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Pity, Power, and Tolkien's Ring: To Rule the Fate of Many, by Thomas P. Hillman

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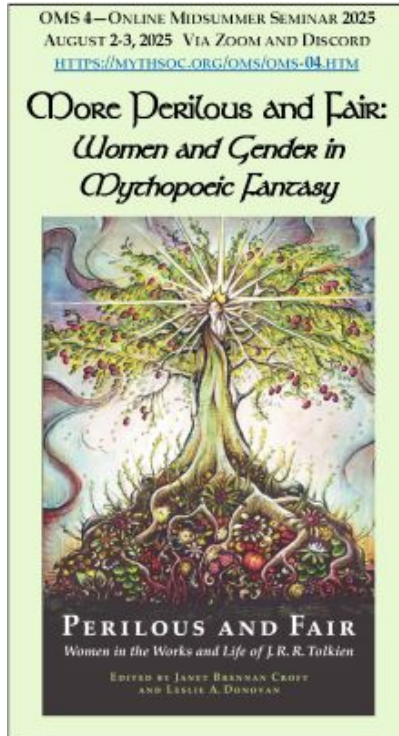
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Knight on a horse, but the corresponding *Phantomwise* card shows a young man on a Gryphon, such as Celia creates for the Circus.

Ultimately, however, it is fortunate that Morgenstern did not aim for a complete alignment of the *Phantomwise* Tarot imagery and the novel. Such a project would certainly have resulted in a predictable set of illustrations for the text akin to the many “based-on” decks currently flooding the swag market. True *Night Circus* revelers and Tarot readers alike will certainly prefer the more subtle and haunting delights of *The Phantomwise Tarot*.

—Emily E. Auger

Morgenstern, Erin. *The Night Circus*. Random House, 2011.

EMILY E. AUGER (Ph.D.) is the author of numerous books and articles, including *Cartomancy and Tarot in Film 1940-2010* (2016) and *Tarot and Other Meditation Decks* (2004; new expanded edition 2023), editor of the multi-author *Tarot in Culture Volumes I and II* (2014); and co-editor with Janet Brennan Croft of *Divining Tarot: Papers on Charles Williams’s The Greater Trumps and Other Works* by Nancy-Lou Patterson (2019). She also served as the area chair for Tarot and Other Methods of Divination at the Popular Culture Association / American Culture Association conference from 2004-2020.



PITY, POWER, AND TOLKIEN’S RING: TO RULE THE FATE OF MANY.

Thomas P. Hillman. Kent OH: Kent State University Press, 2023. 320 pp. ISBN 9781606354711. \$40.00.

CECI N’EST PAS UN ANNEAU. THIS IS NOT A RING. Or so René Magritte would have written under a painting of the One Ring, if he ever painted one. Because, of course, Tolkien’s One Ring is not just *a* ring, meaning *any* ring. It is *the* Ring, the answer to a riddle that comes in the form of another riddle. It is a signifier the signification of which is found in the mythical sphere of the imagination and escapes clear explanations in plain everyday letters. Nonetheless, Hillman thought that it is possible both to describe the effects of the Ring on its bearers in Middle-earth and to comment on it with reference to real world literary and philosophical authors that Tolkien knew, from the *Beowulf*-Poet and Homer to Aristotle and Boethius. *Pity, Power, and Tolkien’s Ring* is the result of this undertaking, a result that constitutes a rewarding and interesting read.

As the title suggests, the focus of the book is found in the opposition between Pity and Power, a contrast that is certainly highlighted by *The Lord of the Rings* and by Tolkien’s correspondence as well as by several scholars. For the

first time, though, an entire monograph examines the entire field of the implications of such an assumption, through an extensive and detailed analysis of the chapters of *The Lord of the Rings* in which the Ring is present and a thorough study of its effects on each and every one of its bearers. It is a remarkable testimony to the quality of Tolkien's writing how well his work holds such a sustained examination, and equally the academic rigor of the research is a witness to Hillman's precision and erudition in his scholarship.

