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## *Tolkien and the Classical World*, edited by Hamish Williams

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### Additional Keywords

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**TOLKIEN AND THE CLASSICAL WORLD.** Hamish Williams, ed. Zurich and Jena: Walking Tree Publishers, 2017. [10], xxvi, 414 pp. ISBN 9783905703450. \$32.00.

THIS VOLUME IS A RARE THING. IN MOST EXAMPLES of essay collections, the various essays are uneven: some quite good, some not as much, some very useful, some not as much. This collection, however, is even throughout providing examinations of various Classical sources and inspirations for Tolkien's legendarium. Although *Lord of the Rings* is a primary focus, the entirety of Middle-earth is in view with several essays examining other stories. In short, any quibbles I may have with this volume are pedantic, and over all I have nothing but praise for authors, editor, and publisher in bringing this book to Tolkien Studies.

Before turning to the contents of the volume, I will do an unusual move in book reviews and point to the cover design. This is nothing short of fantastic especially for those readers who know and appreciate Greek art. Jay Johnstone is the artist and the cover depicts trolls and dwarves in a battle. But the approach is to depict this in the style of Athenian black-figure pottery art where the viewer might see a battle of Greeks and Trojans, or Achilles and Memnon or other classical figures. Instead, we have trolls and dwarves.<sup>2</sup> In his acknowledgements, Williams mentions Johnstone's art gratefully, stating that one could easily see it on a Grecian vase where it might fool the unwitting. Lo, and behold, turning to the back cover one finds an amphora around the middle of which is this battle of trolls and dwarves with Grecian border decoration and peering eyes at the top. This made me smile, laugh, and love it simultaneously. I would wish to own a replica whether an amphora, a poster, a framed piece of this should the artist make such a thing available.<sup>3</sup>

That said, the cover art truly sets the stage for the essays. Like the art which takes a Classical Greek art form and imbues that form with a Tolkien scene, the authors of the essays examine various features of Classical literature's thoughts, themes, and scenes and recast them into part of his legendarium.

The volume is divided into an Introduction and five sections. Hamish Williams's Introduction discusses the differences between Tolkien's upbringing and our own period: Tolkien was brought up on the Classics as were all his generation. That Classical education is a rare thing in our world. Williams discusses what is meant by the Classics and a Classical education. He discusses the results of that difference: current readers will have a much different response

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<sup>2</sup> According to the artist's website, this is a depiction from *The Hobbit* of the three Huggins brothers struggling to overcome the dwarves.

<sup>3</sup> Pat Wynne's illustration for "'There and Back Again'—Odysseus and Bilbo Baggins" by Kenneth J. Reckford (*Mythlore* #53, Spring 1988) similarly employs a classical style.—Ed.

to Tolkien than his contemporaries simply because the intertextual and intratextual materials are no longer known to most of those readers.

The first section is titled "Classical Lives and Histories." The first paper addresses just how much a classicist Tolkien actually was, too long downplayed in Tolkien Studies. Hamish Williams observes in his conclusion to the article "The strings of a strong Classical education thus tightened and slackened at various stages in the course of Tolkien's life" (31). But Williams takes us beyond Tolkien's education with a look into Tolkien's reading tastes, especially those later in his life, focusing on the books of Mary Renault, herself recasting Classical tales into modern novels. Williams also outlines various ways in which Tolkien was influenced by the classics. The second paper in this section by Ross Clare examines the influence of specifically Greek historiographic authors on Tolkien. The bulk of the essay focuses on comparisons between Tolkien's Númenor of the Second Age and the Athenian Hegemony of the Aegean prior to and during the Peloponnesian War. Both societies follow a path of development from altruism and aid to others growing into authoritarianism which eventually collapses under the pressure of its attempts to continue to be authoritarian and empire. Clare also compares Tolkien's depiction of Númenórean kings with the historiographers' treatment of Roman emperors, noting also that the "Faithful" of Númenor have parallels with early Christians in the Roman Empire. One note is that Biblical depictions of kings follows a similar pattern as the historiographical writers in Rome; this might indicate multiple inspirations in Tolkien's approach to the kings of Númenor.

