2005

Review of Tolkien and the Invention of Myth: A Reader, edited by Jane Chance

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Recommended Citation

Leibiger, Carol A. Tolkien and the Invention of Myth: A Reader, edited by Jane Chance. Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts, vol. 16, no. 2, 2005, pp. 158-161.

Chance, Jane, editor. *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth: A Reader*. Lexington, KY: UP of Kentucky, 2004. xx + 340 pp. Hardcover. ISBN 0-8131-2301-1. $35.00.

In this reader, Jane Chance (Professor of English at Rice University and author/editor of several critical studies of Tolkien) has compiled essays by medievalists, Tolkien scholars, and students, as an introduction to Tolkien's mythmaking and its sources in Christianity, western European mythologies, medieval literature, and philology (xiii). The editor has drawn from published articles (going as far back as 1981), conference papers (from two sections of the International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo, MI, devoted to Tolkien, in 2002 and 2003); and two lectures given by Tom Shippey and Michael D.C. Drout at Rice University in 1996 and Bucknell Unversity in 2003, respectively. The book consists of an introduction by Chance (mostly an explication of the contents), followed by five sections devoted to Tolkien's mythical/linguistic themes in general and to his classical, Old Norse, Old English, and Finnish sources, respectively.

Part I, "Backgrounds: Folklore, Religion, Magic, and Language," contains four studies, three of which have been published in scholarly journals; the remaining, previously unpublished piece, Michaela Baltasar's "J.R.R. Tolkien: A Rediscovery of Myth," is an interesting comparison of Max Müller's, Andrew Lang's, and Tolkien's views of the interplay of myth, religion, and language. The discussion of Tolkien's use of language makes mention of Owen Barfield (22, 29), but does not make clear the extent of Tolkien's indebtedness to Barfield for his notions of the deep relatedness of language and myth (demonstrated by Verlyn Flieger in *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World* [1983, rev. ed. 2002]). Classic articles by Catherine Madsen ("'Light from an Invisible Lamp': Natural Religion in *The Lord of the Rings*" from *Mythlore* 53 [1981]), Mary E. Zimmer ("Creating and Re-Creating Worlds With Words: The Religion and Magic of Language in *The Lord of the Rings*" from *Seven* 12 [1995]),

and David Lyle Jeffrey ("Tolkien as Philologist" from *Seven* 1 [1980]) provide discussions of religion and language as they are both represented, and utilized, by Tolkien to further his mythological agenda.

Three contributions in Part II, "Tolkien and Ancient Greek and Classical and Medieval Latin" are conference papers; the fourth is Kathleen Dubbs' classic article, "Providence, Fate, and Chance: Boethian Philosophy in *The Lord of the Rings* (*Twentieth Century Literature* 27 [1981]), which adduces a source for Tolkien's interplay of Providence (the order of the universe), fate (the manifestation of that order), and free will within the "providential order" in Middle-earth (140-141). Gergely Nagy (Assistant Professor of English Studies at the University of Szeged, Hungary) provides a fascinating comparison of Tolkien's and Plato's use of "old and authoritative" myth in discourse (86). Tolkien imitates Plato's use of myth by referring to stories in his texts which must then be created backward through philology; thus the originals primarily exist in allusions to stories and texts (90). Sandra Ballif Straubhaar (Lecturer in Germanic Studies at the University of Texas-Austin) defends Tolkien against claims of Northern European ethnocentrism and even fascism; her essay, "Myth, Late Roman History, and Multiculturalism in Tolkien's Middle-earth," is marred by her adducing two critics whose views are so rabid and uniformed that they only function as straw men (112, 114); her overuse of first-person pronouns and her preoccupation with her own research process further detract from her argument. Finally, "From Catastrophe to Eucatastrophe: J.R.R. Tolkien's Transformation of Ovid's Mythic Pyramus and Thisbe into Beren and Lúthien" by Jen Stevens (Humanities Reference Librarian at Washington State University) compares and contrasts these love stories, indicating differences of agency, freedom of will, choices, and the innovative eucatastrophic ending of Tolkien's love story.

