination,” has the most shifting focus of any in the book. While, ostensibly, the chapter inverts the methodology of the previous that “examined the human nature of the individual and the individual journey,” instead “considering how humanity is comprised of individuals,” Rhone struggles to establish his focus (90). It is unclear whether this chapter intends to focus on the four authors’ perspectives on civilization, in and of itself, or whether he intends to discuss the authors’ response to their cultural moment. While both are certainly possible, the chapter lacks a sufficient historical frame in which to make either case convincingly. The only evidence for the nature of the “Victorians” and “Victorian culture” is the preface from the *Norton Anthology of British Literature* (96). In addition, Rhone’s classifications of “Victorian authors” are somewhat problematic. For example, he classes Jane Austen alongside Charles Dickens and others “whose Victorian literature demonstrated the culture’s mannerisms and hinted at the human nature and spiritual state signified beneath,” even though Austen died twenty years before Victoria ascended the throne (97). This chapter addresses the authors’ responses to politics and to science, particularly their understanding of and response to the theory of evolution. Readers interested in this topic would be well-served by examining the work of Michael D. Aeshliman, Gary Fangren, Doris Myers, Charles Taliaferro, and Ralph C. Wood.

The last two chapters weave together these strands—language, literature, humanism, and civilization—to construct the “Great Tower of Elfland,” which Rhone describes as his “overarching hypothesis” (118). This chapter argues that the four authors “tried to bring myth and imagination back to a search for divine truth, and in the tradition of original myth-makers, to inspire their listeners to do the same” (120). As myth-makers, the four authors participate in acts of sub-creation that reassert that “each life,” as human life is storied, “is part of a divine metanarrative—a story about all stories” (126). For Rhone, their understanding about the nature of language reflects their understanding of God, for “the characteristics of mystery and transcendence are

essential in understanding how these authors approach the fallibility of human language" (137). Accordingly, these beliefs about God's transcendence have consequences for both the literary and the religious texts of these authors.

Throughout the book, Rhone makes no distinction between these types of texts and weaves together prose fiction, poetry, scholarship, apologetics, sermons, and letters and ascribes to them equal weight in constructing his argument. In order to accept his argument, the reader must accept that all texts equally reflect the religious worldview of the authors and their understanding of what it means to be a Christian: "Christianity forces them to obediently question key aspects of one's worldview: including language, literature, humanity, civilization and history" (146). Rhone also presumes that all of their texts equally reflect "their theological assumptions" (153). This method for presenting evidence also has stylistic consequences for the book. Rhone moves freely between the four authors' texts. In one paragraph, Rhone may make reference to MacDonald's *Unspoken Sermons*, Lewis's *Problem of Pain*, and *The Lord of the Rings* (146). At times, quotations from the authors are cited without reference to the author's name so it can be difficult to track evidentiary structure, especially if a reader has less familiarity with one of the four authors.¹

Rhone concludes that these four authors—in all their texts irrespective of their originally intended audience or their genre—"perceive time, progress, science, and civilization" on "the foundation of Christianity" and "write with the hope of creating eucatastrophe and joy in the human spirit" (155). Thus, "Christian mythopoesis" has an explicitly religious, rather than artistic or literary, purpose that motivates it. Whereas other scholars may see contrasts in the mythopoeic results of the authors' works, especially those of Lewis and Tolkien, Rhone sees a shared motivating purpose.

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¹ I am indebted to Shawn White for his expertise about G.K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*.