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## **Hamish Williams. *Tolkien and the Classical World*. Zurich and Jena: Waking Tree Publishers, 2021. Pp. xi & 414. £19.85. ISBN: 978-3-905703-45-0 (pbk).**

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Tolkien and the Classical World is the 46th and latest entry in Waking Tree Publisher's Cormarë Series, a series dedicated to the study of Tolkien's life and legendarium. As the title suggests, the volume views the Tolkien's works through a classical lens, and in this pursuit, collates a varied offering from 16 Tolkienists and Classicists. The result is an eclectic volume, which takes on a wide range of subjects with varying levels of success. While the volume does not necessarily break new ground, it does push the boundaries on some themes and reflections that are recurrent in the study of Tolkien's classical influences and is therefore a valuable resource for all scholars of Tolkien and classical reception alike.

The work is divided into 5 themes, namely: 'Classical lives and Histories'; 'Ancient Epic and Myth'; 'In Dialogue with Greek Philosophers'; 'Around the Borders of the Classical World'; and finally, 'Shorter Remarks and Observations'. The latter section contains two succinct pieces, the first of which appears to find its place in this volume, while the second needed more time and space to make an impact. One thing the volume does fairly well throughout is to recognise that Tolkien need not have read or studied a particular classical work or history to have been influenced by it. This does mean, however, that some essays attempt to handle topics that Tolkien never openly broached himself. While some handle this challenge well, others have a harder time being convincing and thus fail to fulfil the purpose of the volume, as stated by Williams (discussed further below).

In the introduction, 'Classical Tradition, Modern Fantasy and the Generic Contracts of Readers' (p.xi-xxvi), Williams places the volume within the current academic and cultural climate, establishing, with reference to specific essays, where it sits in the field of classical reception, before moving on to discuss Tolkien's work and its position in modern culture. In particular, Williams notes that a decline in classical training has led to classical influences in modern texts being obscured by other more recognisable influences (p.xvi).[1] In doing so, the scholar justifies classical analyses of Tolkien, and gives a rationale for the volume's ultimate aim; that is to question if and how classical source criticism allows us to interpret and reinterpret Middle-earth. While most of the volume is successful in this pursuit, there are certain offerings which fall short of the mark.

The scholar then provides the first offering, a biographical piece, 'Tolkien the Classicist: Scholar and Thinker' (p.3-36). Providing a launchpad for the following essays, Williams justifies the search for classical sources in Tolkien's work, guiding readers chronologically through Tolkien's initial love for, subsequent disillusionment, and eventual reconciliation with classics. Naturally, the biographical works of Carpenter and Garth are necessarily consulted, though Williams equally makes use of some less well-known sources. In particular, the scholar's use of Oronzo Cilli's 2019 volume, *Tolkien's Library*, is particularly effective for showing the depth of Tolkien's classical knowledge. In this respect, Williams attempts to show unequivocally (as Tom Shippey has previously) that Tolkien is almost as much a classicist as he is a medievalist.[2]

The following chapter, Ross Clare's 'Greek and Roman Historiographies in Tolkien's Númenor' (p.37-68), adds to the body of work, populated by the works of Shippey and Ford, amongst others, which aims to identify historical referents in Tolkien's imagined peoples.[3] Focusing on the history of Númenor, Clare demonstrates the parallels between: Tolkien's Númenor and the rise and fall of Athens; the Númenorean kings and the Roman Emperors; and the fall of the Númenorean Faithful and the subjugation of Christians in the Roman Empire. It is perhaps curious that there was not a greater emphasis on Tolkien's own Christianity in the final section, though an in-depth discussion of this would likely require an essay of its own. While these three historical referents may initially seem quite broad, Clare justifies discussing them together by demonstrating that the historians who wrote about these periods – whether through 'historical storytelling techniques' or 'classical historiographical strategies and conventions' – may have had an influence on how the fall of Númenor was written (p.63). Thus, the scholar sets a precedent for further studies; that classical receptions are not found solely in Tolkien's imagined cultures, but also in the way that Tolkien writes their histories.

