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## ***Middle-earth, or There and Back Again* by Łukasz Neubauer**

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August 2-5, 2024

Via Zoom and Discord

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*Middle-earth, or There and Back Again* by Łukasz Neubauer

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**MIDDLE-EARTH, OR THERE AND BACK AGAIN.** Łukasz Neubauer (ed.)  
Cormarë Series 44. Zurich and Jena: Walking Tree Publishers, 2020. iii + 137 pp.  
ISBN: 978-3-905703-44-3.

Although the dispute about whether Tolkien's works should be read as Pagan or Christian still rages, it is a pleasure to read a collection of essays such as the one edited by Neubauer, where not only the general principle is expressed that Tolkien's works show a way to harmonize Paganism and Christianity, as done by Testi in his 2018 monograph,<sup>1</sup> but the specific modalities and terms of such an harmonization are thoroughly investigated with an eye on particular sources both Pagan and Christian.

Thus, after a short introduction by the editor of the volume, Michał Leśniewski treats the Atlantis fascination of Tolkien's and the inspiration he got therefrom for his tales of Númenor, but in tracing the original myth back to Plato, he justly underlines how the Pagan philosopher was an important reference for several medieval Christian thinkers. In the same way, in the next chapter Łukasz Neubauer argues that the scene at the bridge of *Khazad-dûm* in *The Lord of the Rings* depicts Tolkien's reinterpretation of Northern heroic spirit in a Christian form as Gandalf's beneficial altruism and self-sacrifice instead of Beorhtnoth's misbegotten effort to gain honours and glory.

Along the same lines, Barbara Kowalik discusses Pagan authors Hesiod and Plato's influence on Tolkien in the context of her detailed survey of the ways in which the Middle English poem *Pearl* probably inspired the author of *The Lord of the Rings*, and Bartłomiej Blaszkiewicz reads *The Fall of Arthur* as a poem deeply seated in Christian reworkings of the Arthurian Legend, yet stylistically drawing on pre-Christian formulaic oral poetry. In the next chapter, Andrzej Szyjewski analyzes Tolkien's Finnish inspirations from the *Kalevala* in his first conception of the Valarin "pantheon" between Lönnrot's notion of a Finnic primeval pagan monotheism and the Christianization of Uralic mythology. Eventually, Andrzej Wicher directly addresses Tolkien's Pauline undertones, and yet he also treats the Waning of the Elves as a Norse "Twilight of the Gods" (117), and Aman as Avalon, that is, "a Celtic land of the dead" (127).

Such an approach, I deem, is the one which should set the standard of Tolkien scholarship, neither ending up with conducting a sort of confessional reading that excludes other readers and rejects Tolkien's academic and personal interests in Pagan cultures and literatures, nor, conversely, constructing an entirely made-up figure of a Neo-Pagan Tolkien, which would contradict the whole testimony of his devout life, his academic interest in the language of

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<sup>1</sup> Reviewed in this issue.

Middle English religious texts, and his explicit writing. More studies investigating Tolkien in the intersection between Paganism and Christianity are certainly welcome.

Getting into the specifics of each essay in the collection, I especially appreciated how Leśniewski (9) brings up Denis Saurat's 1954 *L'Atlantide et le règne des géants* as an assured source in understanding Tolkien's thoughts on Atlantis, since it is cited in Letter 154 to Naomi Mitchison under the implication that Tolkien was familiar with the text. The notion that giants are not necessarily people of huge size materially, but perhaps intellectually or under other aspects yet (13), is fascinating also in respect to the ongoing debate on what are the Nephilim in the biblical book of *Genesis* 6,4, often cited in connection to the passage from *Beowulf* where the Elves are said to descend from Cain (*Beowulf* 1.112). Neubauer's chapter also has a point on *Beowulf* when he stresses how also the hero's decision to fight Grendel unarmed might be *ofermod*.

