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## ***Tolkien the Pagan? Reading Middle-earth through a Spiritual Lens,*** **edited by Anna Milon**

Alana White  
*Independent scholar*

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### *Tolkien the Pagan? Reading Middle-earth through a Spiritual Lens*, edited by Anna Milon

#### Abstract

Review of *Tolkien the Pagan? : Reading Middle-Earth through a Spiritual Lens* : Proceedings of the Tolkien Society Seminar 2018. Considering each contribution in turn, the engaging elements of each author's discussion as well as potential challenges in studying spirituality in Tolkien.

#### Additional Keywords

Mythlore; *Tolkien the Pagan? Reading Middle-earth through a Spiritual Lens*, edited by Anna Milon; Alana White

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makes the text more approachable than what is found in an older translation. The reader will see Sigurd having the broken sword Gram re-forged, his selection of the previously unriden and the unequaled horse Grani, and his meeting and falling in love with the shield maiden Brynhild. All are elements found in *The Lord of the Rings*. My point is that Crawford's translation has a lot to offer, especially to new Tolkien enthusiasts, because the combination of his use of contemporary language along with his introductory matter help the reader to enjoy the text and to be in a position to see the gems that I have listed here.

On a related note, I can also recommend the audio versions of Crawford's translations of *The Saga of the Volsungs: With the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok* and *The Poetic Edda: Stories of the Norse Gods and Heroes*. Both recordings use Crawford as the voice talent and are produced by Blackstone Audio, Inc. He has a pleasant voice; and the audiobooks are the performances of a talent who knows his material. Plus, having the translator to do the recordings means there is no question that words and names are pronounced correctly.

In conclusion, I recommend *The Saga of the Volsungs: With the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*, translated by Jackson Crawford, especially to literature students and Tolkien enthusiasts. The book is appropriate for all public, college, and university libraries. Educators need to be aware of the violence, incest, and infanticide throughout the book if considering it for junior high or high school libraries. However, a case can be made for the book as world literature and as a significant influence upon the publication of fantasy up to the present time. Finally, I recommend it as pleasure reading for the general reader. And, as stated earlier, I hope and expect this translation to smooth the way for many new readers to experience the thrill of discovering and enjoying the *Völsunga* saga and *Ragnar Lothbrok* through this new translation.

—Phillip Fitzsimmons



**TOLKIEN THE PAGAN?: READING MIDDLE-EARTH THROUGH A SPIRITUAL LENS: PROCEEDINGS OF THE TOLKIEN SOCIETY SEMINAR 2018.** Edited by Anna Milon. Luna Press Publishing; Tolkien Society: 2019. 98p. ISBN-13: 978-1-911143-79-6. £8.

THIS VOLUME OFFERS A VARIED AND NUANCED DISCUSSION of spirituality in Tolkien, though it is important to note the distinction between spirituality and religion indicated in the title. As Tolkien himself did not include defined religion (with all the ceremony and institution that may entail) in Middle-earth,

his texts provide a rich field for discussion, capitalized upon by the authors in this collection.

Anna Milon's introduction articulately frames the difficulties which have historically surrounded the discussion of spirituality in Tolkien—namely that Tolkien was an avowed, even evangelical, Catholic, and that any attempt to understand Middle-earth through an alternative spiritual lens is fundamentally flawed. The proceedings of the Seminar attempt to challenge this outlook, using the framing that while Tolkien himself may have been Christian, his secondary world is not.

Opening the discussion, "On the Providential Historicism of Middle-earth" by Ryan Haecker investigates the previously understudied theological aspect of providential historicism in Middle-earth. Setting the historical scene, Haecker outlines the cyclical nature of middle earth, where each age repeats the "cycle from the fall to the restoration" (6); this helps to illustrate the preferred definition of historicism, the logic of the causes of historical change which shapes the sequence of all events in history. This definition, though undoubtedly thorough, does seem to obscure rather than elucidate by making theoretical that which has already been exemplified through Haecker's direct engagement with the texts.

The definition of providence is more readily understood, and forms the backbone for Haecker's discussion of the Ainur. A point of contention may be Haecker's discussion of proto-trinitarianism. Haecker contends that Eru, the Ainur, and the Mind of Ilúvatar can be understood to represent the trinity, Eru having "begotten" the Ainur as "offspring of his thought" (9) (which, Haecker argues, implies the thought or mind of Ilúvatar is distinct from Ilúvatar himself). While an interesting approach to Tolkien's mythology of creation, this argument runs into some difficulties.