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[1] This is perhaps what Newman (2005) intended when he stated that 'this is a moment to emphasise, not our lofty superiority of taste… but our kinship with Tolkien's epic.'

[2] Shippey 2011.

[3] Ford, 2005; Shippey 2013.

The first text in 'Ancient Epic and Myth', Giuseppe Pezzini's 'The Gods in Tolkien's Epic: Classical patterns of Divine Interaction' (p.73-103), compares and contrasts Tolkien's Valar with the classical gods of Olympus, analysing how both interact with mortals. The scholar begins by analysing divine interaction in the *Silmarillion*, in the form of theophanies, then direct interaction, before moving onto various forms of mediated interaction, contrasting throughout against classical examples. The final section focuses on divine interaction in *The Lord of the Rings*, which as Pezzini demonstrates, is far more implicit than in the mythological *Silmarillion*. The scholar's final summation of divine interaction provides fertile grounds for a study aimed more closely at Tolkien's own experiences; that is, while the Olympians are motivated by self-interest, Tolkien's Valar are motivated by love for mortals, and learn over time to aid them without encroaching upon their freedom. That being said, while Pezzini has aptly rationalised this from a theological perspective, there is perhaps more to be said from a political standpoint which might enlighten the topic further (Williams' observations on Tolkien and the notion of empire and liberty, for example, might be relevant here (p.28-9)).

Benjamin Eldon Stevens' essay, 'Middle-earth as Underworld: From Katabasis to Eucatastrophe' (p.105-130), examines the nature of Tolkien's depiction of *katabasis*, contrasting it against the inherently negative perception of *katabasis* in classical Greek interpretations. For Stevens, instances of *katabasis* in the legendarium are integral to the eucatastrophic turn, whence the scholar coins the term 'eucatabasis', building on Tolkien's own neologism (p.111). The essay becomes increasingly dense in its latter stages; when Stevens attempts to introduce elegy into the debate, the link between otherworldly darkness and historic loss is not always made entirely clear, and yet his findings are enlightening nonetheless. Perhaps more successful then, is Stevens' convincing account of how Tolkien's perceptions of darkness and theology impact his presentation of underworld. Stevens rounds out the essay by suggesting that Middle-earth is, itself, an underworldly place, and thus figures the reader as the still-living on an underworld journey, being guided through the underworld by the psychopomp, Tolkien.

In the following chapter, ‘Pietas and the Fall of the City: A Neglected Virgilian influence’ (p.131-163), Austin M. Freeman adopts a well-established tradition of identifying in Tolkien’s work traces of classical epics. The trend picks up on work established by Pace, Morse, Greenman, and more recently, Bruce.[4] The virtue in Freeman’s work, however, is that he branches out into a thematic study, identifying not similarities in narrative strands, but in character virtues and behaviour, with respect to classical *pietas*. Furthermore, he raises interesting ideas about the crossover between the classical, Germanic, and Christian. While medievalists may be less convinced, Freeman certainly makes the case for Virgilian *pietas* being the secret third ingredient to Tolkien’s *estel*, along with Northern Spirit and Christian *pistis*.

Finishing off the section, Peter Astrup Sundt’s ‘Love Story of Orpheus and Eurydice in Tolkien’s Orphic Middle-earth’ (p.165-189) identifies the various orphic elements throughout the Legendarium in Beren and Lúthien, but also in the less obvious Ents and Entwives, and Tom Bombadil. Sundt examines how the classical interpretations (of Virgil and Ovid specifically), the medieval Sir Orfeo, and indeed Tolkien’s passions interact in the author’s own, very personal rendition, abandoning the tendency towards metaliterary self-reflection found in earlier versions of the myth, and presenting his orphic characters as vehicles of praise for his own loves: nature, music and poetry, and his wife.

