



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

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

Volume 42
Number 2

Article 34

April 2024

The Road to Fair Elfland: Tolkien on Fairy-stories: An Extended Commentary by Giovanni Carmine Costabile

Landon Loftin

Gravitas: A Global Extension of the Stony Brook School

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



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Loftin, Landon (2024) "*The Road to Fair Elfland: Tolkien on Fairy-stories: An Extended Commentary by Giovanni Carmine Costabile*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 42: No. 2, Article 34.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol42/iss2/34>

This Briefly Noted 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.

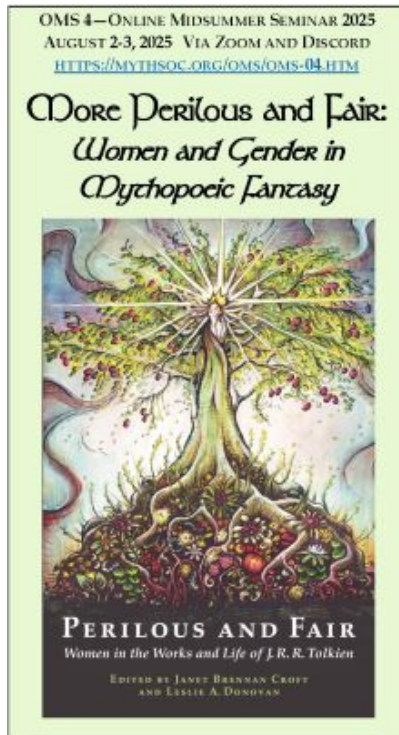
To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>

SWOSUTM

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>



The Road to Fair Elfland: Tolkien on Fairy-stories: An Extended Commentary by Giovanni Carmine Costabile

Abstract

"Briefly Noted" Review of *The Road to Fair Elfland* by Giovanni Carmine Costabile

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/).

THE ROAD TO FAIR ELFLAND: TOLKIEN ON FAIRY-STORIES: AN EXTENDED COMMENTARY. Giovanni Carmine Costabile. Phronesis Editore, 2022. 214 pp. 9788897328247. €18,00/\$16.83; Kindle \$9.96.

ON FAIRY-STORIES"—AN ESSAY THAT BEGAN ITS LIFE as a lecture that J.R.R. Tolkien delivered at St. Andrews in 1939—is a must-read for anyone who has more than a casual interest in Tolkien's fiction; indeed, it is a touchstone for all scholarly inquiries into Tolkien's writings about Middle-Earth, which exemplify the conception of *faërie* that the essay so illuminatingly explores. Though "On Fairy-stories" is itself admirably perspicuous, Tolkien's wide-ranging remarks are tantalizingly brief. Because of this, the essay imparts as many questions as answers in the minds of thoughtful readers. Commentaries like *The Road to Fair Elfland* by Giovanni Carmine Costabile, are therefore both expected and welcome.

The book begins with a long introduction by Simon Cook, who makes a number of unexpected but surprisingly interesting connections. For instance, in the discussion of Tolkien's theory of imagination, one expects (and indeed finds) engagement with thinkers like Coleridge, but not (as one also finds) with figures like Thomas Hobbes, whose contributions to the rise of nominalism are examined at length. The relevance of this connection is, at first, difficult to discern, though diligent readers with philosophical interests may find their efforts well-rewarded.

After the introduction, Costabile's commentary begins. On the whole, as Cook notes in his introduction, Costabile's comments are "erudite, deeply researched, and wide-ranging" (I). He does a great service to his reader in bringing extensive quotes from a handful of Tolkien scholars, and from various relevant primary and secondary sources. Many of the authors that Costabile engages, such as MacDonald, Chesterton, and Lewis, will be familiar to any enthusiast of Tolkien; others, such as R.G. Collingwood—one of Tolkien's most eminent colleagues—are likely only familiar to more scholarly readers (it is, in fact, the comparisons and contrasts made between Tolkien and Collingwood that proved most interesting to this reviewer). The reader will also benefit from Costabile's original analyses, which are frequently interesting and insightful. Where Costabile falters, it is usually in his occasional failure to distinguish his own idiosyncratic interests from those that are likely to be shared by the broader community of Tolkien's readers. To some degree, then, an individual reader's evaluation of the book will be conditioned by the degree to which he or she happens to share Costabile's interests.

