

**Elizabeth Whittingham, *The Evolution of Tolkien's Mythology*,
Review by B.N. Wolfe
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Elizabeth Whittingham, *The Evolution of Tolkien's Mythology: A Study of the History of Middle-earth. Critical Explorations in Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2008. 220 pp. ISBN 9780786432813.

In the twelve volumes of the *History of Middle-earth* series, published between 1983 and 1996, Christopher Tolkien compiled and presented otherwise unpublished material from his father's legendarium: Early drafts, alternate versions, unfinished projects, and organizational information. For scholars of J. R. R. Tolkien, the series represents a tremendous resource, but also a daunting challenge. For Tolkien, as for few other writers, scholarly claims of intent in particular texts are verifiable, by careful comparison of various drafts. It is simply not possible to maintain, for example, that in *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien set out to tell the story of a dispossessed king, since the early drafts (in which Strider is in fact a Hobbit, called Trotter) belie this utterly.

In *The Evolution of Tolkien's Mythology: A Study of the History of Middle-earth* Elizabeth Whittingham accepts the challenge and taps the resources of the History. The book makes many helpful distinctions which may profit other scholars, including a division of Tolkien's writings (not publications) into five chronological periods. Although bedevilled throughout by extremely poor copyediting ('counsel' for 'council', p. 38; 'accedes' for 'concedes', p. 43; etc, etc), the work is an example of serious scholarship in a field full of insubstantial popularizations. Indeed, if anything, the study retains too many of the citations doubtless imposed upon it in its larval stage as a thesis: Far too much is cited, including elementary observations about the Scriptures.

Within Tolkien's Middle-earth legendarium, Whittingham leaves aside *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* to focus entirely upon the *Silmarillion*, the collection of tales on which Tolkien laboured throughout his life, some of which were published in edited form as *The Silmarillion*. As the Table of Contents below reveals, this suits the author's interests, which are directed to macroscopic issues in the creation of the secondary world.

Table of Contents

1. Influences in Tolkien's Life
2. Tolkien's Mythology of Creation
3. Tolkien's Mythology of Divine Beings
4. The Physical World of Middle-earth and of Eä
5. Death and Immortality among Elves and Men
6. The Last Days of Middle-earth
7. The Final Victory

While conceding Tolkien's dislike for biographically based criticism, Chapter One provides a good, fair summary of Tolkien's life, balanced on all subjects, including notably his relationship with his wife. It is a relief to see that despite frequent citations of Verlyn Flieger, including her *Splintered Light*, Whittingham does not accept the thesis that most of Tolkien's ideas can be traced to Owen Barfield; on the other hand, Barfield might have merited at least some mention, particularly in the context of Tolkien's discussions with Lewis concerning 'The True Myth' (a subchapter heading).

In Chapter Two, the exploration of the mythology proper begins and the methods Whittingham will apply throughout the book are deployed. A brief and, as mentioned above, over-cited discussion of world creation myths is used to derive universal categories (many taken from other typologies, e.g. that of Prof. Claus Westermann) which can then be used in discussing Tolkien's texts.¹

Another book-wide concern that makes its first appearance here is the original inclusion and eventual elimination from the *Silmarillion* of a framing story (a story within which the main tale is recounted). Most of these involve a human traveller arriving at a house ('The Cottage of Lost Play') not unlike Elrond's, although in fact on Tol Eressëa, where the traveller hears the accounts which form the bulk of a given text. Whittingham posits that framing stories could have been used to achieve the 'depth' for which *The Lord of the Rings* is much praised, despite dealing with history at a very deep level. The humanness of the story-hearer is meant to incite the reader's sympathy, in the same way that Hobbits' essential normalness does. She argues further that the removal of the frames is indicative of a tendency over time by Tolkien to make his myths less like those of the pagan cultures from whom he drew original inspiration, and more like the creation account of Genesis (on which more below). While this is possible, and interesting, Whittingham does not take into account the difficulty of composing a 'deepening' frame story, and the likelihood (or so it seems to the reviewer), that the framing was recognized as being not very good, and removed. Framing accounts tend either to be perfunctory (as at

the beginning of *The Worm Ouroboros* by Tolkien's acquaintance E. R. Eddison), or to intrude so much into the story that they cease being simply frames (as in Plato's Symposium, although it bears noting that this includes multiple frames). Tolkien may simply have decided that the stories could stand on their own, and that the intermediaries he had originally thought important were in fact distractions.