The second section, "Ancient Epic and Myth," contains four essays. Giuseppe Pezzini's essay explores how the way divinities in Greco-Roman mythology dealt with mortals provided the template for the Valar's interactions with lesser beings in the legendarium. The focus in classical terms are the intertextual epics of Homer and Vergil and *The Silmarillion* and *Lord of the Rings*. Pezzini identifies five modalities through which the divine communicates with mortals in Tolkien's work: Theophanies, Mediated Interactions, Natural Entities, Dreams, and Inspiration. Pezzini does note that Tolkien changes and adapts the classical modalities in order to fit the nature of the Valar and their charge to guide the beings of Middle-earth.

The next essay by Benjamin Eldon Stevens ploughs a similar row as Pezzini with the subject of the underworld and visitations with the dead, a *katabasis*. In the Classical mind, death is inescapable and certainly not a pleasant state, even in the Elysian fields. Tolkien, however, had a firm belief in the Resurrection of the dead and a positive view of the afterlife deriving from his firm Christian faith. Thus, here too Tolkien transforms the classical templates into his own model. The Tolkienian *katabasis* is related to *eucatastrophe*, such an important concept for Tolkien, and so *katabasis* becomes *eukatabasis* in Tolkien's

Middle-earth. In this conception, then, underworld experiences such as the Mines of Moria, Shelob's Lair, or the Halls of Mandos are but temporary stops on the path to perfection.

Piety is without question the most important theme of Vergil's *Aeneid*; "pious Aeneas" is the most common description of the epic hero. This theme, as Aeneas himself, is set against the values of the Homeric heroes and their need for *kleos*, glory. Austin M. Freeman in the third essay of this section examines *pietas* as an overlooked Vergilian influence on Tolkien's fiction. Throughout Tolkien's legendarium, personal sacrifice for the sake of others is how a Tolkien hero gains glory rather than glory for its own sake, and rather than the "Northern Spirit." Freeman goes so far as to say that Tolkien blends *kleos*, *pietas*, and *pistis*, Christian faith, into a "heady mix [...] the form of Northern bravery is filled with the content of Classical *pietas*, and driven by a final end of *pistis*" (131). While this article purports to be focused on Vergil and Tolkien, Freeman leads his readers on a higher path. Certainly the author considers Vergil's influence on Tolkien carefully, including an overview of Tolkien scholarship noting the connections between Vergil and Tolkien, and noting the influence of certain passages specifically on the siege of Minas Tirith. But Freeman goes beyond these. The crux of the article in my view is his statement: "Northern + Classical + Christian = English" (156). This essay is of great value not only for the specifics of Vergilian influence, but more importantly how Tolkien combines in an "alchemical" fashion these virtues from the three cultural influences into something new, *estel*: hope that results in action on behalf of others. *Estel* is thus hope, faith, faithfulness, and charity all in one.

Peter Astrup Sundt rounds out the second section by examining the Orpheus and Eurydice myth as an influence on Tolkien's literary output. Sundt's analysis focuses specifically on the classical myths as transmitted by Vergil and Ovid rather than the medieval poem *Sir Orfeo* which Tolkien translated and worked on. The influence of the latter is apparent in the Beren/Lúthien tale or even Aragorn/Arwen. In this article Sundt demonstrates that there has been a gender shift: Lúthien is Orpheus whose powerful song gains her entrance to the dark dungeons where Beren is held and gains his release. Beren, however, also fulfills the Orpheus role in other parts of the tale; like the mythic character Beren is said to have a connection with the natural world just as the Virgilian Orpheus does; both characters have a *katabasis* (a descent into the underworld) in Tolkien's treatment of his own legend. Orphic connections are not limited to Beren and Lúthien. Sundt states that Middle-earth should be labeled an "Orphic world" due to the prevalence of Orphic figures. Beyond those mentioned, the Ents share a number of Orphic qualities, most obviously in the loss of spouses that causes mournful songs. Sundt also notes Orphic connections with Tom Bombadil most notably in his ability to move trees

and other plant life to his will. Sundt successfully convinces me of the ubiquity of Orpheus as background to much that is in Middle-earth.