The notion that the mind is somehow distinct from Eru is contentious—the trinity is traditionally understood to mean that God exists as three distinct persons yet one divine essence which is fundamentally a unified substance. This implies equal authority and understanding across the Christian trinity, which does not hold true for Haecker's trinity of Eru, the Ainur, and the Mind of Ilúvatar. Indeed, this is undermined in Haecker's later discussion of the Great Music when he describes "the degree of their (the Ainur) prescient foreknowledge is [...] limited" (10) in comparison to Ilúvatar's.

This is also complicated by Haecker suggesting that "Eru [...] by begetting the Ainur and creating Arda can be called Ilúvatar, the 'father of all'" (9). For readers who are not familiar with the Christian conception of ontological equality, this could be misleading. Haecker runs into the problem of implied subordination, but in Christian theology there can be "no subordination as far the possession of divine essence is concerned" (Berkhof 89). Repetition of the

word “begotten” throughout this section of discussion serves to complicate Haecker’s argument and may ultimately undermine his premise.

The following discussion of “the historicism of Middle-earth” is arguably more engaging and almost dislocated from Haecker’s theory of proto-trinitarianism until his final conclusion. Having considered the three themes of the Great Music, the ages and aeons of Middle-earth are discussed, grouped into trinities “evidently mirror(ing) the triplicity of Tolkien’s trinitarian theology” (16). While I am unconvinced of the “evident” nature of conclusion Haecker draws, in large part due to the difficulties implicit in Haecker’s definition of the trinity, the contribution is certainly a stimulating entrance to this volume.

Aslı Bülbül Candaş’s “The Nature of Arda: An Artwork as the Embodiment of the Flame Imperishable” considers the importance of the creative power embedded in the nature of Middle-earth through the Flame Imperishable and leads into consideration of natural theology. Candaş describes the interdependence of Arda and the characters who live there; Arda “houses and protects them and supports their creativity with its own boundless sources of creation” (21) while the characters (particularly the Elves) “devote their lives to the immortalisation of the creative power in nature” (21).

Having demonstrated this mutual relationship, Candaş uses this as a springboard to foreground the upmost importance of artistic creation within Arda, creation itself being implemented through the Great Music. Creative power is imbued in the Flame Imperishable and creativity is linked to the status and location of the flame. Candaş’s argument hinges on the point that “the Flame Imperishable wants to manifest itself through the nature of Arda” (23) but it relies on the Valar and inhabitants of the world to produce “revelatory artworks.” It is a thorough and well-illustrated argument, and the discussion regarding the Two Trees as the first “combination of nature and art” (24) is particularly engaging.

Approaching the “religious beliefs, practices, and traditions” (31) developed by fans, “Honouring the Valar, Seeking the Elf Within” presents Markus Altena Davidsen’s findings on Tolkien spirituality. Davidsen clarifies that “Tolkien spirituality is a form of religion” but it is not an organised religious movement; fans from any number of religious backgrounds have fused engagement with religion and Tolkien’s work.

Providing a brief history of these groups, Davidsen proposes that the affordable paperback editions allowed more communities to access Middle-earth and “the hippies took Tolkien to heart” (33). Discussing a few of the groups (the first being active in the Mojave Desert), Davidsen demonstrates how inspiration was drawn from Tolkien; Elvish names, hymns, and languages play a part in Tolkien spirituality. Davidsen also highlights the importance of the release of *The Silmarillion*, and the influx information on Elven culture, history

and behaviours. The summary of who might be inclined towards Tolkien spiritualism brings the importance of Elves to the forefront: “most practitioners [...] are also strongly fascinated by Elves, and some even go so far as to claim to *be* Elves themselves” (39). Why Elves have proven to be so engaging is not directly addressed; however, Davidsen does make it clear this is a persistent theme.

