



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

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

---

Volume 42  
Number 1

Article 26

---

October 2023

## ***East of the Wardrobe: The Unexpected Worlds of C.S. Lewis by Warwick Ball***

Phillip Irving Mitchell  
*Dallas Baptist University, TX*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Mitchell, Phillip Irving (2023) "*East of the Wardrobe: The Unexpected Worlds of C.S. Lewis by Warwick Ball*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 42: No. 1, Article 26.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol42/iss1/26>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact [phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).

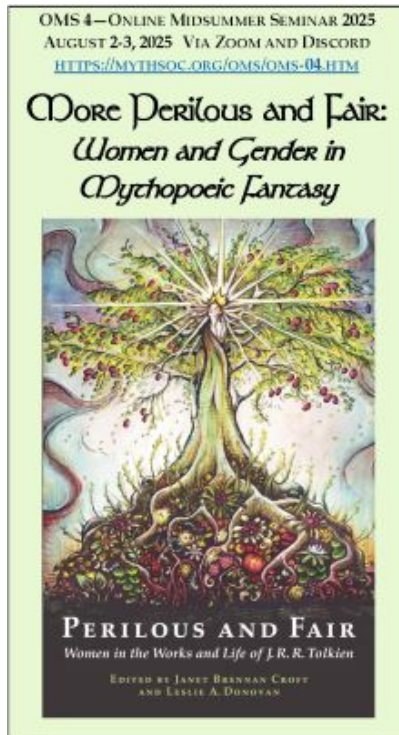
To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:  
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>

---

Online MidSummer Seminar 2025  
More Perilous and Fair: Women and Gender in Mythopoeic Fantasy  
August 2-5, 2024

Via Zoom and Discord

<https://www.mythsoc.org/oms/oms-04.htm>



*East of the Wardrobe: The Unexpected Worlds of C.S. Lewis* by Warwick Ball

**Additional Keywords**

Near Eastern Studies

**Creative Commons License**



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Tolkien in the World of Heavy Metal” certainly sheds light on a form of adaptation many readers may be unfamiliar with and is an interesting addition to this volume.

Penultimately, “Is Adapting Tolkien (Mis)Remembering Tolkien?” by Mina D. Luki investigates attitudes towards adaptation. The relationship between memory and adaptation shapes Luki’s line of thought, taking Jackson’s film trilogy as the adaptation in question. The author presents the range of responses to their research surveys to demonstrate the variety of opinions towards adaptations and modifications in Jackson’s trilogies. The discussion of canon, fandom, and collective memory extends the implications of Luki’s evidence and forms an interesting and well-rounded contribution to this volume. Readers keen to explore the factors involved in forming views towards adaptation will find this particularly valuable.

The final contribution is from Kristine Larsen, “Adapting Tolkien Beyond Arda, or, How to Navigate the Political Minefield of the International Astronomical Union in Order to Name Features on Titan, Pluto, and Charon After Middle-earth.” This article is built on the importance of names to and within Tolkien; it weaves this concept of names into a discussion of astronomical naming (particularly the politics of this) and concludes by considering the naming of features on Pluto and Charon. Larsen’s work is thorough and evidently well researched; however, I might suggest adherence to the general theme of adaptation is more subtle than in other contributions; application might be the word that comes to mind more readily, given the discussion of naming astrological features and rationalizing this by linking names to themes, characters, or settings in Tolkien. But this does not undermine the interest and value of Larsen’s work, and it concludes the volume on a stimulating and engaging note.

—Alana White



**EAST OF THE WARDROBE: THE UNEXPECTED WORLDS OF C.S. LEWIS.**  
Warwick Ball. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. xv + 298p.  
978019762652. \$27.95.

