



BOOK REVIEW:  
*Tolkien and the Classics*

*Maria Alberto*

Arduini, Roberto, Giampaolo Canzonieri, and Claudio A. Testi, editors. *Tolkien and the Classics*. Walking Tree, 2019. ISBN 978-3905703429.

J.R.R. Tolkien is easily one of the most widely recognised – and also hotly contested – authors whose work and legacy we continue to discuss today. Depending on who you ask, Tolkien may be either a father figure to the genre of modern fantasy or else a bore whose fiction is overhyped (and many points in-between). Additional points of contention abound: his literary style and use of song are polarising – almost as much as his women characters – and his sporadically racialised descriptions of certain characters, often faceless enemy masses, are troubling and cannot be relegated to claims that this was a norm of his time. Moreover, these elements of Tolkien’s work – along with his Catholic background and framing of his own work in reams of paratextual materials – have drawn historically ardent defenders, who in some circles (like many who responded to the Tolkien Society’s excellent “Tolkien and Diversity” seminar this summer) deride queer perspectives, non-Christian approaches, and readings from scholars and fans of color, among others. And all of this is *before* we even begin to consider the tremendous impact that adaptations of Middle-earth have had in media ranging from film to television, videogames, music, fan works, and more. (Lest this be taken as hyperbole, I should admit that as I write this review I am listening to Blind Guardian’s *Nightfall in Middle-earth* on loop for easily the 500<sup>th</sup> time.)

I mention all of this as a means of providing context for the highly complex venture being undertaken by editors Roberto Arduini, Giampaolo Canzonieri, and Claudio A. Testi, as well as their contributors, in *Tolkien and the Classics*. As the volume’s own introduction asserts, this book has two aims: first, to meet an “ever-growing awareness” of the need to champion Tolkien as a “great literary classic, comparable to those already accepted as ‘canonical’” and second, also via the introduction, “to be enjoyed, and made actual use of”

by students and educators at the secondary and university levels (xvii). These are already two very different projects, with sometimes quite disparate audiences, and each comes with its own complications that *Tolkien and the Classics* meets with mixed success.

As its editors explain, *Tolkien and the Classics* is part of an ongoing project organised by the Associazione Italiana Studi Tolkieniani (AIST), or the Italian Association of Tolkien Studies. The essays collected here are short, about ten pages apiece on average, and almost without exception they offer close, comparative readings that locate parallels between Tolkien and a second author from one of three broad time periods: Antiquity, the Middle Ages, or the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Each of these time periods comprises its own section of the volume, and – just as a sampling – the “classic” authors being compared with Tolkien here range from Homer, Euripides, and Virgil in the first section to Aquinas, Malory, and Chaucer in the second, and then Sir Walter Scott, Joseph Conrad, J. M. Barrie, and Kenneth Grahame in the third.

As this partial list perhaps makes clear, one definite drawback of this collection is its very broad organisation schema. Though most of the Antiquity authors are Greek, those in other periods are largely British with a smattering of Italians and one American, and there is little recognisable organising principle to their inclusion beyond the contributors’ own preferences and the implication that these authors are “classical” members of a recognised literary canon. In their introduction, Arduini, Canzonieri, and Testi maintain that these essays can “assess the parallels or differences produced by similar historical conditions such as war, or explore the common interest in a narrative theme, such as travel” (xvii), but not every essay situates its own argument along these lines: many simply compare the authors thus named. So while there could be merit to any one of these approaches if it had been clarified and discussed further, that particular framing felt lacking here, and without it the collection cannot entirely support either its aim to reach students and educators or its intention to situate Tolkien within an existing literary canon.

For another thing, it is difficult to place Tolkien in a canon of any kind without some exploration of what that canon is (Great? Global? Literary? By, for, and to whom?); how those within it have earned their own inclusion (Taught for centuries? Early examples in relevant genres? Foundational, by which we can often assume colonial as well, influences on other literatures?); and what value comes of canon-making in the first place (Who can be taught? How “seriously” we can take them? What stakes does this identification hold?). In addition, the desire to acclaim Tolkien a “great literary classic, comparable to those already accepted as ‘canonical’” (xvii) is a longstanding one that has been made by medievalists, modernists, and more, so this volume’s own addition to an ongoing conversation is not entirely clear. All things considered, this stated interest in placing Tolkien within a literary canon seems more in keeping with earlier eras of Tolkien scholarship. Likewise, this interest and intent are also tied up with that earlier question of why create and prioritise a canon at all: in a way, this feels like arguing that *if* Tolkien’s work, literary influences, and intertextual fluency meet some pre-existing standard – and one, moreover, that is never explicitly stated – then *this* will be the reason why we continue to read, write about, and teach him.

On a related note, this volume’s sometimes nebulous organising schema and its dedication to close readings over all else also mean that its ability to

reach students and educators was not always clear to me. Admittedly, I am an American educator and academic, and by virtue of working at American universities I am required to teach specific skills to undergraduate students in both my composition classes and many of my literature ones. So this experience certainly informed my own interest in Arduini, Canzonieri, and Testi's claim that this collection is for students and educators. However, between the focus on canon-making, the range of paired authors discussed, the somewhat loose organisation schema, and the aforementioned focus on close reading above all else, the promised application for students did not fully materialise for me.