At least one more reservation needs to be mentioned: this book is not user-friendly. For reasons that are undoubtedly beyond the author's control, the book does not contain the text of "On Fairy-stories." If you want to use the book

you must therefore have the expanded edition that is edited and annotated by Douglas Anderson and Verlyn Flieger. Furthermore—a point that will bother some readers more than others—there are a number of petty errors and typographical inconsistencies. However, despite being distracting, these do not detract from the substance of Costabile’s commentary. On the whole, therefore, readers who find their imaginative appetites whetted by “On Fairy-stories” would do well to wade through *The Road to Fair Elfland*. Moreover, researchers who may find themselves engaging the ideas presented in “On Fairy-stories” may wish to have *The Road to Fair Elfland* on hand for *à la carte* guidance and inspiration.

—Landon Loftin

LANDON LOFTIN is a PhD candidate at Faulkner University, a teacher at Gravititas: A Global Extension of the Stony Brook School, and co-author of *What Barfield Thought: An Introduction to the Work of Owen Barfield*.



MYTHOPOEIC SOCIETY AWARDS 2023 WINNERS

2023 Mythopoeic Fantasy Award for Adult Literature

Sacha Lamb, *When the Angels Left the Old Country* (Levine Querido, 2022)

2023 Mythopoeic Fantasy Award for Children’s Literature

Kelly Barnhill, *The Ogress and the Orphans* (Algonquin Young Readers, 2022)

2023 Mythopoeic Scholarship Award in Inklings Studies

Paul S. Fiddes, *Charles Williams and C.S. Lewis: Friends in Co-inherence* (Oxford University Press, 2021)

2023 Mythopoeic Scholarship Award in Myth and Fantasy Studies

Brian Attebery, *Fantasy: How It Works* (Oxford University Press, 2022)

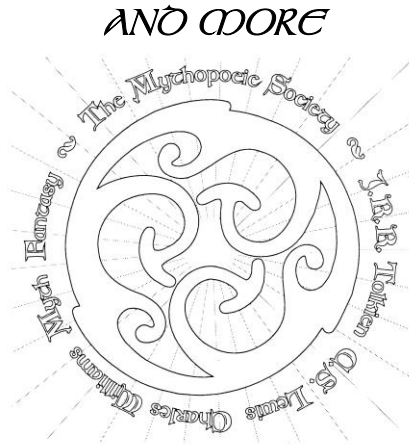
2023 Alexei Kondratiev Student Paper Award

Anna Caterino, “Hell on His Mind: Dean Winchester’s Journey to Hell and Back” (published in *Mythlore* #144)

IN THE NEXT ISSUE:

“THE COMPANY AT ST. ANNE’S” AND “THE GOD’S GARDENERS”: WHAT C.S. LEWIS AND MARGARET ATWOOD TEACH US ABOUT CARING FOR OUR PLANET

BY ANNE-FRÉDÉRIQUE MOCHEL-CABALLERO



Patrick Wynne

A note on the cover design:

The Mythopoeic Society has long used an inward-oriented triskelion design as its logo. In Mythlore #3 (July 1969), editor Glen GoodKnight reproduced a sketch by BG Callahan which labels the three arms to represent J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Charles Williams, and identifies them with the authors' key concepts of, respectively, Eucatastrophe, Sehnsucht, and Romantic Theology, all leading to Joy at the center. Starting with issue #142, Mythlore's cover features a plurality of outward-reaching triskelions, which represent an open and inclusive approach to mythopoeic fantasy, still centered on the Joy it brings us as readers and scholars, and still anchored by, but quite rightly reaching well beyond, our original core three authors. The open source triskelion design used on the cover and interior of the journal is <https://openclipart.org/detail/278014/triskel> by roshellin.