WARWICK BALL IS AN ARCHAEOLOGIST AND HISTORIAN, and that gives *East of the Wardrobe* a particular disciplinary insight. Much of what he sets out has been seldom explored concerning the Chronicles of Narnia, and Ball’s work in Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, and Ethiopia, as well as his study of Near Eastern influence on the Roman Empire, displays a broad knowledge of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish literature, as well as numerous Near Eastern and some Far

Eastern cultural connections. It means that C.S. Lewis's inventive world can be engaged from these multiple perspectives, and this opens up for Ball's readers the imaginative possibilities of the non-Western world and of history and archaeology in general. In Ball's approach, there is a certain romance to the evocative potential of the past. As he points out, for the archeologist, "a potsherd is not just a potsherd; it carries a huge number of other messages beyond mere ceramics: industry, chronology, artistic creativity, trade, international connections, the nature of a culture or a civilisation, and so forth" (221), and Ball endeavors to bring this sensibility to Narnia's visual and symbolic world, as well as to its wide scope of literary and cultural allusions.

The book's personal, digressive, and allusive qualities make it a page turner and often sheer fun to read. Ball can range across architecture, cuisine, men's and women's dress, currency, religious beliefs, travel literature, visual art, and folklore. At times, the digressive quality of the book ranges outside the expected Eastern sources to varying modern books such as the Harry Potter series, Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, films directed by Terry Gilliam, or the science-fiction which Lewis read. Ball also offers his opinions of American evangelicalism's love affair with all things Lewis. This wider range gives the book a chatty quality that some might find distracting, yet its discursiveness also makes the book ideal for engaging a general readership.

Ball's methodology, however, does raise a question of its interpretative purpose and value. In the last analysis, is *East of the Wardrobe* a study in conscious allusions, in unconscious sources, or in general comparative myth and religion? Ball himself often admits that the evidence for these as conscious allusions is of varying degrees of strength, and there is a tendency on his part to cast a wide net. Chapter One, "Endless Books," for example, acknowledges Lewis's limited international travel while stressing his wide reading and prodigious retention of what he read. Ball argues that Lewis's sources for allusions, conscious and subconscious, were other books, but Ball's copious examples are not always dependent upon reading that can be established as Lewis's. Ball can appeal to William Beckford's *Vathek*, Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh* and John Burgon's poem about Petra, to name a few, and assert that these would surely have been known to Lewis, presumably because they were standard English literature or well-known to the general public (25). Ball traces Charn to several possible sources, including Rose Macaulay's 1953 *Pleasure of Ruins* which makes reference to Persepolis, an illustration in Pascal-Xavier Coste's *Voyage en Perse*, and Christopher Marlowe's Tamburlaine (30), and he also offers similar possibilities for the origin of Aslan's name in James Morier's *The Adventurers of Hajji Baba of Ispahan*, Richard Davenport's more obscure *The Life of Ali Pasha*, and even marbles in the British Museum from the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus in Turkey (37-38, 44). Ball argues for the potential influence of

Robert Byron's *Road to Oxiana* on *The Last Battle* (36-37), yet later asserts with conviction that it owes much of its plot to Herodotus's account of the Graeco-Persian Wars (53). All of this has the delightful scope of a serious mind at play, and these can make for appealing reading, yet at times one wonders how much of this can be established beyond being somewhere in Lewis's possible education, reading, or English cultural knowledge.

The same can be said for the Ball's use of the visual. Ball invokes Lewis's insistence that his fiction began with mental pictures, which were followed by plots to support them, and *East of the Wardrobe's* numerous illustrations of artwork and photographs of architecture are engaging and help the reader envision the comparative connections that Ball explores. They too raise questions about the importance of the visual in interpreting and teaching Lewis's fiction. How important, one may ask, are illustrations to the way we spatially and narratively interpret Narnia? Chapter Two, for example, is brilliant in its own way. "It All [Perhaps] Began with a Picture" focuses on Pauline Baynes's illustrations for the *Chronicles*, and Ball recognizes rightly that for more than one generation of readers, Baynes's visuals have been intertwined with their love of Narnia. He traces her indirect debt through Aubrey Beardsley to Eastern styles and her more direct awareness of Persian painting. The figure reproductions of Nizami's *Khamsa* are particular revealing of patterns that Baynes borrowed (75-77). He also looks at her training at the Slade School of Art and how it would have made her aware of numerous drawings and engraving by Western illustrators of Istanbul, Cairo, and Samarkand, and Ball shows how each shaped Baynes's drawing of Tashbaan. Ball points out, too, that at times Baynes's visual imagination crosses boundaries. Her Calormene armor, he points out, is more Japanese or European than Saracen (72). Ball's digressive approach also allows him to explore Baynes's re-illustration of certain scenes for a 1989 edition of the *Chronicles* and her later commission to illustrate an edition of *The Arabian Nights*. All this makes for enriching reading, but by the end of the chapter Baynes herself is the real subject rather than Narnia per se.

