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***Hobbit Virtues: Rediscovering Virtue Ethics through J.R.R. Tolkien's The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings***, by Christopher A. Snyder

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might have looked like, had they had them. Though interesting and diverting in its own right, it adds little to scholarly discussions of Tolkien's work.

My sense of the deficiency in editorial oversight is further heightened by the fact that contributors were ostensibly not given (or if they were, for some unfathomable reason did not take) the chance to review the scholarship of their peers before the collection went to print. There is no internal conversation within the volume—a hard disappointment, as many of the papers would have benefited from the knowledge of another that, sometimes, is its immediate neighbor. Some essays take for granted what another in the volume has decisively shown to be incorrect. Some others are simply shallow and inconclusive in areas that another contributor has explored in great depth. Connections are thus dropped, opportunities lost, and the reader is left to groan in frustration as she considers what might have been.

It would be ungenerous (not to mention untrue) to suggest that *Music in Tolkien's Work and Beyond* has little worth. I hope I've accurately illustrated in the foregoing that the volume carries forward many important discussions in Tolkien Studies, and that it offers new ideas for exploration and interrogation. But even besides that, it is certainly worth pointing out that even the most flawed of this volume's offerings might be the seed that produces a great tree. One has only to soldier through its imperfections to reach the goal. Read it with this in mind.

—Megan N. Fontenot



**HOBBIT VIRTUES: REDISCOVERING VIRTUE ETHICS THROUGH J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S *THE HOBBIT* AND *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*.** Christopher A. Snyder. New York NY: Pegasus Books, 2020. 254 p. ISBN 9781643134109. \$27.95.

CHRISTOPHER SNYDER BEGINS HIS WORK *Hobbit Virtues: Rediscovering Virtue Ethics through J.R.R. Tolkien's The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings* by discussing the careful tending of a garden. Tolkien and his Hobbits were particularly fond of gardens, but this serves as his introductory image for a more profound reason. He suggests, "Cultivating one's garden can also be seen as tending to our individual souls, cultivating virtues through reason and discipline" (4). Harkening back to Socrates, Snyder suggests that a well-ordered soul leads to the growth of virtue, but that leads the reader to a question that defines the remainder of this work. What types of virtues might Tolkien be presenting through his legendarium? Snyder points to what he terms a Hobbit philosophy drawn from the final words of Thorin Oakenshield, "There is more

in you of good than you know, child of the kindly West. Some courage, and some wisdom, blended in good measure. If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world" (Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, XVIII.312). Snyder recognizes that these specific virtues that Bilbo Baggins possessed seem to transcend Middle-earth. "Consider Thorin's choice of words: *good, kindly, courage, wisdom, valued*. These are terms one can find in the ethics of Plato, Aristotle, Confucius, and many other philosophers and religious teachers" (7). In short, "these are Hobbit virtues, and we humans should recognize them as well" (9). This approach characterizes the remainder of Snyder's work. He identifies a specific virtue, considers how it has been understood in several different moral systems, and then provides examples of where Tolkien displays characters who exhibit that virtue. Snyder's ultimate hope is to see a return to these virtues as he says, "Let us return to these virtues—seeing ourselves at our best and happiest—to make the world a merrier place" (9).

The first virtue Snyder decides to explore is humility. Several different belief systems including Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Greek mythology, Buddhism, and Taoism considered humility to be virtuous, so after pointing to the relevant texts from each belief system, Snyder points to multiple examples of specifically Hobbits who are humble. Bilbo Baggins "is a meek or humble creature who, when pressed, acts with bravery and cunning to defend his friends" (17). Samwise Gamgee "exemplifies the medieval theological principle of being worthy of heroic virtue *because* he does not seek to be a hero in the first place" (18). Examples such as these bring Snyder to his conclusion that, "We should return to upholding the virtue of humility, but we must not mistake it for weakness. It is, on the contrary, the first step on the path to moral strength" (19).

Snyder then advances to discuss courage. Again, he explains how various belief systems have addressed courage, but this chapter takes a slightly different approach. He differentiates between different types of courage and how Hobbits are not expected to save the world. Instead, they are "small heroes who overcome their fears through unexpected demonstrations of both physical and moral courage" (23). Bilbo displays his courage multiple times as a bourgeois Hobbit who is thrown into an adventure he does not originally want to go on, and the four main hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings* become more courageous as they progress on their respective journeys. Snyder connects these developments to Tolkien's "theory of courage" which is "'the great contribution of early Northern literature,' the 'creed of unyielding will' illustrated by the attitude of Odin, Thor, and the other deities of Asgard marching to their doom and defeat at Ragnarök" (29). Even in the face of seeming doom, courage shines through, and "finding courage in unexpected places—Merry and Pippin and

Éowyn included—gives one hope that we too might be able to rise to the occasion and persevere in our struggles, even if we do not get to fully enjoy the victory” (33). Structurally, this chapter is different because it weaves the discussion of virtue with the examples from Tolkien as opposed to presenting two distinct sections. In terms of a conceptual framework though, it contains all of the same elements.

