



BOOK REVIEW:

Middle-earth, or There and Back Again

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Neubauer, Łukasz. *Middle-earth, or There and Back Again*. Walking Tree, 2020. ISBN 978-3905703443.

Middle-earth, or There and Back Again, edited by Łukasz Neubauer, is another addition to the ongoing boom in Tolkien studies. It is volume 44 in the Cormarë series on Tolkien, its numerous volumes having appeared regularly since 1997. This slim book (iii + 137 pages, including index) contains six chapters, each focusing to a greater or lesser extent on Tolkien's sources and influences. Part of what makes this volume valuable is that, despite its brevity, it does not limit its focus to Middle-earth as the title might suggest. Two of the six essays – Bartłomiej Błaszkiwicz's essay on Tolkien's *The Fall of Arthur* and medieval romance, and Andrzej Szyjewski's on Tolkien's version of *The Story of Kullervo* – both focus on texts that are lesser-known (and indeed not widely available until recently), while the other four revisit familiar subjects. It is no surprise, for instance, that the myth of Atlantis informed Tolkien's account of the fall of Númenor, as explored by Michał Leśniewski, or that Tolkien was intimately familiar with the medieval allegorical poem *Pearl*, which Barbara Kowalik argues influenced Tolkien's creation of the One Ring. Nor is it surprising that religion influenced Tolkien, as Łukasz Neubauer argues in his chapter on Gandalf as a Christian-inflected corrective to Germanic heroic ideals as reflected in *The Battle of Malden*, and as Andrej Wicher explores in his chapter relating Galadriel to Pauline doctrine (among other subjects). The through-line is that all of these chapters make a case for Tolkien's work being influenced by earlier texts and traditions.

As Neubauer notes in his Foreword, with a “bit of semantic stretching, one could ... argue that much of medieval (and ... even post-medieval) fiction is a truly eclectic hodgepodge in which certain major elements ... are constantly

being reinvented” (ii). This volume presents essays interested in exploring how Tolkien’s own canon can be seen in similar terms: the essays focus on how Tolkien uses source materials in a “highly creative” way, sometimes so much so that they are “hardly recognisable”, and that he also “would not infrequently combine what, at first glance, may appear to be unrelated ... or even irreconcilable” source texts, so that his work involves a “constant mediation of the world of the past ... and the world in which he lived” (ii). The challenge with source studies is to demonstrate influence, rather than congruence or coincidence, and this is rendered more challenging when dealing with subjects that have already been considered by earlier scholars. While some of the attempts here are more persuasive than others, and while the authors are at times cautious about affirming influence, speculating rather than proving, these essays succeed more frequently than they fail in illuminating Tolkien’s debts. Readers interested in Tolkien’s influences and in how he reworks and transforms earlier texts and traditions will find this a valuable book.

Leśniewski’s essay on the Myth of Atlantis opens the book. In it, he revisits the topic of the “direct references to both Plato and his myth of Atlantis” that appear frequently in Tolkien’s work (2), as is widely known. Leśniewski argues that Tolkien could not avoid familiarity with the myth of Atlantis, given the attention it was receiving during his lifetime, although he also suggests that the myth resonated with Tolkien personally, given his recurrent dreams of flooding. Though Leśniewski engages in some speculation that is not convincing – e. g. that “inherited memory” (7) may have been a factor in Tolkien’s recurring flood dream, or about whether Tolkien believed that Plato’s account dealt with a real historical event – Leśniewski’s weaving of the literary and the personal provides insight into how Tolkien makes use of the myth of the flood as a demarcation point between myth and history: “the ultimate destruction of Númenor constitutes the moment which separates the mythological and the historical timelines of his legendarium” (13). The chapter also argues for a parallel between the moral implications of Plato’s and Tolkien’s accounts as arising from human transgression. Plato’s importance to Christian thought generally, Leśniewski argues, also informs the implicit Christian elements of Tolkien’s version of the myth.

Editor Łukasz Neubauer then compares and contrasts Gandalf with Byrhtnoth, the hero of the Old English *Battle of Maldon*. Neubauer’s main argument, carefully built and compelling, is that

Gandalf’s loyalty to the other members of the Fellowship and his self-sacrificial dedication to the higher cause appear to be a clearly distinguishable reinvention – in a Christian idiom – of the essentially heroic, albeit eventually failed attempt of the hastily-assembled English forces to hold off the troops of ravaging Vikings. (26)

Neubauer contrasts the convention of the hero sacrificing himself for fame with Gandalf’s fundamentally similar action from a fundamentally different motivation: the sacrifice of self in service of others. The close parallels between the actions are answered by the profound differences in the characterisation of Gandalf and Byrhtnoth, as Tolkien translates the heroic into the Christian (at least implicitly).