After providing this historical overview, the ‘who,’ attention is given to the ‘why,’ with Davidsen evaluating veracity mechanisms and how Tolkien’s works conflate fact and fiction. Considering why people may use Tolkien’s mythology as a religious text, an answer is proposed: they “imitate the rhetoric of real religious narratives” (32). Taking time to consider two of the mechanism support this imitation, Davidsen outlines both the author-narrator conflation and the factuality effect; the cumulative effect of these mechanism is to ensure doubt is cast on the status of Middle-earth as fiction, concluding Davidsen’s contribution.

“Tolkien’s Mandos, Pratchett’s Death” by Justin Lewis-Anthony examines the relationship between the works of Tolkien and Terry Pratchett, particularly relating the theme of death. Offering a brief overview of the historical connections between the two authors, Pratchett’s writing is considered as “a reaction to Tolkien” (47), with Lewis-Anthony approaching his argument through the distinction between Death (the character) and death (the process of dying).

Considering Tolkien first, Lewis-Anthony argues that while there is a death figure in Middle-earth (Mandos), death is not a character in the same sense as Pratchett’s Death. An insightful analysis of Death’s character follows, serving to highlight the opposing approaches of the two authors. Following a thorough discussion of each author’s representation of death, Lewis-Anthony ultimately concludes that Tolkien and Pratchett are inevitably separated by their own religious ideologies. Having demonstrated that both authors approach death with frankness and curiosity, the article considers the vital distinction between death (the process of dying) and Death (the character)—while Tolkien always implies something beyond death, Pratchett’s death is a barren emptiness.

Finally Giovanni Carmine Costabile’s “Also Sprach Fëanor, Spirit of Fire: A Nietzschean Reading of Tolkien’s Mythology?” concludes the volume; the springboard for this reading is Tolkien’s reference to “the Dark Lord,” which “can be read as some sort of reference to the only God of the Judaeo-Christian tradition” (68). This allows for the extrapolation: what if Eru was not God?

While this is already an interesting premise, Costabile builds upon it by offering an introduction to Nietzsche and Tolkien’s likely awareness of him. A summary of Nietzsche’s philosophy and published work follows this, which is quite extensive and will ground any introductory level reader. Turning to

Tolkien's work, Costabile points to Fëanor as Nietzsche's 'Superman'—the argument hinges on the concept that both Tolkien and Nietzsche conceive of mankind as "power-sick" (74). Nietzsche's understanding of his imaginary Zarathustra, Moses, and St Paul are each held up against Fëanor in turn and the parallels demonstrated between God's role in Moses's and Fëanor's undertakings is particularly engaging.

Costabile does address Tolkien's own statements regarding the capitalisation of Lord as applied to Morgoth and Sauron, but concludes by asserting the view implicit in every contribution to this collection: that Tolkien's own Christian and Catholic views "should not constitute a reason to forbid any different reading in the applicability of a literary work" (80).

This is a very fitting end way to end this volume. Each contribution attempts to offer a new avenue into reading Tolkien's works and may well stimulate a more varied and nuanced approach to reading spirituality in Tolkien. While this volume may run into challenges from those who insist the only 'correct' reading is a Christian, if not a Catholic, one, all individuals who are interested in spirituality in Tolkien will benefit from this collection—bearing in mind that those contributions which attempt to reinterpret or redefine Christian concepts may be open to greater scrutiny.

—Alana White

#### WORKS REFERENCED

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**RE-ORIENTING THE FAIRY TALE: CONTEMPORARY ADAPTATIONS ACROSS CULTURES.** Mayako Murai and Luciana Cardi, eds. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2020. 432 p. ISBN 9780814345368. \$34.99.

A COMMON CRITICISM DIRECTED AT THE RAPIDLY FLOURISHING AREA of fairy-tale studies is its Western-centrism, evident in its (until fairly recently) almost exclusive focus on Euro-American storytelling, and subsequent marginalization of non-Western traditions and voices. In an attempt to overcome this limitation, recent years have seen an increase in efforts to expand scholarly horizons so as to include previously overlooked corpora, cultures, languages, geographical areas, media, and authors. *Grimms' Tales around the Globe*, edited by Vanessa Joosen and Gillian Lathey (2014), Mayako Murai's *From Dog Bridegroom to Wolf Girl: Contemporary Japanese Fairy-Tale Adaptations in Conversation with the West* (2015), and especially the expansive and comprehensive *Fairy-Tale World*, edited by Andrew Teverson (2019), are but a few notable titles which call for a de-centralization of both the discipline and the