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## ***Journey Back Again: Reasons to Revisit Middle-earth*, edited by Diana Pavlac Glycer**

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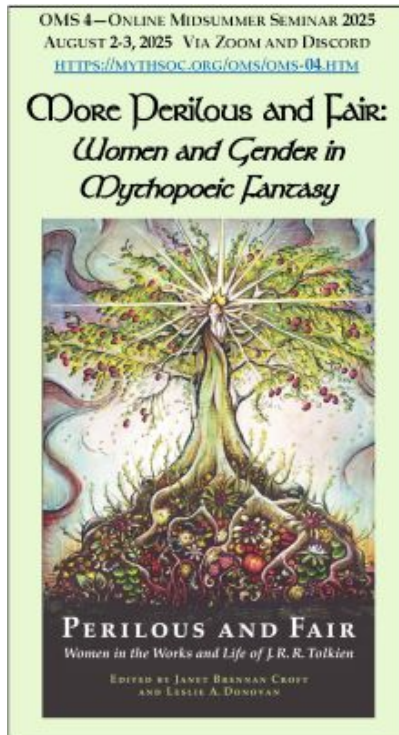
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**JOURNEY BACK AGAIN: REASONS TO REVISIT MIDDLE-EARTH.**

Edited by Diana Pavlac Glyer. Azusa, CA: Azusa Pacific University Press. 2020. 246 p. ISBN 9781735278803.

FROM THE HONORS COLLEGE AT AZUSA PACIFIC UNIVERSITY comes a truly charming defense of the wonders and lessons of Tolkien's Middle-earth. Composed of chapters by graduating seniors of the Honors College, *Journey Back Again* works from the premise that "*The Lord of the Rings* as a work of fantasy is not only worth reading but is worth reading many times" because "truth and reality run through all of Middle-earth" (14). Its authors argue that "[t]he genre of fantasy is one means by which we can see truth more clearly" (15), and that *The Lord of the Rings* in particular "is capable of reorienting the imagination to better see what is true and beautiful in our own world" (15). "An imagined world," they write, "is a reshuffling of our own, a kaleidoscopic turning of things to reveal new angles, an overturning of familiar soil to give it room to take in new seed" (15).

It might be said that this book is built on relationships from the ground up: relationships between these students and each other, and between them and their mentors, certainly made this book a reality. But the authors' individual chapters also engage with relationships of all sorts: between characters, between things and objects, between places, and perhaps most importantly, between Middle-earth and our world. As Britta E. Bunnell puts it in her chapter "The Community Quilt," "connections are the pieces of the quilt that bring communities together and encourage the growth of individuals. The more intricately these pieces are interwoven together, the bigger and more beautiful the picture of community becomes" (85).

*Connections* becomes an operative word here. It's always nice to see where authors of edited collections have allowed their work to be directly influenced by the pieces surrounding their own, to be connected through dialogue as a unified whole. *Journey Back Again* consistently reminds the reader, though the main text and through footnotes, that the book is a group effort, a developing conversation in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This sort of vision is, as Joshua Graham argues in a slightly different context, wise (168).

On the whole, *Journey Back Again* covers a lot of familiar ground. Jacob L. Bradley's chapter on "Providence at Work" treads a well-worn path, and Anna K. Dickinson's reading of Gollum in "Making the Risky Choice" will feel familiar to many readers. Similarly, Bunnell's "Community Quilt" capitalizes on the obvious importance of fellowship to *The Lord of the Rings*, but her classifications of those relationships are interesting and compelling.

That said, most of the chapters make fascinating connections that are at once scholastically invigorating and, really, “light-bulb” moments for both fan and scholar alike. For instance, Dickinson points out that “just as pity ‘stayed’ Bilbo’s sword-grasping hand when he considered killing Gollum many decades prior, Gandalf restrains Éomer’s sword-grasping hand, showing Wormtongue pity and mercy” (141). Mark E. Jung emphasizes Aragorn’s role as one who restores the fallen to community, specifically reading his actions during Boromir’s death-scene as Aragorn’s recognition and acceptance of the other man’s recovery. Aragorn, Jung argues, “chooses to continue to have faith in Boromir by giving him an opportunity for redemption” (93).

Furthermore, many aspects of these chapters look to instigate generative conversations. In “Unexpected Worth,” Jordan F. Mar argues for the significance of Tolkien’s oft-overlooked prologue. She points out that “some audiobook recordings of *The Lord of the Rings* skip the prologue altogether and insert it at the end as if it were some sort of appendix. But when readers skip the prologue, they miss the crucial first sentence: ‘This book is largely concerned with Hobbits.’ This sentence and the rest of the prologue are foundational for the story” (46). As someone who has read *The Lord of the Rings* numerous times, but who sometimes skips the prologue, I was struck by the seriousness of Mar’s argument. In overlooking a sometimes-mundane exploration of every-day Hobbit life and history, have I sold Tolkien’s story short? Recognized it as something it is not? These questions are prompting me to reconsider the centrality of *The Lord of the Rings*’ “fringe texts.”

Similarly, Jensen Armstrong’s chapter, “A Narrative Quest,” explores several ways in which the form of *The Lord of the Rings* deepens readers’ experience of Middle-earth as a complex, teeming world. He argues that focalization, or the way in which scenes are experienced through a particular character’s point of view, gives readers an entry-point into the story and insists that the characters are “real people who exist in Middle-earth, not just useful devices to further the narrative” (23n6). “Often,” Armstrong writes, “the voices we least expect to be meaningful offer a crucial perspective” (26).