Two established Tolkien scholars, Marjorie Burns (Professor of English at Portland State University) and Tom Shippey (Walter J. Ong Chair of Humanities at Saint Louis University), provide essays in Part III, "Tolkien and Old Norse." Shippey's contribution, "Tolkien and the Appeal of the Pagan: *Edda* and *Kalevala*," presents a detailed and fascinating discussion of the different roles of the authors, Snorri and Elias Lönnrot, respectively, in their works, and how these works and their authorship influenced Tolkien's construction of mythology and "primary" texts within his "secondary" texts. This essay is essential for understanding Tolkien's notion of the rootedness of these texts, i.e., their fit into their respective cultures (mythology and worldview), and his attempt to create an English mythology (153, 159-60). Burns' "Norse and Christian Gods: The Integrative Theology of J.R.R. Tolkien" demonstrates how Tolkien reconciles pagan polytheistic and Christian monotheistic worldviews in his cosmology. Under the distant, all-powerful Eru/Ilúvatar, who corresponds to the Christian God and is the origin of all things, the Norse gods correspond in simplified form to the Valar, mediating between Eru and his creations (168). Unlike Norse gods, however, the Valar are uniformly good, and their negative traits are localized in the evil Melkor (169-170). This integrates pagan thought into a Christian world view, as evil is derivative and therefore less powerful than the good, which predates evil and is localized in a higher being. Andy Dimond offers a comparison of the similarities between the Norse Ragnarök and the end of the Third Age, indicating how Tolkien's exiling of the Elves reconciles his world with that of Men, using an apocalyptic confrontation of good and evil to usher in a new world order (187). Andrew Lazo's essay, "Gathered Around Northern Fires: The Imaginative Impact of the Kolbítar" is a brief history of Tolkien's roles in various literary groups and of the changes in his and C.S. Lewis' roles as their friendship developed and was consolidated with Lewis' conversion to Christianity (213). While Lazo provides some interesting information on Tolkien's associations, this contribution is marred by

its long-windedness, frequent authorial self-references, and factual errors (e.g., Lazo's claim that William Morris' *Sigurd the Volsung* is a lyric poem [198]).

Michael D.C. Drout (Associate Professor of English at Wheaton College) elegantly and convincingly demonstrates how Tolkien linked his mythology to an Anglo-Saxon past in "A Mythology for Anglo-Saxon England," the first essay in Part IV, "Tolkien and Old English." Expressing skepticism about Tolkien's claims in *The Lord of the Rings'* Appendix F that his work has no connection to English history (241), Drout demonstrates numerous explicit ties to Anglo-Saxon language, history, and culture that Tolkien consciously provided in order to build a "pseudohistorical mythology" for England that was "intellectually and aesthetically pleasing," even solving some nagging philological problems, e.g., why an Anglo-Saxon would have written *Beowulf* (239-240). Two additional contributions also deal simultaneously with Tolkien's use of Old English sources, and *Beowulf*. "Oaths and Oath Breaking: Analogues of Old English *Comitatus* in Tolkien's Myth" by John R. Holmes (Chair of the Department of English at the Franciscan University of Steubenville) discusses the importance of oaths and the prohibition against oath breaking in Germanic culture and Tolkien, pointing out the "permissible limits on oaths" in the latter as an example of the intrusion of the modern into an ancient heroic code (252, 255, 258). Alexandra Bolintineanu ("'On the Borders of Old Stories': Enacting the Past in *Beowulf* and *The Lord of the Rings*") compares and contrasts the use of *exempla*, episodes of the legendary past, in Tolkien and his source. While both texts use *exempla* to evoke legend and integrate it into the present (265), the past provides negative examples in *Beowulf* and positive ones in Tolkien, as characters seek and find encouragement and guidance from mythical stories (268).

While Tolkien's debt to Finnish mythology has been recognized since the publication of Humphrey Carpenter's biography in 1977, only recently has the *Kalevala* been scrutinized by

Tolkien scholars; Part V, "Tolkien and Finnish," aims to fill this lacuna. "A Mythology for Finland: Tolkien and Lönnrot as Mythmakers" by Verlyn Flieger (Professor of English at the University of Maryland) draws parallels between Elias Lönnrot's contribution to Finland's emerging national consciousness and Tolkien's desire to provide his nation with an English, as opposed to a British, mythology. Richard C. West's (Senior Academic Librarian at the University of Wisconsin-Madison) "Setting the Rocket Off in Story: The *Kalevala* as the Germ of Tolkien's *Legendarium*" pinpoints the *Kalevala*'s Kullervo story as an influence on, if not a direct source of, *The Silmarillion*'s story of Túrin (289). Finally, David Elton Gay's (Continuing Education Instructor in folklore at Indiana University) "J.R.R. Tolkien and the *Kalevala*: Some Thoughts on the Finnish Origins of Tom Bombadil and Treebeard" points out the similarities between two Tolkienian creations and the great singer Väinämönen (297). While these contributions are all extremely interesting, none is as well crafted and thorough as Shippey's essay on the *Edda* and the *Kalevala* in Part II. It is clear that these essays only "scratch the surface" of this topic; the *Kalevala* should prove a fruitful source of research on Tolkien's mythological sources in the future.

Chance's reader brings together many important studies of the sources of Tolkien's *legendarium*, including both classic articles and important conference papers. This is essential reading for all those who would seek to understand the cosmic order explicated in *The Silmarillion* and underlying *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings.*

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