



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 39
Number 2

Article 20

4-23-2021

***Fantasies of Time and Death: Dunsany, Eddison, Tolkien* by Anna Vaninskaya**

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Recommended Citation

Waters, Sarah R. A. (2021) "*Fantasies of Time and Death: Dunsany, Eddison, Tolkien* by Anna Vaninskaya," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 39 : No. 2 , Article 20.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol39/iss2/20>

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FANTASIES OF TIME AND DEATH: DUNSANY, EDDISON, TOLKIEN.
Anna Vaninskaya. London: Palgrave, 2020. 262 p. ISBN 9781137518378. \$55.00.

THIS VOLUME BEGINS WITH FANTASY and with a justification. Anna Vaninskaya knows she is deviating from her reader's expectations from the offset by pairing J.R.R. Tolkien with Lord Dunsany and E.R. Eddison, and pre-empts the inevitable "but what about the Inklings?" cry.¹ Her grouping is provocative, and is deliberately set up as such. It causes us to take a step back, first back into the origins of fantasy, and second a step back from Tolkien's regular spot at the Eagle and Child. It forces us to acknowledge how habitually we locate Tolkien with the Oxford set, and the other contemporaries this occludes. Of course, it is not uncommon to see Tolkien called upon in works on contemporary fantasy today, but this is where this study again subverts its readers' expectations, it expressly sets out *not* to consider the influence of Dunsany on Eddison on Tolkien or any variant on the three—again delivering a shock to the now familiar terrain of influence and collaboration which underpins Inklings studies. This is, therefore, a study of value for readers interested in Dunsany and Eddison in their own right, not just as Tolkien foreshadows or contemporaries, though this framing is also given due attention. Vaninskaya distinguishes her trio from authors who created a fantasy school, influenced each other, or even wrote as part of a broader fantasy community (3). In each case, Vaninskaya knocks the scaffolding familiar to Inklings studies, where Tolkien's work is discussed in a milieu of influence, community and the creation of "the kind of books" a certain "we want[ed] to read" (Tolkien, *Letters* 209, #159). The fact that each of these is a subconscious expectation of readers today is a particular testament to the collaborative dialogue Diana Pavlac Glyer's work has acknowledged and, in turn, fostered.² But Inklings studies needs and is robust enough to merit these shocks—it is better for the dialogue they spark, both because it prevents it from a narrowness of vision, and because, as Vaninskaya's study shows, there are some really valuable parallels, if not influences, to be revealed by setting Tolkien alongside two other contemporary world-builders and fantasy writers.

¹ A cry swiftly answered by those well-versed in Inklings history, since Eddison not only was a guest at Inklings meetings (1944; 1957), along with his wife, but also read to them from *The Mezentian Gate* (see Humphrey Carpenter's note on Tolkien, *Letters* 258, #199) and received both praise and criticism in later writings by both Lewis ("On Stories" 104) and Tolkien (*Letters* 258 #199; 377 #294). This connection is not, however, discussed by Vaninskaya.

² Cross-pollination is indicated even in the title of her landmark study: *The Company They Keep: C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien as Writers in Community*.

Despite the three listed names in the title, this is really a single author study in three parts. Vaninskaya's monograph is a trilogy where you do not, necessarily, need to have read the previous instalment in order to take up the story. Nonetheless, Vaninskaya identifies broad connections and parallels, focusing in particular on shared themes, scopes, and forms, across the works of the three writers. The parallels emerge most directly in the Envoi as she argues that in Dunsany, Eddison and Tolkien we encounter the same ideas of time and death reshaped, re-sculpted and refashioned and yet reappearing with unsettling familiarity, as each fantasy forces us "to stop and think again about time and death when we behold them in its estranging light" (230).

Death and time are clearly linked, with transience pulling them together. Vaninskaya shows how, in each of the worlds of Dunsany, Eddison and Tolkien, there is a preoccupation with mortality and temporality. For her, the exploration of this preoccupation, and the clashes which emerge between death and time, and between the divine and the human responses to death and time, underpin the structures of the words as much as the structures of the narratives. She argues persuasively that in each of the writer's fantasies there is a dramatization and probing of the gods' game of life and death, and their slave, Time. Thus, in this study, Vaninskaya sets out to demonstrate that the worlds of Dunsany, Eddison and Tolkien "are characterised by an obsession with temporality, mortality and eternity, with process, event and state" (7).