Bridging the gap to the next section, ‘In Dialogue with Greek Philosophers’, Michael Kleu’s ‘Plato’s Atlantis and the Post-Platonic Tradition in Tolkien’s Downfall of Númenor’ (p.193-215), aims to establish the degree to which the Númenorean narrative can be traced back to Plato’s *Timaeus* and *Critias*. However, perhaps somewhat contradicting the purpose of the essay, Kleu argues more successfully that Tolkien’s Númenor should be seen as a reception of the Atlantis interpretations of Ignatius Donnely and William Scott-Ellis, rather than those of Plato. In his conclusion, Kleu states his intention to suggest the ‘function’ and ‘purpose’ of Tolkien’s reception of the Atlantean myth; however, on the topic of function he states only that the 'content-based functions' are secondary to Tolkien's personal motivations, and does not expand on this (p.211).

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[4] Pace 1979; Morse 1986; Greenman 1992; Bruce 2012.

Continuing with considerations on Plato, Łukasz Neubauer's essay, 'Less Consciously at First but More Consciously in the Revision: Plato's Ring of Gyges as a Putative Source of Inspiration for Tolkien's Ring of Power' (p.217-246), draws parallels between the Ring of Power and the Ring of Gyges, noting not only the obvious invisibility factor, but equally the corruption that accompanies the usage of the rings. The scholar is careful not to neglect other possible influences, including Nesbitt and Wagner, when analysing how and why Tolkien chose to adapt the nature of the Ring into an actively corrupting force (as opposed to Plato's idea of a ring that simply enables internalised evil to manifest externally). Neubauer addresses Shippey's thoughts from his 2003 volume on the addictive property of the One Ring (p.234); however, the argument could have perhaps benefited equally from factoring in Shippey's arguments on the Ring's corruption and Boethian philosophy from his 2000 volume, which has been cited elsewhere in the essay (though perhaps mention of these arguments might detract from the initial intention).[5]

In 'Horror and Fury: J.R.R. Tolkien's The Children of Hurin and the Aristotelian Theory of Tragedy' (p.247-268), Julian Eilmann moves on from Plato, focusing rather on examining the tragic elements in the fairly recent *Children of Húrin* in light of Aristotelian theory of tragedy. In a systematic study, Eilmann analyses both the nature of Túrin Turambar's character and the story's narrative structure, in order to identify how Tolkien incorporated the techniques expected of tragedy (namely *peripeteia* and *anagnorsis*), and ultimately achieved the cathartic ending that Aristotle pins as the defining characteristic of the genre. For better or worse, the scholar never addresses whether or not he believes Tolkien followed Aristotelian theory consciously, but rather details the ways in which the Children of Húrin conforms to said theory. Thus, a critical study on Tolkien's familiarity (or lack thereof) with Aristotle's theory of tragedy may be a direction for future study on this subject.

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[5] Shippey 2000: 135.

Moving into the next section, Philip Burton's philological offering, '"Eastwards and Southwards": Philological and Historical Perspectives on Tolkien and Classicism' (p.273-304), takes on the task of discussing and explaining Tolkien's peculiar lexical choices. Burton convincingly demonstrates that certain words – those of particular animals, mythical creatures, plants and wines – are inherently symbolic of cultural transmission; 'oliphaunt', for example, has a contested etymology, but was likely received into English as a borrowing from Byzantium, or further east (p.289-290). Burton furthers the scholarship that views Tolkien's Middle-Earth as an expression of multiculturalism and cultural exchange, showing that this sentiment is even imbued in the language that characterises the secondary world.

Richard Z. Gallant's 'The Noldorization of the Edain: The Roman-Germani Paradigm for the Noldor and Edain in Tolkien's Migration Era' (p.305-327) marks a return to a historiographical study reminiscent of Clare's, though with a focus on finding historical antecedents in Tolkien's imagined cultures, rather than in his narrative devices and writing style. Gallant likens the 'education' of the Edain by the Noldor to the relationship between the Germani tribes and Rome, marking out in particular the transformation from the *gentes* Edain to the *regnum* Númenor. Particularly interesting is the scholar's assertion that the written style of the Noldorian *Silmarillion* is reminiscent of Roman historiographical works, suggesting even that the 'good' and 'bad' barbarian dichotomy can be identified in Tolkien's work (p.313).

