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## *Tolkien and the Classics*

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# R E V I E W S

**TOLKIEN AND THE CLASSICS.** Edited by Robert Arduini, Giampaolo Canzonieri, and Claudio A. Testi. Zurich: Walking Tree, 2019. 245 p. ISBN 9783905703429. \$24.30.

*TOLKIEN AND THE CLASSICS* PRESENTS IN ITS INTRODUCTION a twofold aim: to solidify J.R.R. Tolkien even more firmly in the realm of literary “greats,” and to provide a text that is both pleasurable and pragmatic. In both objectives, this collection of short essays succeeds. Inspired by an ongoing project from the Italian Association of Tolkien Studies, *Tolkien and the Classics* offers a refreshing assortment of perspectives on Tolkien’s works, connecting his writings to various canonical authors from the past. In doing so, the writers in this volume include both instantly recognizable Tolkien scholars (Tom Shippey and Amelia A. Rutledge, for example) and new contributors from such varied backgrounds as musicology, computer science, philosophy, and cultural management. This combination of lay and expert criticism furthers the pleasure provided by this collection—readers will find the variety of subjects and foci both accessible and stimulating.

Drawing parallels between Tolkien and classic authors from three distinct eras (Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Modern Period), our scholars provide trim but fascinating articles exploring such classic writers as Homer, Virgil, Aquinas, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Conrad, and Poe. The four articles on antiquity primarily connect Tolkien to the Greeks, a focus that readers should find particularly enriching as (though it is a growing area in Tolkien studies) there is perhaps less scholarship devoted to this topic. The six essays regarding authors from the Middle Ages range in focus from generic analysis—the creation of an English mythology, for example, in Tolkien and Mallory—to the specific tropes of inns and folkish characters in Tolkien and Chaucer. While the largest section is, perhaps unsurprisingly, the Modern Period, with eleven articles in total, these particular essays engage in such surprising and challenging questions as what makes a character ill-fated or tragic; the different ways one can depict “fairy/faerie”; the blurry distinctions between pride and shame; Tolkien’s rejection of post-war disenchantment; and the relationship

between Tolkien and Poe's female characters, the sublime, and death. In short, there is something for everyone in *Tolkien and the Classics*.

An article that typifies the strengths of this collection, Cecilia Barella's "Tolkien and Grahame" traces a variety of comparisons between Tolkien's writings and Kenneth Grahame's 1908 children's classic, *The Wind in the Willows*. While Barella demonstrates obvious parallels with *The Hobbit*, she also asserts that perhaps overlooked comparisons can also be drawn with *The Lord of the Rings*. Barella's analysis of these two authors serves to elevate the seemingly mundane or even "juvenile" elements of their writings: the "animal" or creature tales, the stories for "children," the genre characteristics that seem primed to lessen these works' literary merits. Among the points in her essay, Barella observes the way in which both authors treat nostalgia as a powerful means of desire, a desire at times for transcendent or spiritual experiences. For Grahame, Rat and Mole (two of his central characters) have a brief but life-altering encounter with a mysterious faun, mythical even within the world of talking animals and car-enthusiast toads: "This [short] chapter constitutes one of Grahame's highest literary achievements [...]. Pan telepathically communicates with Rat but also leaves the gift of oblivion against too painful a longing" (160). Similarly, Tolkien utilizes Sam Gamgee and the Elves to embody a painful mixture of "happiness, peace, and fear." "For Tolkien as for Grahame," Barella writes, "nostalgia represents the yearning, the very perception of transcendence" (161). She continues to investigate other points of similarity—narrative structure, the theme of the return or homecoming, fantasy as adventure and escape—offering readers intriguing glimpses into the parallels between Tolkien and Grahame but also inviting us to re-visit these works, returning to their myriad worlds.

One obstacle that readers may find in this volume is that of style; as most of the articles in this collection have been translated from Italian to English, it is understandable that not all the translator's syntactical choices will land with the same ease and polish of a scholar writing in his/her native tongue. At times, though, I found myself distracted by apparent proofreading errors and awkward phrasing, wondering if this was indeed a limitation of the translating process or one of writerly skill on the part of the essay's author (see above regarding range of contributors and experience). Nevertheless, these moments of disruption were the exception rather than the rule, and most readers—whether casual or academic—will find these stylistic shortcomings immaterial given the rewards of the articles' contents.

For the scholar, the student, and the enthusiast, *Tolkien and the Classics* is an enriching read, well worth one's time (and, if read in excerpts, not too much time will be needed). Accessible, enlightening, and entertaining, these essays add valuable voices to the current Tolkien studies discourse, highlighting the

impressive range of scholarship being conducted and, one would hope, sparking curiosity in readers for scholarship yet to be explored. While of varying length, depth, and—in some cases, perhaps—quality, these analyses have in common a praiseworthy goal, one echoed in the introduction to the volume and to this review: to elevate Tolkien’s status within the literary community, and to offer new ways of reading and thinking of the classics, Tolkien included. It is an invitation to return, to re-read the “greats,” and to see what new and exciting connections to Tolkien and his writings yet exist. In my estimation, this collection accomplishes what engaging scholarship should: it leaves one wanting more, in the best sense.

—Willow DiPasquale



**INKLINGS OF TRUTH: ESSAYS TO MARK THE ANNIVERSARIES OF C.S. LEWIS AND J.R.R. TOLKIEN.** Paul Shrimpton, ed. Grandpont House, 2018. 102pp. ISBN 9780952216728, £8; order at [grandpont-house.org](http://grandpont-house.org).

FEATURING CONTRIBUTIONS BY Stratford Caldecott, Walter Hooper, Simon Stacey, and Michael Ward, this brief collection publishes a series of talks given at Grandpont House in Oxford in 2013. It bears its title because, according to Shrimpton, the pursuit of literary truth is a common theme emerging from each of the papers. Shrimpton also notes engagement with Tolkien’s doctrine of sub-creation and with the subtle Christian sensibilities underlying the fictional worlds of both authors.

The first essay, by Michael Ward, is titled “The Heavens are Telling the Glory of God: C.S. Lewis, Narnia, and the Planets.” Ward’s *Planet Narnia* is required reading in Inklings scholarship at this point, but this essay provides a good summary of his argument for those who have not yet read Ward’s lengthier work. He argues that each of the Narnia books represents the personality and tone of one of the seven medieval planets, which thus provide the hidden but coherent through-line for the series. This is in large part the standard form of the talk that Ward gives when he is invited to lecture on this subject. He nuances this presentation with the idea of a hidden yet ever-present purpose or pattern to the world of Narnia which apologetically buttresses the hidden yet ever-present purpose of our own world. “Can our real world truly have a purpose and a pattern? Lewis believed it could, despite all appearances to the contrary. And he reflects this apparent conflict in Narnia” (39). Since Ward has already treated this subject exhaustively elsewhere, there is very little to surprise us here.