For Vaninskaya, the central subject of the fantasies of Dunsany, Eddison and Tolkien is dying *and* death. We are kept thinking about "dying" *and* about "being dead" (Lewis, "Hamlet: The Prince or the Poem?" 99), as in each world we are forced to consider whether death is the end, is deliverance, and whether it is a source or cause of hope or despair. I am skating around C.S. Lewis's discussion of *Hamlet* here with some deliberateness, not just because it offers a helpful lens on the exploration of mortality and immortality in the worlds of Dunsany, Eddison, and Tolkien, but also because Vaninskaya herself uses Shakespeare's exploration of mortality, the transience of life, and the capacity of words to immortalize, in her reading of Dunsany in particular, and Eddison to a lesser extent. She discusses this through the lens of *Hamlet* as well as through Shakespeare's Sonnet 18's closing phrase: "and this gives life to thee." Vaninskaya unpacks what "this" means in the context of Dunsany and Eddison's worlds and particularly the capacity of fantasy, and of written words and worlds, to resurrect characters with each new reading. This suggests the transformative power of words and immersion in these worlds for readers, although this is not a notion which Vaninskaya either raises or tackles in this study. Nevertheless, she does acknowledge that fantasy "confers eternity on the passing moment" (15), which at least hints at its transformative potential.

There is a further dimension to the *Hamlet* nod, as Vaninskaya links together death and knowledge (120) which are notably combined in the eponymous character's "to be" speech. She considers how Eddison and Tolkien, in particular, explore what it means to be omniscient: where its boundaries lie and the moral as well as mortal consequences of striving for more. For, as Vaninskaya's study suggests, in these fantasies immortality as much as mortality is considered a curse, or at the very least a limitation. We see this in the clash between permanence and change in the two opposed lands in Dunsany's *The King of Elfland's Daughter*, in Eddison's gods and mortals who each "desire the other's most conspicuous attribute" (103), and in the elvish envy of the gift of death for man in Tolkien's legendarium.

As I noted above, this is a study split into three parts, so I will address each part independently for the remainder of this review. Although it is split into three, these are not three equal parts. Tolkien will, at least for some readers, be the name which sells this volume, and thus perhaps needs less justification. However, he is nonetheless granted more page space (75 pages) than the lesser-known Dunsany (45 pages), though not quite as much as the, perhaps today, even less familiar Eddison (83 pages). The split into numbered subsections within each author's chapter easily hides the relative brevity of the Dunsany section, which is granted nine subsections to Tolkien's six, but emphasizes the extended attention given to Eddison, whose chapter is split into seventeen subsections.

Dunsany begins the book's proceedings and Vaninskaya considers his short fiction (*Fifty-One Tales* and *The Gods of Pegāna*) as well as his novels (*The King of Elfland's Daughter*, *The Blessing of Pan* and *The Charwoman's Shadow*). Indeed, as the bibliography reveals, a broad range of Dunsany material has been consulted, and is indeed addressed, in this chapter. This breadth is a hallmark of this volume, revealing the extent to which Vaninskaya has immersed herself in the worlds and words of each of her trio. But the breadth does not stop there, as is evident in the frequent literary allusions which Vaninskaya employs as frames for reading each of the writers. We see this in her reading of Dunsany, whose exploration of Time Vaninskaya reads through Shakespeare and Swinburne and their linked languages of time devouring. She adds a smattering of Shelley's "Ozymandias" (1818) to the mix, as she wades through Romantic visions of things shattered and even the apparently eternal eroded by the violent hand of Time. In so doing, Vaninskaya reveals and explores Time's "active enmity" (29) in Dunsany's worlds. The repetitive nature of Dunsany's works, particularly evident in the repeated and inevitable iconoclastic hand of Time, is also acknowledged.