The third chapter, Barbara Kowalik's "Tolkien's Use of the Motif of Goldsmith-craft and the Middle English *Pearl*: Ring or Hand?", asserts that the "analogies between Tolkien's and the *Pearl* poet's use of jewels are so close, profound, and numerous as to put it beyond doubt that the twentieth-century writer was, consciously or unconsciously, inspired by his medieval predecessor" (55), though the boldness of this claim is mitigated by her reluctance to assert actual influence. Nevertheless, Kowalik draws attention to numerous (possible) echoes. One of the most interesting of these, which I wish Kowalik had pursued further, is her speculation that the numerological underpinnings of *Pearl* inform the references to numbers in *The Lord of the Rings*. This would buttress allegorical readings of the latter by linking it with the allegory of the former; for instance, numerological implications could support the reading of Frodo as prefiguring Christ (42). More central to her argument, though, is how Tolkien uses the symbolic associations of jewellery and the crafting of jewellery in *Pearl*. Kowalik plausibly links in both works the ambivalence of jewellery and its association with light. Though there has been some consideration of the connections between *Pearl* and *The Lord of the Rings* before (not all of which Kowalik cites, actually), her chapter adds to the discussion, especially through her careful enumeration of multiple points of similarity, especially in her connections between the One Ring and the Silmarils as "imbued with ambivalence" (49), though some connections are more tenuous than others. For instance, she points out that the Silmarils are "locked in 'the deep chambers' of Fëanor's treasury and worn by him only at great feasts Similarly, the medieval poem refers to the Pearl being kept in a secure coffer or chest" (49). However, the locking away of precious gems is too unremarkable a reality to carry much weight as an example of influence.

Continuing with Tolkien's reworking of medieval materials, Bartłomiej Błaszkiwicz's essay on Tolkien's incomplete alliterative poem *The Fall of Arthur* tackles Tolkien's reworking of medieval romance conventions. Błaszkiwicz offers a close reading, noting Tolkien's changes to key figures such as Mordred (making him a more complex villain than he tends to be in medieval texts) and Guinevere, who acquires more agency at Tolkien's hands than medieval accounts typically grant her. A general strength here is Błaszkiwicz's detailed enumeration of the changes Tolkien makes to his source materials. Nevertheless, Błaszkiwicz overstates the potential significance of what was after all abandoned by Tolkien. In his conclusion, he likens Tolkien to Milton by arguing that Tolkien's fragmentary poem may "hint at the continued power of the Arthurian tradition to contribute to the emergence of new literary universes marked by scope, uniqueness and richness, such as Milton's *Paradise Lost* or Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*" (81).

Also examining early work by Tolkien, Andrzej Szyjewski makes the case that Tolkien's *Story of Kullervo* constitutes the "first attempt of the then twenty-two- or twenty-three-year-old student of philology to bring under control the mythological matter, and thus transform the 'living' tradition into a written text" (84). As does Błaszkiwicz, Szyjewski makes a close study of how Tolkien adapted and modified his source materials to create a more coherent narrative and more developed characters. While at times speculative – referring to what "seems" to have interested Tolkien, or what "might have" been elements Tolkien liked (89) – Szyjewski's close reading nevertheless provides valuable insight into Tolkien's emerging strategies for building mythworlds. That this

text received comparably little critical attention prior to the publication of Verlyn Flieger's edition, praised by Szyjewski as a "highly significant moment for Tolkien Scholarship" (83), makes this essay especially useful.

Rounding out the book, Andrej Wicher returns to Middle-earth and to theology in his study of "The Wisdom of Galadriel". One might pair this chapter with Neubauer's on Gandalf, as both address how their focal figures can be linked to a Christian frame of reference. Wicher weaves into his reading the Pauline tradition, the cult of Mary, and 19th-century idealised conceptions of women as articulated by John Ruskin. Again, the claims for influence are speculative and perhaps not as compelling as those in the other chapters. For instance, while Wicher does find Ruskin-esque traits in Galadriel, he avoids commenting on aspects of her depiction that fail to correspond to the Ruskin ideal until late in the essay, and even then without bothering to reconcile them with his argument, merely noting that her characterisation is "full of paradoxes" (128). While this does not negate the possibility of influence, it does weaken Wicher's case. Nevertheless, Wicher's analysis suggests paths for further scholarship – for instance, in his brief comments on Galadriel also being called Nerwen, or "manly maiden" (123), a point Wicher leaves underdeveloped but that might provide fruitful basis for a queer reading. Indeed, one might argue that Wicher's own reading would gain nuance if it applied a theoretical rather than a descriptive framework to Galadriel's "paradoxes" and complexities. However, theoretical interventions are not the aim of the book, so perhaps one should not expect to find them.

In conclusion, this short volume opens up valuable ways of thinking about Tolkien in relation to his (possible) sources and influences. While not all the chapters are equally compelling in their analysis, and while the book is rooted in close textual analysis and source study rather than theoretical elucidation of the complexities of Tolkien's use of sources, they all provide insights that most Tolkien scholars will find worth considering.

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