The third section of the book is titled "In Dialogue with the Greek Philosophers." In the first of the three essays here, Michael Kleu examines Plato's Atlantis myth's influence on Tolkien's the "great wave" and the Fall of Númenor. The author relates in detail Plato's treatments of the story in the dialogues, then draws out the multiple connections to Númenor and its downfall. This detailed analysis seeks to show that Tolkien actually read those dialogues and not just some summary or text influenced by them. One telling piece of evidence in that regard is that the Akallabeth ends with reflections on true Being and Becoming, a frequent dialogue topic in Plato, most importantly at the conclusion of the *Timaeus* which contains the most well-known version of Plato's myth. Kleu concludes his contribution with some reception theory applied to Tolkien's reception of the Atlantis myth not only through Plato but through other works which may have influenced Tolkien as well. One fairly minor point of detail that has nothing to do with the overall content of the chapter: the author states that Sauron "let" the Númenóreans he had deceived build a temple to Morgoth on Meneltarma, the mountain in the center of the island on whose top is an altar to Ilúvatar but no building. This is incorrect. Sauron "caused to be built" (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 273) a temple on a hill in the city. This detail does not and should not detract from the overall content and argument of the chapter; but to a reader steeped in Tolkien's Middle-earth it does stand out.

Magical rings are not unknown in literature though they are not common. The next essay in this section addresses connections between Plato's "Ring of Gyges" as related in Plato's *Republic* in book 2. The ring empowers the possessor to become invisible at will. Łukasz Neubauer takes a close look at the narrative noting parallels and discusses the similar themes that each tale of the ring illustrates. Chief among these connections is the corrosive and corruptive influence of the magical ring on the bearers. Neubauer also considers the morality of the bearers arguing that Bilbo's pity, like love, is a Christian influence taken directly from the Corinthian correspondence of St. Paul rather than the Platonic, and so noting the multi-layered influence when dealing with rings and ring-givers.

Julian Eilmann's contribution finishes this section by reflecting on Aristotle's theory of tragedy and noting how the narrative framework that Aristotle insists is essential to tragedy is fully present in Túrin's tale in *Children of Hûrin*. There would be few who would argue that this tale is not a tragic one and in many ways parallels the great Greek tragedies such as, in particular, the Oedipus cycle.

Section 4 deals with matters about scholarship of the Classical world rather than that world in particular. The first essay written by Philip Burton considers classical scholarship that Tolkien may have been influenced by. This is explored by noting the Classical world's connections to other parts of the world through largely works of etymology regarding classical flora, wine, and dragons. Burton focuses principally on Classical connections to the "hinterland," that is, northern Europe.

Richard Gallant considers the parallels between the "Noldorization of the Edain" and the Romanization of the Germanic tribes in Late Antiquity. Gallant notes three stages in each case. First, the "barbarians" (the Edain and the Germanic tribes) are admitted into the armies of the dominant culture and fight alongside. Second, the "barbarians" are admitted into the culture and society of the dominant culture. Third, the new-comers adopt the law-code of the dominant culture. The author notes that the Eldar have competing goals and that the comparison here fits the Fingolfan followers and their relationship to the Edain the best. Thus, *interpretatio Romana* becomes *interpretatio noldoriana*.