Pity, Power, and Tolkien's Ring is made of an introduction and eleven chapters, of which the last sums up the conclusions of the whole study. Bibliography and a helpful index are also provided in the end. A note of little concern is that, while readers familiar with Kent State University Press titles may be acquainted with their style, for example by reading Verlyn Flieger's excellent books, I find it questionable to have endnotes in a monograph, especially when reading on paper, since it forces one to check the end of the volume nearly every other page, when footnotes are usually the obvious and more readable solution in such circumstances.

The introduction sets the premise of the whole by stressing the importance of pity and, especially, Pity as a concern in Tolkien's works in general and in *The Lord of the Rings* particularly. Since the beginning I especially liked how Hillman repeatedly references the tale of Beren and Lúthien throughout the book, so to suggest that the similarity between the recovery of the Silmaril and the destruction of the Ring is not just an incidental suggestion that the Hobbits advance on the threshold of Mordor, but an actual indication that the two tales share the Quest frame and the same theme of the little ones overcoming the mighty and powerful. Indeed, I was surprised that Hillman, even though he mentions the fact that one of Tolkien's letters refers to the motive of the wheels of the world being turned by the humble, did not quote the phrase from said letter referencing Beren and Lúthien's tale as "the first example of the motive (to become dominant in Hobbits)" (*Letters* 209, #131).

The first three chapters, "Bilbo's Lie and the Ring," "Bilbo's Pity and the Ring," and "The 1951 *Hobbit* and 'The Shadow of the Past,'" study the first two chapters of *The Lord of the Rings*, "A Long-expected Party" and "The Shadow of the Past," in connection with the chapter "Riddles in the Dark" from the 1937 edition of *The Hobbit* and its 1951 revision. Hillman convincingly argues that Bilbo displays signs of his attachment to the Ring that are often overlooked and that Frodo too initially refuses Gandalf's advice to learn to pity Gollum because of the evil influence of the Ring, exerting its effect from the very start of Frodo's acquisition thereof.

In the first chapter I disagree with Hillman's interpretation of the Ring as Sauron's power only, and not also his life. When Tolkien writes that the Ring is "one of the various mythical treatments of the placing of one's life, or power,

in some external object" (*Letters* 399, #211), he is not taking the *or* conjunction to be exclusive, as in an either/or clause in which an alternative cannot coexist with the other: in this case, it does not mean that one can either put one's life or one's power in the object. "[L]ife, or power" is rather inclusive, as in an alternative between names, both of which refer to the same person or thing: in this case, what is placed in some external object can either be called one's life, or one's power. Power and life are in this case synonyms precisely because they refer to Sauron's soul, which, although angelic, through his fall became incarnate. In Aristotle's treatise *On the Soul*, he defines incarnate souls as being of three kinds: vegetative, sensitive, and rational. Vegetative souls are the souls of plants, that are only capable of nutrition and growing/diminishing. Animals also have a vegetative soul, but they possess a sensitive soul too, enabling locomotion, sensation, and emotion. Humans have all three souls, including the rational soul, that allows articulated speech, calculation, and logical thinking. So, Hillman is both right and wrong that Sauron's Ring is not an extension of his soul: it is not an extension of his rational soul, but only of his vegetative and sensitive soul, allowing the Ring to grow and diminish in size, to feed on its bearer and all those who desire it, to move (like when it abandons Gollum), to feel and to act on sensations and emotions, not after a rational design, but thriving on irrational pulses like an evil beast or a parasite plant. The Ring does not have a rational will or consciousness, but it has an animal will and consciousness. So, indeed it has a will and consciousness of its own, literally. What it lacks is a conscience, or a free will, that are properties of a rational soul. Tolkien's point is that evil is an abdication of one's rational soul, despite all of Morgoth's, Sauron's and Saruman's cunning. But evil has life and power of a certain kind. Life properties, or life powers, of the soul are its vegetative and sensitive powers. So, when Sauron forges the Ring, he imbues it with part of his vegetative and sensitive soul, that is, with part of his vegetative and sensitive power, or vegetative and sensitive life. Hillman misunderstood this aspect, even if the rest of his analysis here is thorough and accurate. But his knowledge of Aristotle might have led one to assume that he would have been keener on this point.

