



Book-Review:
Pagan Saints in Middle-earth

James Hamby

Testi, Claudio A. *Pagan Saints in Middle-earth*. Walking Tree, 2018. ISBN 978-3905703382.

The symbolism of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Legendarium* has long been debated: is the symbolism primarily pagan or Christian? Claudio A. Testi thoroughly examines the various answers to this conundrum before settling on an answer that synthesizes several different interpretations: while the world of Middle-earth is manifestly pagan, its virtuous inhabitants nonetheless are viewed through a Catholic lens. Middle-earth's virtuous inhabitants are, as Testi puts it, "men and women who have not yet received the revelation" of Christ (128). Testi traces the theological underpinnings of this interpretation and explains how this idea shaped Tolkien's notion of "pagan saints" in his works. His argument provides a nuanced understanding of a difficult topic; however, his analysis is still disputable. In the Afterword, for example, Tom Shippey argues that Tolkien's work represents "polyphony", pagan and Christian elements coexisting but not melding, in contrast to the "harmony" uniting these two world views that Testi describes. Testi previously presented his argument in "Tolkien's Work: Is it Christian or Pagan? A Proposal for a 'Synthetic' Approach" for *Tolkien Studies* in 2013. This book expands upon all of the major points that Testi makes in that essay, especially his discussion of the points that favor either a pagan or a Christian perspective. The added focus on these interpretations, including their failings, causes the synthetic argument he later makes to be far more cogent than that earlier essay.

Testi divides his study into two main sections. The first section investigates the three main arguments that Tolkien's work is Christian, pagan, or both simultaneously. Tolkien quite famously asserted on multiple occasions that his work was not allegorical; however, Testi points out that, despite Tolkien's statements, many critics over the years have considered "the *Legendarium* a mythology that becomes more and more Christian in its development" (14). Many critics over the years have seen a strong vein of Christian humanism in Tolkien's works. Joseph Pearce, for instance, in

Tolkien: Man and Myth finds Tolkien's Catholic theology ubiquitously present in all of his works, and Bradley Birzer sees Tolkien's *Legendarium* as inextricably entwined with Christian symbolism. Testi agrees that Christianity is indeed a major influence on Tolkien's works, but he also rightly points out that proposing "a specifically Christian interpretation as the *sole* possible reading corresponds to an outright perversion of Tolkien's vision" as it "does not account for the deeply philological inspiration of the *Legendarium*, his attention towards languages and their evolutions, nor his love of pagan sagas" (25–26). To view Tolkien's work as only Christian is too limiting and ignores Tolkien's notions of mythopoeia as a recombination of many older literatures into something new. On the other hand, Testi suggests that interpreting Tolkien's work as exclusively pagan "diminishes the scope of the Tolkienian perspective just like the Christian one does" (41). He furthermore examines how many purely pagan interpretations contain either a "poor understanding of the dramatic nature of the Christian message", ignore "the important differences between Middle-earth and the pagan civilizations of history" (32, 36), or have some other vital flaw that prevents the pagan interpretation from being convincing. Finally, while Testi finds the argument that Tolkien's *Legendarium* is both Christian and pagan to be closer to the truth, he still finds this interpretation insufficient, and he asserts that "the terms 'pagan' and 'Christian' are never conceived of as contradictory. Only if we acknowledge this will it be possible to understand how the fully pagan horizon of the *legendarium* is in complete harmony with the supernatural level of Christian revelation" (63). Furthermore, Testi rejects the polytheistic views of scholars who argue that Tolkien's work is solely pagan. For instance, he argues that Patrick Curry's argument in *Defending Middle-earth* that Tolkien denies the existence of a single, superior creator is inconsistent with Tolkien's stated views on his own work (31). Testi asserts that Curry's view, and the interpretations of others such as Catherine Madsen and Ronald Hutton, suffer from an imperfect understanding of Christian theology.

For Testi, Tolkien's *Legendarium* portrays a pagan world from a Christian perspective. The inhabitants of Middle-earth are undoubtedly pagan but not outside the vision of salvation as articulated by the Roman Catholic Church. Testi asserts that paganism and Christianity exist in harmony with one another and that "it would be impossible to understand the *Legendarium* without acknowledging both its pagan roots and its relation with the Christian revelation" (67). Testi suggests that Tolkien's interest in a synthesis between Christianity and paganism originated in his work with Anglo-Saxon literature, which was largely "written in the Christian era but still imbued with pagan culture" (72), as well as in his Catholic faith and its acceptance of the idea that pre-Christian, noble pagans were eligible for salvation. Testi observes how Tolkien greatly admired pagan poetry with its emphasis on courage as an ethical concern (88), and he felt that this concept of courage had been integrated into Christianity with "its authentic essence of dauntless courage even when facing defeat" (92). Using these ideas of synthesis, Testi argues, Tolkien created his *Legendarium*. Testi spends the last portion of his book exemplifying how Tolkien's pagan world fits into a Catholic view of humanity. Testi concludes his study by stating that, despite no references to faith or internal allegories, the Catholic nature of Tolkien's work "*paradoxically resides in the distinctive non-Christianity of his world*, a universe that is essentially the pagan expression of a level of nature that is nevertheless in harmony with the supernatural level of Revelation" (136, emphasis original). Much like *Beowulf*, Tolkien created a world in which the heroic ethos coexists with Christian salvation.

This book offers an intriguing exploration of the dispute between pagan-versus-Christian interpretations of Tolkien's work. Testi's solution to this question – that

Middle-earth is pagan but in accord with Christianity – is nuanced, scholarly, and well-supported. He does a fine job of pointing out the inadequacies of other interpretations and delineating what is different about his own, which at times is tricky due to the synthetic nature of his reading of Tolkien. Testi carefully defines terms, considers perspectives and inspirations, and presents conflicting interpretations with fairness. Additionally, the Foreword by Verlyn Flieger and the Afterword by Tom Shippey (who does not entirely agree with Testi) provide context for this work's place in the field of Tolkien studies. As mentioned above, Shippey sees the pagan and Christian elements as simultaneously present but independent of one another. Shippey's argument presents a compelling counterpoint to Testi's. However, when considering Tolkien's own description of mythopoesis from "On Fairy-stories" about how different old bones are thrown into a cauldron to create a new soup, and taking into account Tolkien's Catholic belief that virtuous pagans could attain salvation, Testi's view of synthesis seems more likely than believing that the Christian and pagan elements have nothing to do with one another.

Overall, Testi's study offers a wonderful overview of an intriguing question in Tolkien's work. Even readers who disagree with his solution will no doubt benefit from the in-depth and serious consideration he gives to his subject. Indeed, given the evidence that Testi cites, it is difficult to see how Tolkien's work could now be viewed as either exclusively Christian or pagan. For Testi, Tolkien did not create his vision out of the tension between paganism and Christianity but rather out of a synthesis between the two. This book is a wonderful addition to Walking Tree Publishers' *Cormarë Series* and will no doubt prove beneficial to Tolkien scholars and enthusiasts alike in helping them to understand Tolkien's vision of Middle-earth.

Biography: James Hamby is the Associate Director of the Writing Center at Middle Tennessee State University. His reviews have appeared previously in *Fafnir*, *Science Fiction Studies*, *The Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, *Foundation*, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, *Extrapolation*, *Studies in the Novel*, and other publications. His dissertation, *David Copperfield: Victorian Hero*, argues that Dickens created a new archetypal hero for the Victorian Age patterned on his own life.

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