The final essay in this section follows Gallant in examining Gondor as equivalent to the Mediterranean world and Rohan as the Germanic tribes of Late Antiquity. Author Juliette Harrison argues that in this case Tolkien has transformed primary world history: the Germanic peoples *save* (emphasis mine) Rome/Minas Tirith rather than sack it, uphold its influence and hegemony in the region rather than dismantle it. The author is careful to explore that Rome as city and empire is only one influence on Minas Tirith, considering in particular Egyptian influences. But this *eucaatastrophic* transformation of Late Antiquity yet holds. Not only so, but the transformation also renders a very different view of Minas Tirith than the picture Faramir paints of decline and failing.

The final section consists of two "shorter" papers and reflections. Alley Marie Jordan considers Classical Pastoralism in Middle-earth focusing on the parallels of Vergil's shepherds in the *Eclogues* and the hobbits of the Shire. Both use these pastoral images as counter-point to war and imperialism.

The final essay by Oleksandra Filonenko and Vitalii Shchepanskyi consider "Classical Influences on the Role of Music." The authors point in particular to Pythagorean and Neo-Platonic discussions and parallels.

Summing up the collection is an afterword by D. Graham Shipley. Shipley reviews the contributions to the volume and discusses Tolkien's use of the Classics in comparison and contrast to C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams. He concludes the volume by stating that the Classical world may not be vital to understanding Tolkien's Middle-earth, but that Classical influences stand alongside the Medieval and are just as important.

This volume is certainly one for the shelf of every Tolkienist. While some essays are stronger than others, there is not one weak essay in the

collection. Some are more suggestive in their observations and conclusions than others, who argue more aggressively their suggested influences. A further note is that the volume addresses parts of the entire legendarium and not solely *Lord of the Rings* or *The Hobbit*. As stated at the beginning, real, in-depth consideration of the influence of the Classical world on Tolkien's imagination is yet an area to be mined, though some work has already been done. Further, I hope the volume generates additional interest in the Greek and Roman texts mentioned not only in relation to Tolkien and Lewis, but for their own sake.

—Larry Swain

#### Works Cited

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**MUSICAL SCORES AND THE ETERNAL PRESENT: THEOLOGY, TIME, AND TOLKIEN.** Chiara Bertoglio. Eugene, Oregon, Pickwick Publications (an imprint of Wipf and Stock), 2021. xv + 192 p. ISBN 9781725295025. Hardcover, \$41.00, Paper, \$26.00.

IN THIS STRIKING SYNTHESIS, AT ONCE LEARNED AND ACCESSIBLE, Bertoglio applies her broad knowledge as a concert pianist with graduate degrees in theology both to the persistent problem of timeless divine eternity and to taking “Tolkien’s *Ainulindalë* [...] as a filter for rereading the biblical narrative of Genesis” (167). The result is an eminently valuable contribution to studies of philosophical theology in relation to Tolkien’s legendarium. The book reworks and amplifies four earlier articles: “Dissonant Harmonies: Tolkien’s Musical Theodicy,”<sup>1</sup> “High Scores: The Notation of Music, Time and the Eternal Present,” “Dante, Tolkien, and the Supreme Harmony,” and “Polyphony, Collective Improvisation and the Gift of Creation.”

In accordance with its musical topic, the book begins with a *Praeludium*; a *Cadenza* and *Intermezzo* separate the two main parts, and a *Quodlibet* and more personal *Encore* follow the second. The first major section develops the idea of a musical score as a metaphor for divine timelessness, in four chapters: “Time and the Eternal Present” (3-16), “Musical Scores and Temporality” (17-34), “Music as a Syntax of Time” (35-59), and “Observing the Score” (60-78). The idea that the Divine cannot fundamentally exist in time follows directly for a theology which attributes absolute transcendence to the Divine: a Creator which is *totaliter aliter*, totally other than the creation, cannot have its primary existence

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<sup>1</sup> I commented briefly on “Dissonant Harmonies” for “The Year’s Work in Tolkien Studies.” I should also note that I am cited in the book, and that I spoke on “Radio la voce di Arda,” on September 10, 2021, at Dr. Bertoglio’s invitation.