I admit as the book progressed I began to be more and more skeptical of Ball's claims for allusions and wished he had simply explored the comparative possibilities since they provide him more than enough ground to stand on, and they are clearly his expertise. There are important exceptions to this. He traces in very convincing fashion the debt that *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* owes to *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (147-150). Likewise, he makes a strong case for why *The Arabian Nights* influenced Lewis despite his stated distaste for them (43-48). Yet there are also cases where there simply is no need for Ball to establish direct intentional allusions, and his desire to do so on more pluralistic grounds is forced. For example, when Ball claims that Aslan's creation of Narnia through song is non-Christian, he likely means that the

imagery is not a typical Christian picture, or perhaps that older versions can be traced to pre-Christian sources. Ball points to Aboriginal Dreamtime and its presence in Frazer's *Golden Bough* as one potential source. He seems to overlook, at least here, the medieval appropriation of the Ptolemaic cosmos and the music of the spheres. Even if such music does not have a Christian origin per se, it had long been one by the time it reached Lewis. So why make the effort to insist on its being other than Christian for him? Likewise, Ball's attempts at locating Manichaeism and Sufi themes in Lewis often seem a stretch, that is, as *allusions*. They do offer some fascinating comparative possibilities and are worth a discussion as to how varying readers can encounter and respond to Lewis's more apocalyptic approach in *The Last Battle*. I suspect one has to already be committed to a Manichaean thesis to hold that the binaries of light and dark or Aslan and Tash are traceable back to a Manichaean worldview, rather than the more obvious Jewish and Christian genres of apocalypse. Ball is correct, however, to raise the question as to whether such a dualistic metaphysics shaped Lewis as a residual impulse from his pre-conversion period or perhaps through Augustine's own debatable holdovers. (201-205).

All this raises the issue of whether an author's judged intentions should shape our readings of his or her work; at least, if we are to take Lewis's own beliefs seriously. Ball's citation of Jonathan Lee on Lewis's "Limited Inclusivism" (see 269n84 and 270n98) provides some of the ground for Lewis's own understanding of other religions. Since this concept needs further explanation, it would have strengthened the book to bring this out of the footnotes and into chapter seven, though this might also have changed the character of Ball's project and been less effective with some readers. At the same time, limited inclusivism is not the same as general universalism, and Ball's convictions are not always ones that Lewis would have shared, so some readers may walk away without questioning Ball's attributions, believing they are more established than they really are. For example, Ball's claim that since Aslan can be known by other names, "'Tashlan' is after all, valid," runs against the whole plot of *The Last Battle*, where a profession of Tashlan is treated as blasphemy (210). Ball's more pluralistic instincts can conceivably reach such a conclusion, but hardly because Lewis would have agreed. Ball, in his defense, admits that Lewis would not see himself as a Manichean and, furthermore, argues that no one should judge another's religion (215-216). Nevertheless, I think some discussion of Lewis's doctrine of the Tao and his Appendix for *The Abolition of Man* would have helped ground better the kind of conversation Ball wants to encourage. Lewis is not gesturing to the universal except as it fits within his own worldview, and by the time Ball concludes his final chapter, "Farther Up and Farther In," in praise of something like mere universalism, he has traveled well beyond Lewis's demonstrable intentions.