Fellowship is clearly present in *The Hobbit* as well as *The Lord of the Rings*. Missions are completed when groups of companions execute tasks that are given to them. Fellowship was also important to Tolkien personally as evidenced by his membership in and great passion for the T.C.B.S. and the Inklings as well as his study of the Knights of the Round Table. In fact, it is quite possible that we would not have been able to experience Tolkien’s fiction without encouragement from his friends. Bilbo Baggins starts out as a solitary bachelor before joining the company of Dwarves. Frodo has a group of friends in the Shire before he sets out on his quest, but he develops even stronger ties with members of the Fellowship assembled in Rivendell but drawn from many regions of the world. As Snyder points out, “Hobbits ... have the capacity not just to experience fellowship with other Hobbits, but to form deep friendships with Men and Dwarves and Elves. Hobbits can overcome the natural suspicion of those who look different, whose culture and ways are different” (50). Without Fellowship, Frodo as well as Middle-earth would be doomed.

A frequently forgotten, yet taken for granted, virtue is that of good cheer derived from food, drink, and laughter. Snyder directly states, “I would argue, along with Professor Tolkien, that the appreciation of food and drink and jokes shared in fellowship—in other words, ‘good cheer’—are appropriate in any age” (51-52). The Epicureans and Hedonists excessively embraced this virtue while other cultures such as the Hebrews, the ancient Egyptians, some within Christianity, and the Babylonians living under Hammurabi’s Code suggested that there were limits to particularly alcohol use. This balance points towards traditional virtue and a compromise between excess and ascetism. Snyder writes, “As much as Hobbits enjoy their six meals a day, ale, and pipeweed, both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are about the periods and circumstances when we must go without these creature comforts” (68). Even in these areas where virtues might not be universally agreed upon, Tolkien may have been trying to charge a reasonable compromise of moderation. He was not suggesting “cheer” to the detriment of one’s self but rather “good” and appropriate “cheer.”

Storytelling has been a central element of cultures around the world to preserve tradition as well as entertain. Snyder contends, “In making storytelling a Hobbit virtue, Tolkien may be suggesting that we should all indulge in this activity, on occasion, to make for a merrier world” (69). Tolkien understood

myth and fairy stories as “vehicles for carrying truth” (70). This tradition that appears in Paleolithic cave art continues to this day as people seek to convey some dimension of reality to someone else who had not experienced it firsthand. Snyder recalls how Socrates advises in *The Republic* that parents should only tell their children “myths that encourage true virtue” (72). Tolkien clearly wrote a myth, but he also has characters tell stories within his myth in various forms such as song and poetry. In fact, the story that Tolkien wrote is mythologically derived from a story written by Bilbo, Frodo, and Sam reported in *The Red Book of Westmarch*. Storytelling is an integral part of Tolkien’s story and of the human experience, and, like Socrates pointed out, they can certainly convey virtue.

It is nearly impossible to read *The Lord of the Rings* without recognizing the themes of service, selflessness, and self-sacrifice in nearly every plot line. Frodo sacrifices for the salvation of the world, Sam sacrifices for the good of Frodo, and the entire Fellowship sacrifices for the freedom of Middle-earth. Cultures have recognized the value of coming together in communities and sacrificing for the common good for millennia. Snyder points out how service has often manifested itself evilly through slavery in many cultures, but he also shows how service, when done by our own individual choosing, not by abduction or compulsion, can be a beautiful thing. Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, and other religions teach that people ought to help bear the burden of others. Snyder quotes, “*Agape* ‘is the kind of love,’ writes the philanthropist Sir John Templeton, ‘in which the religions of the world may find a basis for unity’” (96). Interestingly though, Tolkien turned the notion of traditional sacrifice on its head through Frodo’s quest to destroy the Ring, “Instead of sacrificing a valued object to a god, Frodo’s aim is to destroy the powerful object made by an evil spirit in the very fires that created it” (106). Many make sacrifices to destroy a great evil and a great power. But sacrifice shows itself in smaller actions as well such as Sam using his gift from Galadriel to beautify the entire Shire, not just his own front yard. Large or small, Snyder shows how sacrifices are beautifully virtuous in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Mercy connects to many of the virtues already discussed, but it is central to both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Many ancient cultures such as the Greek culture that birthed Homer’s *Odyssey* did not have a high view of mercy and equated it with weakness while the law of Leviticus and Deuteronomy as well as Hammurabi’s Code seem to emphasize justice over mercy according to some commentators (although Snyder does point out that the remainder of the Old Testament does address mercy multiple times alongside justice). Historically, mercy became a more prominent virtue specifically through Christianity, but that tension with justice remained, and Tolkien explores that through the character of Gollum. Snyder provocatively, and most likely accurately, suggests, “Tolkien probably did not set out to write