Nonetheless, I personally found many of these essays interesting and informative; many also offered thought-provoking readings that I will certainly return to. For instance, essays on characters from *The Silmarillion* such as Fëanor and Túrin Turambar are much rarer than essays on their successors in *The Lord of the Rings*, so it was pleasant to see these. Before coming into this volume, though, I had already been studying and writing about Tolkien's work for years, and I was reading these texts, even *The Silmarillion*, long before that. If I had not, I am not sure how accessible this volume would be. For less experienced readers, selections such as Sara Gianotto's comparison of Tolkien's Fëanor and Vittorio Alfieri's tragicomic characters – which she concludes by noting that both authors suggest that “however desperate the situation might be, and despite the constant oppression of fate, there is always a choice, and it is up to us to take it. If we do not choose, we leave nothing behind but the void” (153) – might be utterly opaque. As Gianotto's essay references without the space to explicate fully, the role of “fate” and desperation in Fëanor's story is complex, and the ramifications of this particular prince's decisions are utterly interwoven with just about every other narrative across the *Silmarillion*.

Likewise, a less experienced reader might be left with mistaken ideas about how far the critical conversations surrounding Tolkien's women characters have progressed. For instance, Gloria Larini's chapter, “To Die for Love: Female Archetypes in Tolkien and Euripides”, could be an interesting addition to conversations ongoing in works such as Janet Brennan Croft and Leslie Donovan's *Perilous and Fair: Women in the Works and Life of J.R.R. Tolkien*. However, if this is the first introduction to this topic that a student were to encounter, they might be left with a mistakenly simplistic impression of Lúthien, Arwen, and even Alcestis as characters simply following the “archetypes” of beautiful women who sacrifice their lives for love (25–26). For students, I imagine it would be more beneficial to think beyond the bounds of archetypes and to consider women characters beyond just their relationships with men. Lúthien in particular is actually one of the most powerful and interesting characters in *The Silmarillion*, capable even of besting Morgoth, and placing her in relation with a certain archetype that perhaps partially fits her, but also occludes her, seems a disservice to new readers.

Then too, beyond even the sometimes-esoteric areas of Tolkien scholarship covered here, I am not entirely sure how students at the secondary and university level might use this collection. Classes on the Antiquity period might conceivably cover Homer, Apollonius Rhodius, Euripides, and Virgil alike, as flattened as Greek history and traditions have become in many education systems. However, authors such as Kenneth Grahame, Edgar Allan Poe, and the War Poets of WWI are at once tremendously different from one another and also less flattened into a single tradition or period, thanks to our own closer

proximity to them. With considerations such as this, it becomes unclear whether this volume was imagined to be a reference consulted by single sections or chapters, or else a bibliography of sorts, or perhaps a series of models for students' own essays; it is certainly not an introduction to Tolkien's work. So, whatever student use it might be intended to meet, *Tolkien and the Classics* could have framed and addressed that more clearly.

To return briefly to the essays themselves: although *Tolkien and the Classics* offers a truly mixed bag of reading opportunities, a few stand out. Amelia A. Rutledge, for example, maintains that Tolkien and Sir Walter Scott critique a "chivalric imaginary", and she covers an excellent range of characters who demonstrate the "negative effects of the fanatical will to domination" (126), moving beyond the easily recognisable example of Sauron to name Melkor, Fëanor, and Túrin Turambar as well. Elsewhere, Simone Bonechi's essay on Tolkien and the War Poets manages the heroic feat of fitting an exploration of pre-WWI social tensions, wartime trauma, and differing reactions to modernity into just ten pages. Long-time Tolkien scholar Tom Shippey anchors the collection with a partially autobiographical examination of both personal and literary connections between William Morris and Tolkien.

All things considered, coming to this volume from an American comparative literature program made for an interesting reading experience. Though my own program of study has emphasised many of the same practices espoused by the editors of and contributors to *Tolkien and the Classics* – particularly close reading and detailed comparison of disparate texts – in my experience these practices must also be accompanied by a greater engagement with the existing secondary scholarship. Although certain essays in this volume do cite important works by Tolkien scholars such as Verlyn Flieger, Jane Chance, John Garth, Thomas Honegger, and Tom Shippey (not to mention Shippey's own essay here), they do so less closely or critically than critics in the Anglo-American world have likely come to expect. In this regard, the short length of these essays – which in many cases felt more like conference papers from which longer articles would then be developed – has been a shortcoming difficult for many contributors to overcome.

Scholars who write on Tolkien's contemporaries and influences might find this volume interesting for some of the new connections it forges, if not necessarily for its very brief insights into such connections. For example, other than this volume, I have not encountered essays placing Tolkien in conversation with Marco Polo, as Valérie Morisi does with Chapter 5, or with Italian author Carlo Collodi of *The Adventures of Pinocchio* fame, as Giampaolo Canzonieri does in Chapter 18. Even in such instances, though, I imagine these essays might serve best as starting points for further, more developed conversations about links between Tolkien and those who either might have inspired him or were writing about similar concerns contemporaneously.

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