In Kowalik's essay (53), I should note the way she interestingly hypothesizes that the Ainur's Vision of the world yet uncreated as "globed" depends on images of the unfallen world as a pearl and fallen as an apple in *Pearl*. It would have been even more accurate to point out how these images might connect to both Tolkien's late notion of Arda as Morgoth's Ring and his symbolic portrait of evil as stealing unripe apples in the aborted sequel to *The Lord of the Rings*, titled *The New Shadow*. I think that also the concept of courtesy in Tolkien warrants for further exploration, both as stressed in the Virgin Mary's title of "Queen of Courtesy" from *Pearl*, cited by Kowalik (54), and as criticized in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Instead, I already suggested Galadriel may be partly inspired by Lady Bertilak, as Kowalik does (61), in my Italian monograph on Tolkien (Costabile 283-290).

I was surprised by Blaszkiewicz when he argues that *The Fall of Arthur* might be inspired by Dryden's rendition of Purcell's work (73), but indeed the idea of Arthur's military expedition against the Saxons is not traceable to any earlier known source, so he might well be right. Nonetheless, I have to point out how he seems to ignore the whole strand of Middle English romances focusing on Gawain as the quintessential Round Table knight instead of Lancelot, when he claims that Tolkien's focus on Gawain is unprecedented (73). Moreover, in stressing Guinevere's characterization as "fay-woman" (74), he misses the opportunity to connect her with the fay Gwendeling, as Melian of Doriath was called in the earlier versions of the legendarium, and, even more so, "fair and fell" should recall one of Galadriel.

I particularly appreciated Szyjewski's analysis of the way in which the Finnish-inspired Ilu eventually becomes Eru Ilúvatar. Also Wicher is brilliant when he compares Galadriel to Mary Magdalene (121), or when he points out that for mortality to become the threshold to immortality the already-immortal

must leave Middle-earth (117). Nonetheless, he is wrong in translating the name Galadriel as “Lady of Light” (121), since her name is glossed by Tolkien as meaning ‘Glittering Garland’ (*Letters* 423, #345). Moreover, the Girdle of Melian is no physical belt (118), but an immaterial spell.

*Middle-earth, or There and Back Again* is recommended both to scholars and to Tolkien’s readers. The efforts of the academicians behind the volume surely add up substantial contributions to the fields of Tolkien scholarship and the study of Mythopoeic literature, paving the way for future research.

—Giovanni Costabile

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**A SENSE OF TALES UNTOLD: EXPLORING THE EDGES OF TOLKIEN’S LITERARY CANVAS.** Peter Grybauskas. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2021. 176 pp. ISBN 978-1-60635-430-8. \$55.00 (hardcover)

THE WORLDS OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN’S WRITINGS are vast, imbued with richly varied geography and history, and Tolkien is deservedly credited as a master of “world-building.” Readers of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* immerse themselves in a world made to feel all the more “real”—even in its otherworldliness, with its Dragons, Balrogs, Ents, and Elves—because of the meticulous detail with respect to places, persons, and events. However, as readers also notice, for all the hundreds of thousands of words devoted to the tale-telling in these works, there are also hints of so many other tales left untold, which nevertheless reinforce the powerful sense of Middle-earth’s reality. That is, the reason that *The Lord of the Rings* and other works are as enchanting as they are owes as much to what is not fully revealed as to the detailed descriptions and complex narratives provided in the text.

In his excellent study of this subject, *A Sense of Tales Untold: Exploring the Edges of Tolkien’s Literary Canvas*, Peter Grybauskas takes up the daunting but exhilarating challenge to examine stories “untold” in Tolkien’s work. A senior lecturer in English at the University of Maryland, Grybauskas endeavors to explore “the frames, the edges, allusions, lacunae, the borders between story and un-story, gaps and spaces between vast Ages and miniscule periods in an ellipsis” (xvii). All of Tolkien’s readers have undoubtedly found tantalizing tidbits of “tales untold” of which they would like to hear more, such as Aragorn’s casual reference to “the cats of Queen Berúthiel” or the terrifying hints at the wars against Angmar during the Hobbits’s harrowing encounter