Vaninskaya notes the way Dunsany's works oscillate between time defeated and time triumphing, as she addresses the rhythmic opposition Dunsany confronts us with, in the structure, style, and imagery of his narratives which thrive on juxtaposition. Vaninskaya writes persuasively about the need for timelessness and time's passage in Dunsany, with one undercutting the power of the other. Timelessness becomes an undesirable static, full of limitations rather than joy. We see this, for instance, in the clashing realms of *The King of Elfland's Daughter*, where the grass is always bleaker on the other side. Vaninskaya argues for the oppositional dependence of Dunsany's writings: "neither half of the whole can exist without the other" especially "the past and the present, timelessness and time" (51), and hinted at in that final couplet is another coupling: life (eternality) and death (mortality). In worlds predicated on oppositional dialogue, the emergence of time and death as crucial cruxes is not perhaps wholly surprising, but, through close reading, Vaninskaya shows us why it is integral to Dunsany's fantasy. And in her concluding summation to this section, where she notes, "opposites brought together in passing to create beauty: that is the foundation of Dunsany's unique fantasy rhythm" (60), she lays down the gauntlet for future scholars to explore this "fantasy rhythm" further, as well as setting up a dichotomy she will return to in her chapters on Eddison and Tolkien. The brevity of this chapter, when compared with the following two, while generous to future scholars, leaves us wishing for further development and exploration of some of her readings and ideas. However, its tight structure and groundedness is welcome, and the kind of close detail to individual works we encounter here is something that the Eddison and Tolkien chapters struggle to replicate with the same kind of precision.

The Eddison chapter focuses its discussion on *The Worm Ouroboros* and the *Zimiamvia* trilogy (*Mistress of Mistresses*, *A Fish Dinner in Memison*, and *The Mezentian Gate*). Here we pivot from the more time-focused discussion of the Dunsany chapter, to more of a leaning towards death although, as with the preceding chapter, of course the two are intertwined. In the *Zimiamvia* trilogy, death is figured as a portal to life, to knowledge, and the power and knowledge of the gods is seen to be open to corruption and limitation. It is a world which is provocatively topsy-turvy, where, as Vaninskaya highlights, omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience are figured as a burden, while mortal uncertainty and limited foresight are counterintuitively favored. It is, once again, a world which runs on paradox and oppositions. This is especially striking in the way the radical is normalized, as gods wonder whether to truly be all-knowing they must experience mortality and so experience death. To know nothing is the only thing that remains unknown to omniscient immortals, or, as Vaninskaya neatly puts it: "omniscience taken to its logical extreme leads

to the destruction of omnipotence" (114). And Eddison confronts us with these extremes. There is a deliberateness to the shock he triggers as he forces logic to its limits, a kind of irreligious spin on the violent shock tactics of Flannery O'Connor, as the aftershocks of both on the reader reveal the inherent fallenness of the world.³ But in Eddison, the gods too are fallen. The ironic knowing nod of subversion is particularly detectable when we consider that the pivotal existential dilemma in Eddison's *Zimiamvia* trilogy centers on a hunger to know, which Vaninskaya sums up in a refiguring of the *Hamlet* phrase we encountered earlier: "to know is not to be, to be is not to know" (120). This reconfiguring of the fall and the fruit of the tree of knowledge by Eddison, is not a fallenness which is given much attention by Vaninskaya, but it may, nonetheless, offer further parallels in the reader's mind when they turn to the third chapter of the book, as the reader is left to join the oppositional dots between the theocentric vision of Tolkien and the decidedly theo-deposed, or at least theo-problematized visions of Dunsany and Eddison.

Vaninskaya demonstrates the importance of Eddison's philosophy in his fiction, particularly Spinoza's philosophy concerning time and eternity, as moments are stacked upon moments and temporality rather than permanence is emphasized. His philosophy is dense and often complex, and Vaninskaya offers us a pathway through its complexities, though at times a little more detail would help secure her argument for those less well-versed in his particular philosophical blend. Employing his "philosophy of the unity of opposites" (126), Vaninskaya shows how Eddison seeks to capture that which is everchanging even as he shows how swiftly such transient moments burst. Illusions of absolutes, of permanence in either life or death, are icons which are repeatedly shattered by his pen which in one moment seeks to eternalize, to capture "that which is but which cannot be caught" (124), and, in another, works to undercut such permanence, as its iconoclastic ink flows forth. But perhaps the most useful section of the Eddison chapter is Vaninskaya's reconfiguring of Eddison's unchronological structure, and the *Star Wars*-like prequel playing with which he engaged. She argues that this lack of linearity is deliberate rather than a flaw. She suggests that the paradoxes and slippages caused by this within and between the three novels, "function internally to demonstrate and reinforce that freedom from temporal directionality that is a key attribute of Eddison's God" (142). Thus, the reader can "contemplate the *fabula* of the three novels as a whole, under the aspect of literary eternity, beholding past, present and future

³ Flannery O'Connor wrote: "The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural [...] you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures" ("The Fiction Writer and His Country" 163).