Hana Paz Leuze carries the discussion further in her chapter, “Navigating the Weight of Evil.” While some of this chapter’s claims are dubious (I’m still not totally convinced that there is good in Shelob and Sauron, for example), Paz Leuze takes a key moment towards the end of her piece to examine paragraph breaks. Yes, paragraph breaks. At the risk of saying too much about myself, I’ll admit that this was perhaps my favorite passage in the entire book. Paz Leuze points out that “Tolkien does not rush the reader, nor his characters, into hope” (124). Each time the characters and readers are impressed with feelings of despair, she writes, Tolkien gives us a paragraph break before turning our attentions toward hope. According to Paz Leuze, this formal feature

visually acknowledges the weight of evil and despair, and allows us a moment for that weight to truly matter, without giving up on hope entirely (124). Not only that: Paz Leuze employs the feature herself as she writes about it, giving her readers (at least, the nerdy ones like me) an opportunity to revel in the perfect stylistic choice.

The potential reader will be warned, however: the book is not without its flaws. For one, it rather clearly envisions a reader who identifies as Christian, both in its description of the authors as mature Christian scholars (back cover) and in its hesitancy to move outside of that framework in its analysis. Some of the chapters thus border on didactic, while others insist on supporting their reading with references to that now (in)famous phrase from one of Tolkien's letters: namely that *The Lord of the Rings* is "a fundamentally religious and Catholic work" (*Letters* 172, #142). Verlyn Flieger and others have often remarked on the danger of taking Tolkien's letters out of context, so here I will only point out that the use of that letter in this way opens those chapters in particular to criticism. This is not to say that only Christian readers will find anything of interest in *Journey Back Again*. Such a judgement would be gravely mistaken, as I hope my comments above make clear.

*Journey Back Again's* most serious shortcoming is that it neglects to enter into dialogue with some of the more important social issues that have recently become a core part of the conversation surrounding Tolkien and his work. In other words, it resists diverse readings of *The Lord of the Rings* and often employs outdated language. One general example of this is that several times throughout the collection, the word "man" is used to refer to humanity, while authors and other artists are described with the pronoun "he."

More specifically, Bunnell's chapter emphatically shuts the door in the face of queer interpretations of *The Lord of the Rings* (81). Such readings, however, are becoming increasingly significant and challenging in Tolkien communities today, as LGBTQ+ fans push for the validity of both their readings of the text and their place in the fan community. Bunnell also praises the racial reconciliation that takes place through Legolas and Gimli, but does not address the fact that in Middle-earth, many races (usually ones described by Tolkien using racist/racialized stereotypes and slurs) are ultimately excluded from the "community" that is otherwise celebrated in the text.

Likewise, Paz Leuze uses ableist language to discuss the difference between good and evil in Tolkien's work, repeatedly referring to evil beings as "marred" or even "damaged." Granted, such descriptions fit within the world that Tolkien created, but Disability Studies would argue that such terms must be interrogated and their association with evil resisted. But nowhere in *Journey Back Again* are the more problematic aspects of Tolkien's work questioned or even acknowledged.

Despite these and other shortcomings (many of which are not specific to this book in particular), I do recommend picking up a copy of *Journey Back Again*, and not just because I'm invested in supporting up-and-coming young scholars. It's a short, fun read that will not only inspire you to return with fondness to a longtime favorite, but will also encourage you to again look beyond both what lies visible on the surface of *The Lord of the Rings*, and your own, potentially calcifying ideas about what the book is and isn't. The experience may even inspire you, as it did me, to think back to your own early work on Tolkien, likely recalling that it was every bit as ambitious, earnest, and joyful as the chapters collected here.

Luckily for us, the Mythopoeic Society Press has agreed to republish *Journey Back Again* in order to bring it into wider circulation. The new edition is slated to release in the latter half of 2022, and, I hope, will inspire seasoned scholars to look again on a familiar tale, and a new generation of scholars to continue to cultivate the rich field of Tolkien Studies.

—Megan N. Fontenot

#### WORKS CITED

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**WAKING THE DEAD: GEORGE MACDONALD AS PHILOSOPHER, MYSTIC, AND APOLOGIST.** Dean Hardy. Hamden CT: Winged Lion Press, 2020. 231 p. ISBN 9781935688211. \$24.40.

WHAT IS THE INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND that informed the life and works of George MacDonald? This is the primary question Dean Hardy sets himself to address in his 2020 book, *Waking the Dead: George MacDonald as Philosopher, Mystic, and Apologist*. In the book, adapted from Hardy's PhD thesis, he asserts that while sufficient attention has been paid to MacDonald's literary and theological backgrounds, there is "a striking lack of exploration from the mystical, philosophical, and apologetic angle" (2). Hardy strives to amend this omission, ultimately in order to argue that "George MacDonald was an unprofessed philosopher, hesitant theologian, unique mystic, and an unconventional apologist" (189). As an exercise in reading upstream—that is, of chasing literary elements back to their source—*Waking the Dead* is an obviously meritorious project. Regrettably, some poor argumentation and doubtful conclusions trouble the book's potential.