Chapters four to ten analyze Frodo's Quest from the Shire to Mordor and back, to finally depart from the Grey Havens. The examination is extensive and appropriate almost in all respects, and he raises many acute points, actually too many to list them here. For example, he notices how Frodo's temptation at the Barrow-downs is a crucial moment, as Gandalf later observes, and he points out how "Galadriel herself is a mirror" (Hillman 104). He studies the impression that Sam has that Frodo in a few key moments seems like a great lord, he compares Faramir's renunciation of the Ring to Tom Bombadil's, and he puts the choices of Master Samwise under the light of *ofermod* in *The Battle of Maldon*.

In chapter 10 Hillman surveys in detail the consequences of taking seriously Verlyn Flieger's suggestion that Frodo is broken after the destruction of the Ring (Flieger 163): the whole final chapters of *The Return of the King* are devotedly studied by him in this respect.

But Hillman is wrong not only on the life and power that Sauron imbued in the One Ring. To begin with, Hillman does not take seriously his own observation that the Ring is betrayal (Hillman 89): in the light of my observations (Costabile 2023; 2024, especially chapter 11), the treacherousness of the Ring implies marital treason (adultery) and religious treason (idolatry) as well. Sauron, like Morgoth, wants to become his own God. Galadriel imagines becoming a terrible Queen whom "all shall love [...] and despair" (*LotR* II.7.366). Tolkien connected Galadriel's temptation with sex (in the BBC radio interview, at 17:07), which entails the vanity of glamour in its modern sense that Tom Shippey mistakenly thought to be necessarily germane to Tolkien (Shippey 47). Hillman assumes without argument that the Ring's betrayal is asexual and areligious.

Furthermore, the ninth chapter, "Hobbits in Darkness," is a little gem by its own, but somehow it misses McIntosh's explanation of the apparent contradiction between Manichaeism and Augustine/Boethius in Tolkien's account of evil: Shelob's darkness only "seemed" (*LotR* IV.9.718) to have a substance of its own. While I think that McIntosh did not manage by this explanation to settle the matter, I would have expected that his attempt deserved at least a mention, especially since his monograph is cited in the bibliography. Hillman also laments that there is not an extensive treatment of evil in Tolkien, but does not mention the fact that McIntosh dedicates a whole, long, final chapter to the subject in his book.

The eleventh and final chapter, "Pity and Power in Time," concludes the volume by considering mortal and immortal in Middle-earth as a parallel to the dichotomy between pagan and Christian in real world history. The proposition is enlightening and brilliant, also with respect to another of the volume's many instances of bringing the tale of Beren and Lúthien into play, always appropriately. The highlighting of Arwen's Pity towards Frodo is another striking passage. Nonetheless, another shortcoming of Hillman's is found precisely in this chapter: "though in all lands love is now mingled with grief, it grows perhaps the greater" (*LotR* II.6.349) is read by the author as though "it" referred to "the world" from the preceding "[t]he world is full of peril" (Hillman 253). Instead, love is clearly the subject of the last sentence, so that one should read: "though in all lands love is now mingled with grief, [love] grows perhaps the greater."

My criticism is particularly strict because such an outstanding work as Hillman's proves to be should be evaluated against its own high standards. And

Pity, Power, and Tolkien's Ring, despite said shortcomings, passes the test, proving itself to be an important work of Tolkien scholarship that contributes in a positive way to discussions on the Ring, Pity, Power, and a variety of related subjects. Part of the discussion that it stimulates I already pointed out above, but the book contains valuable insights in many other respects that makes it a reference in its field and a sure recommendation, with the only suggestion that my indications of what Hillman overlooked may prompt him and the publishers to incorporate a few corrections and additions in order to remedy a few mistakes, omissions, and imprecisions in a second edition.

—Giovanni Carmine Costabile

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