simultaneously as one field" (143). As Vaninskaya acknowledges, the sense of inevitability and yet the lack of linearity with time which characterize Eddison's world, define our reading experience. Eddison's modernist pushing against forms which contain, allows his readers to be freed from "narrative time" (143), from linear constraints, and left to flounder without their support as well as revel in that god-like freedom where time is a fabric and where moments are fleeting and continuous. But, as Vaninskaya makes clear, this need not be a flaw: viewing death and time through *deus-ex-machina* glasses provocatively subverts mortality, time's constancy, death's finality or freedom, and the very fabric on which the world we peer down onto stands.

Vaninskaya's focus in the Tolkien chapter is on his self-confessed "death-focused fantasy" (187), which she reads through the lens of his *Beowulf* lecture (1936) and its focus on the inevitability of death, of "history as a salvage operation from the 'wreck of time', and of the human condition as one marked above all else by awareness of the shadow of death" (154). In Tolkien's legendarium, she argues, characters live under the shadow of death, and its bedfellows, darkness and despair. But this is darkness with hope. Both time and death are limited in the power they can exert because, as she puts it, "for Tolkien, the 'Drama' or 'Tale' of life in Time had an Author who served as a guarantor of a wider reality beyond its finite bounds" (155). She explores the paradoxes of Tolkien's legendarium perhaps most clearly in the clash of the outlooks of men and elves, while men desire the known, elves envy man's access to the unknown, again Vaninskaya falls back on the fall-knowledge narrative which is central to her Eddison discussion. For Vaninskaya, in Tolkien's world death may be construed, by man, as a punishment for the fall, rather than a release into life and true knowledge. This reveals a clouded vision, a characteristic true of both men and elves. But knowledge here is linked to both death and time, as Vaninskaya deftly parallels the trajectories of men and elves, noting that while men desire to escape death, elves yearn to escape time. And nowhere is this clearer than in Vaninskaya's paralleling of those who hope and those who despair in the face of death.⁴ The difference lies, she argues, in selfish or selfless visions, with an individual's ability "to look beyond their own temporal defeats" (181), as time and death are explicitly wedded together.

To see time and death as things to be mortally conquered then, is ultimately to place one's faith in the seen rather than the unseen, to submit to time and death is to trust, and these are lessons which Vaninskaya argues must

⁴ The responses by Aragon and Denethor are deliberately contrasted to show two opposing mortal responses to death which centre around their faith, trust and attitude, as she notes, "[p]ride and despair are the markers of a pagan death; hope and humility of a Christian one" (177).

be learnt by both men and elves. This is evident in her concluding suggestion that the lesson which resounds in *The Lord of the Rings* is: “do not try to halt the flow of time, to hold on to the past; learn to let go. The alternative is mummification, death-in-life” (187). Her framing of this through attempts to possess, and the embalmed, if not destructive, existence that triggers, is especially persuasive in the light of the ring, as well as her discussion of the later versions of *Akallabêth* (187-88), and her reflections on the forms of Tolkien’s writings in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Book of Lost Tales* which are both framed narratives. This framed form is key, since, as she suggests, they are self-consciously aware of their “precariousness” (192) even as they seek to contain that which cannot be permanently captured. The framed narrative shows attempts to embalm lives with inky words, even as they spill at the seams of the framing. This emerges as perhaps the most striking oppositional core Vaninskaya discusses, and demonstrates her argument that the juxtaposition inherent in the works of each of the three writers her monograph considers extends beyond theme and character to style and form. In Tolkien, the framed narratives reveal their captured momentary nature, as with the unchronological time play of Eddison, or the limited “happy” ending of Dunsany’s *The King of Elfland’s Daughter* (187).