In '"Escape and Consolation": Gondor as the Ancient Mediterranean and Rohan as the Germanic World in *The Lord of The Rings*' (p.329-348), Juliette Harrisson picks up on the well-established topic of the relationship between Gondor and Rohan as a reimagined history of Rome and the Germanic tribes of the 4th to 7th centuries. While this might initially seem to run the risk of falling into unoriginality, and of searching for direct analogues between history and Tolkien's works, the scholar manages to add to the topic in two key ways: firstly, by framing Gondor as a reception, not just of Roman culture, but of classical Mediterranean culture more generally; and secondly, by demonstrating that this reframing of the history of Roman decline adheres to Tolkien's vision of fantasy as a medium for 'escape and consolation'.

Alley Marie Jordan's essay, 'Shepherds and the Shire: Classical Pastoralism in Middle-earth' (p.353-363), starts off the final section by comparing Tolkien's hobbits to the shepherds from Virgil's *Eclogues*, in a brief but enlightening study on classical pastoralism in the *Lord of the Rings*. Jordan draws many parallels between the hobbits and the shepherds, but most interestingly, the scholar identifies the backdrop of a threatening imperial incursion as the key element which allows the ideals of pastoralism to truly shine through. While Jordan does not discuss the likelihood that Tolkien had read the *Eclogues* – which might be a critique for those who adhere to Hardwick's framework for classical reception scholarship – this fact alone does not detract from the virtues of the essay.[6]

In the final offering, 'Classical Influences on the Role of Music in Tolkien's Legendarium' (p.365-374), Filonenki and Schepanskyi discuss how Tolkien's perception and use of music in the legendarium weave together Catholic elements with the classical. Focusing first on the cosmogonic episode at the beginning of the *Silmarillion*, the scholars compare the music of the Ainur with the classical *music of the spheres* notion. There is a brief discussion of the various iterations of this notion put forth by Greek and Roman philosophers, but aside from detailing some similarities (as 'parallels' would be perhaps too strong), the essay does not make an overly compelling case for seeing the Ainulindalië as a reception of the *music of the spheres* idea. There may be yet more to say, however, about the scholars' mention of Plato's *Myth of Er*; comparing the sirens and the Fates of the latter to the Maiar and Valar, Filonenki and Schepanskyi make what could be a strong start to establishing parallels between the two cosmogonical episodes, but the theory is still in its infancy.[7] Moreover, the overall summary takes an idea we have perhaps heard before – that Tolkien's work is a complex tapestry of interwoven sources. Thus, in the end, the scholars have provided some new and interesting avenues for discussion, but the essay itself offers only as yet underdeveloped ideas (though admittedly, this may be due to its brevity).

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[6] Hardwick 2003: 5.

[7] There is perhaps room for a philological extension to this debate: if indeed Tolkien had referred to Valinor as 'Faery' in early drafts, then there could be reason to see the Valar and Maiar as receptions of the medieval 'fay' (though this warrants a discussion in and of itself), a word derived from the Latin *fata*, which might give weight to the idea of the Valar as receptions of the Fates. C.f. Martinez 2010: 67, 78.

Finally, in the afterword, ‘Tolkien’s Response to Classics in its Wider Context’ (379-394), D. Graham J. Shipley neatly ties up the findings of the volume, situating them once again against the contextual backdrop of Tolkien’s personal experiences, knowledge of classics, and his purpose in creating Arda. Shipley’s chapter recreates the personal tone set by Williams in the initial chapter, and reminds readers that, while we search for meaning in the legendarium, Tolkien’s purpose was primarily to create a compelling narrative, and subtextual significance was secondary (though still important) to that purpose. Perhaps most importantly, the chapter rounds off by foregrounding a familiar notion: that the legendarium is an eclectic work, the value of which is greater than the simple sum of its parts.

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