For some, far more important than Ball's view of religion is his stance towards post-imperialism and Orientalism. It is fairly clear by the time he directly addresses Edward Said that Ball is a traditional scholar and not terribly concerned with such critical readings beyond the obvious justice of their moral distaste with stereotypes and Euro-centric prejudices. Throughout *East of the Wardrobe*, it is the Calormenes, especially in *The Horse and His Boy*, that naturally dominate Ball's discussion, and chapter three, "The Manners and Customs of the Modern Calormen," shows how Lewis's portrait of Tashbaan is equally a fantasy drawn from Western ideals, positive and negative, and based on accounts of the actual Cairo or Istanbul (117-123), as well as on T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and its descriptions of the desert (128-130). Here, Ball's perspective as a historian prevails, for he is as often a curator as an interpreter of the past, and he finds the long tradition of Orientalism, if not entirely unproblematic, less sinister than some might conclude. He judges Lewis (and Tolkien) as part of the classicist approach to the East and reflective of the conflicts surrounding World War II, and he argues that in the latter context, Lewis was likely far more antagonistic towards Germans and Italians than Arabs or Turks. Likewise, he maintains that the European romantic fantasy of the Middle East in the 1940s and 50s was decidedly more gentle than more recent Muslim stereotypes of fundamentalist violence and misogyny, so Lewis should be read as a person of his time and culture rather than ours (230-233). Ball's reading here will hardly satisfy everyone, but it is consistent with his discursive invitation to enjoy the archeological and cross-cultural possibilities which he explores.

Ball's best instincts, after all, are inclusive and celebratory. Thus, he can appeal to Michael Ward's *Planet Narnia* thesis of the seven heavens and yet respectfully demur, not so much by discounting Ward's specific associations, as by expanding the possible sevens to include the Seven Sages and Gates to the Underworld of Mesopotamia, the various sevens of Ancient and Medieval Christianity (the seven deadly sins, the seven churches of Revelation, the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit), and *The Seven Beauties* of Sufi poet Nizami of Ganja. With this last selection, Ball waxes poetic exploring Nizami's own symbolic system in some detail, even offering a table that summarizes the points of comparison and contrast (228).

"The Chronicles of Narnia," as Ball points out, "have been criticised as a pastiche. *Of course* it is—a magnificent pastiche" (238). For those readers and critics who are inclined to archetypal readings, Ball's own pastiche has much to offer, and the same can be said for those seeking to explore post-colonial and post-imperial readings, even if only as a counter to Ball's less critical examinations. But, as I have suggested above, even those readers who are simply interested in comparative literature can enjoy the numerous possibilities

on display. I think *East of the Wardrobe* will be mined for all of these for some years to come.

—Philip Irving Mitchell



**NÓLĚ HYARMENILLO: AN ANTHOLOGY OF IBERIAN SCHOLARSHIP ON TOLKIEN.** Edited by Nuno Simões Rodrigues, Martin Simonson, and Angélica Varandas. Walking Tree Publishers, 2022. 198 p. ISBN 978-3-905703-47-4. \$24.30 from amazon.com.

**I**F YOU SHIED AWAY FROM *NÓLĚ Hyarmenillo: An Anthology of Iberian Scholarship on Tolkien* in the belief that it would be in Spanish and Portuguese, or that a knowledge of Spanish and Portuguese culture or Tolkien fandom would be required, rest assured: this is not the case. The nine essays presented here are all in English, similar to what you would find in Tolkien-related English-language publications, without the pretentious academic jargon. This is a well-designed book, nicely produced, well written in excellent English and free from typos and other errors.

Series editors Thomas Honegger & Doreen Triebel write:

The present collection with essays by Spanish and Portuguese scholars is part of Walking Tree Publishers' endeavour to support the academic dialogue and exchange between the different international research efforts in matters Tolkien. The selection illustrates the breadth and depth of the Iberian scholarship, and we hope that it helps to build bridges between the Tolkien-communities of the English, Spanish, and Portuguese speaking worlds respectively. ("Acknowledgments")

One hopes that their efforts will bear fruit, for much work in Tolkien Studies is being done outside England and the United States, which needs to be acknowledged and listened to.

*Nólë Hyarmenillo* ("Lore from the South" in Quenya) contains nine essays, chosen to highlight a variety of approaches to Tolkien: three on Peter Jackson's films, two on Anglo-Saxon and Norse elements, two on literary and philosophical approaches to Tolkien (using trees as metaphors), and two on popular culture (including one film essay).

The Introduction, by editors Nuno Simões Rodrigues, Martin Simonson, and Angélica Varandas, gives a history of Tolkien scholarship in Spain and Portugal, and of the authors and essays included. It should be read.