To capture in ink is to limit, and each of the three, as Vaninskaya demonstrates, confront the reader with this in narrative form as well as narrative content. Vaninskaya shows the way immortalizing is explored only to be continually undercut in Dunsany, Eddison, and Tolkien, through characters paralleled strivings to transcend time and death—strivings which ultimately boil down to a desire to possess the perceived power locked within stasis or eternity, and the implied fallenness of this desire. These refusals to stop for death, to play by the rules of time, or one’s allotted mortality or even immortality, are undercut as characters are swiftly confronted with the fast approaching “Carriage” which will hold them “and Immortality” (Dickinson, “479” 138). In this undercutting, this constant pushing back at permanence and limitations, and pushing against the confines of time and death, each writer grapples with the ramifications of W.H. Auden’s couplet “how could the eternal do a temporal act, / The infinite become a finite fact?” (*For The Time Being* 8), offering variously irreligious and more conservative responses through fantastical play and their mortal and immortal, temporal and eternal figures. This crossover in thematic and stylistic decision in the exploration of death and time in Dunsany, Eddison, and Tolkien’s handlings of death and time in their works, is one such example where Vaninskaya offers parallels through her discussion, not presented neatly for the taking, but there to be formulated by her readers. Vaninskaya demands an active reader, but the active reader is

indeed rewarded with cross-pollinating connections between the fantastical realms she discusses.

As Vaninskaya points towards at the Tolkien chapter's opening, towards the end of the chapter she drifts into biographical readings of Tolkien's work. These are less developed and, as a result, less convincing. The notes on the impact of the loss of his father on Tolkien appear tangential, and the links between these biographical discussions and the preceding consideration of Tolkien's engagement with time and death in his *legendarium* are at times overly simplistic because they are not given the analytical space Vaninskaya gives to her more well considered ideas. Similarly, the *Envoi* is brief and thus, in its pulling together of strands, treads a path towards fantasy platitudes at times rather than detailed insights. However, her closing remarks on the worlds of Eddison and Tolkien, which transcended even their own earthly time and deaths, are insightful. Figured almost as literary *Sagrada Familia's*, she argues that "there could be no end to attempts to render as beautifully and poetically as possible the longings for transcendence of a consciousness faced with the fact of finitude" (230-31), except, that is, in narratives where the final period is not entered, and where, in the case of Tolkien in particular, words and worlds tumble out for decades after their author's time has been called.

The sheer volume of material covered is undoubtedly a strength of this work, but it also risks something of a weakness, and not just because at times breadth hampers and supersedes depth. There is extensive delving into the minor as well as the major headlines of Dunsany's, Eddison's, and Tolkien's oeuvre, and this is to Vaninskaya's merit. However, much knowledge of the reader is assumed, and some additional glossing (whether in an appendix, footnote, or in the main body), for each of the authors works mentioned, would have been a welcome addition to save readers, even those with good familiarity with each author's worlds, from drifting away from Vaninskaya's book to conduct searches with too great a degree of regularity. But the depth is also a merit. As noted earlier, in the discussion of the Dunsany chapter, Vaninskaya's bibliography is a testament to how steeped she is in the worlds of Dunsany, Eddison and Tolkien. She deals with minor and well-known works with equal familiarity and ease, integrating each readily into her discussion, which allows her to evidence what might otherwise be sweeping statements about each author's recurrent themes, forms, and style. This study will therefore be of value to readers interested in the works, worlds, and words of Dunsany, Eddison and Tolkien. Furthermore, the raised profile of lesser-known works by Dunsany, Eddison, and less familiar works from Tolkien's *legendarium*, may also introduce new readers to their realms, as she cracks open the door into otherwise "lost" tales. For ultimately, Vaninskaya's volume does what Lewis argued the best literary criticism ought to do, it "lead[s] in" rather than taking

“you out of the literature” (Lewis, *The Discarded Image* i), and *Fantasies of Time and Death* makes us hungry to return to the primary worlds it discusses.

—Sarah R.A. Waters

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BRIEFLY NOTED

FAFNIR: NORDIC JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY RESEARCH. journal.finfar.org. ISSN 2342-2009. Free online open-access journal.

FOUNDED IN 2014 AND PUBLISHED BY The Finnish Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy Research, World Fantasy Award-winning *Fafnir* publishes two issues per year and is indexed in the *MLA International Bibliography* and the *Directory of Open Access Journals*. *Fafnir* is co-edited by Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, Laura E. Goodin, and Esko Suoranta; Editors-in-Chief serve a three year term and the journal is currently advertising for a 2021-2024 Editor. Reviews Editor Dennis Wilson Wise has written and reviewed for *Mythlore* and is our incoming Steward for the Mythopoeic Society Awards.

Fafnir's content is almost entirely in English, and essays have dealt with topics and authors as diverse as *Firefly/Serenity* fandom, eugenics in science fiction, the dealer scene at Terry Pratchett conventions, race and racism in *Star Trek*, steampunk motifs in Miyazaki's movies, artistic conventions in graphic