*The Hobbit* to be a story about mercy. He certainly did not see that one single act of pity by a little creature would save his whole world" (122). Bilbo could have killed Gollum, but he did not, and Gollum ultimately fell with the Ring into Mount Doom after fighting with Frodo who was unable to surrender it himself. Snyder considers this the greatest virtue of the Hobbits, "The world was saved because three Hobbits took pity on a miserable, wretched, murderous creature full of malice and deceit. The little people *are* lordly, they have grown morally. There is *much* wisdom and *much* courage within them, but love and mercy sit above all their many Hobbit virtues" (129). After this climactic chapter, Snyder definitively changes tone as he begins to approach his conclusion.

Snyder takes a chapter to discuss the overall appearance of virtue and vice in Tolkien's sub-creation. He chronicles Tolkien's broad categories of people groups first and highlights some of their overarching characteristics. For example, readers can learn the virtues of "respect, empathy, and a smile" (140) from Galadriel and "magnificence, the crowning virtue of chivalry" (148) from Aragorn. Readers can also learn to avoid certain vices from different races as well. While Snyder acknowledges that some might be uncomfortable with Tolkien's usage of race and gender, he suggests that Tolkien's world demonstrates how, "Virtues, in other words, are not values, they do not change with the calendar or with geography. Different cultures can be respected—even protected—but moral relativism is to be avoided" (159). In other words, virtues are good and have always been good while vice always ought to be avoided. It is not a question of valuing one culture or race of beings more than another but rather a question of adherence to the good, which every character in Middle-earth struggles with at one time or another.

Lastly, Snyder queries what it means to be small in a large world. Simple things like taking long walks and remembering tradition can be virtuous. Keeping one's promise might seem elementary, but it is a step in the direction of virtue which is good. Being virtuous is not impossible for anyone, but Snyder recognizes that even if all of these virtues are good, "The criticism does beg the question, however, about the good toward which these virtues all point. It is, and has been, a controversial topic among philosophers since the days of Socrates" (175). Snyder concludes the body of his work with a conciliatory answer to that question, very close to where he started this book, "Ancient virtues may lay for many years dormant. It does not mean that they are dead. We Hobbits need merely discover them, plant them in new soil, tend our little garden with care, and wait with sunlit hope for them to spring leaf and flower again in a new age" (180). He has sought to prove that virtue theory is relevant for all, no matter what religion one subscribes to, and is invariably present in the world that Tolkien discovered. That is the good, cultivated garden.

Snyder's work is compelling. He provides a comprehensive defense of virtue theory in the work of J.R.R. Tolkien. While much has been written about the Pagan or Christian roots of Middle-earth, Snyder reaches beyond that question and suggests that, much in the style of C.S. Lewis in *The Abolition of Man*, these virtues are simply human and are universally applicable across time and culture. Snyder actually includes multiple appendices that track different virtues across culture. One of them is specifically dedicated to Lewis and his *Tao*. This allows him to hopefully unite his readers on common ground and explore the most important themes of Tolkien's work together.

Naturally, readers who are sympathetic to virtue theory are going to find Snyder's argument more appealing than those who are skeptical of the entire enterprise. He does not spend a great deal of time defending virtue theory as a philosophical approach and rather discusses how Tolkien's work demonstrates virtue theory. While Snyder does spend some time defending the contention that Tolkien would have embraced virtue theory (as he did not explicitly affirm it in any of his writings), it should be noted that this work explores virtue theory by using Tolkien as an example rather than providing a defense of the claim that Tolkien knowingly embraced virtue theory. This is not meant to be a criticism necessarily but just a note for the reader to understand the purpose of Snyder's work more clearly.

One potential shortcoming of this work is that Snyder does not spend a great deal of time defining what virtue theory is. While one certainly could assume that many readers of this book will be familiar with virtue theory, some additional discussion would have been helpful. His preface seeks to do that, and it is concise and useful summary. Nevertheless, some depth could have been added to that definition in order to more explicitly lay out the development of virtue ethics beyond what was given. That may help address the concern that this argument is going to resonate most powerfully with those who already believe in the viability of virtue theory.

That being said, the collection of virtues that Snyder highlights is commendable. Some themes always come up when talking about Tolkien: mercy, fellowship, and service come to mind. Emphasizing storytelling and the goodness of food and drink were enjoyable inclusions. Snyder is a fine writer, and this book reads extraordinarily easily. Snyder's is a valuable work that is approachable for the casual Tolkien reader yet delves deep enough into the finer points of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* to satisfy more serious students of Middle-earth.

— Zachary D. Schmoll

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