Chapter Three resembles its predecessor, beginning with consideration of mythological comparanda, in this case, the gods and demi-gods of pagan myth, and the God and angels of the Bible. Of the Kalevala, one of Tolkien's most beloved sources, Whittingham notes quite correctly its nineteenth century compiler's 'lack of objectivity and precision in editing the poems', not to mention 'the lack of consensus concerning the identity of the gods'; what is odd is that she somehow thinks that it is only '[d]espite' this that 'comparisons between *The [sic] Kalevala's* pantheon and Tolkien's deities do reveal some parallels'. As (foot)noted above with regard to Biblical criticism, surely the issue is not what the pre-literate Finns really told each other about the gods and heroes of their land, or exactly what theological truth underlies the Hebrew plural intensive, but how Tolkien received them. If Whittingham is determined to make use of secondary sources, it would be valuable to attempt to reconstruct those which Tolkien himself had consulted, if any, rather than using whatever is to hand.

In both of these chapters, as previously mentioned, Whittingham tries to identify the direction in which Tolkien was moving as he edited, emended, rewrote, and re-imagined. She outlines a general movement away from a pagan conception of the world and towards what she calls a Judeo-Christian² one. Tolkien certainly never creates anything like a truly polytheistic system: One God is always firmly Creator and Disposer. Whittingham highlights steps he takes along the way to make this God's sovereignty in Creation more evident, and to distinguish the Valar from gods, making them more like angels. This very perceptive insight could of course be taken too far, but Whittingham is content to observe and categorize, making it one of the real strengths of the volume. She observes correctly that the Valar never quite mirror angels as they appear in the Judeo-Christian tradition, although some nod to C. S. Lewis' Oyéresu would have been worthwhile.

Evolution in Tolkien's thoughts as to the nature of the world itself is a prime subject for this volume's analysis, and it is to these that Whittingham turns her attentions in Chapter Four. The world was at times conceived of as flat, at times as round, at times as having changed from the one to the other at a particular point in its history. In some accounts, an impermeable wall surrounds the world and keeps it distinct from the void, sometimes as a sort of dome or atmospheric layer, sometimes

as a fence (with gates for the sun and moon). Mistake of Tolkien's Greek in his letters³ and incorrect attribution of gender to the famous Old Norse scholar Jesse Byock⁴ suggest the author may be operating at the limits of her knowledge here. Nonetheless, Whittingham does well to note the contrast between the seas the Norse gods used to protect mankind and those the Valar use to protect themselves from men; perhaps this is comparable to the 'quarantine' established around Earth in Lewis' Ransom novels.

Chapter Five deals with death and immortality for the two human⁵ races of Middle-Earth: Elves and Men. While the contrast between mortal Men and immortal Elves exists from the earliest conceptions of Tolkien's work, Whittingham shows the complexity that underlies the dichotomy. Elves too can die, of wounds or great sorrow, but their deaths send them only as far as the Halls of Mandos to await either rebirth (in early writings) or the end of time. Men, although the days of their lives are numbered, survive death at least in part: Their spirits leave the boundaries of the world, and thus will outlive even the universe. The author is at her best⁶ in clarifying the developments of these separate but related thanatologies through all the stages of Tolkien's writing, and is to be commended for making full use of Tolkien's correspondence, in which these issues were frequently raised.

Chapter Six displays the same strengths and weaknesses as other parts of the work under review, as it surveys some of the most mysterious and tantalizing elements of Tolkien's legendarium: The end of the world, and the new world that shall follow it. Hints and glimpses of these are provided throughout Tolkien's work, including memorably Treebeard's farewell to Celeborn and Galadriel in *The Lord of the Rings*. The author has amassed these, and shown all that can be shown of the system that underlies them.

Chapter Seven, 'The Final Victory', hearkens back to the previous chapter in its discussion of the eventual triumph of good, while also wrapping up the volume as a whole. Whittingham's conclusions are modest and appropriate, the most important being that Tolkien's revisions take his world away from his pagan sources and towards his Christian ones.⁷

In sum, *The Evolution of Tolkien's Mythology* is a work to be recommended. Its interests are the grand themes of a sub-creation, the secondary world's birth, death, and governors. It leaves extensive space for further studies along the same lines but at a more particular level, for example tracing the evolution of individual heroes and characters in Tolkien's writings. Many of the work's faults are forgivable on the grounds that it is blazing a relatively new path, which always requires the scholar to stretch his or her abilities, cite from relatively unknown fields, and which results

inevitably in a few misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Its and its author's successes are entirely their own.

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Notes

1. Whittingham would do better to make the case for citing Westermann's and other's works, rather than simply mentioning their last names: She ranges across so many disciplines that her reader can hardly be expected to know by name everyone she cites. Some of these citations are of dubious authority in any case. In particular, one might question the applicability of Biblical criticism that Tolkien, a Roman Catholic who was educated and catechised long before *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, would likely have rejected, if he ever had occasion to come into contact with it.
2. To Tolkien, this would presumably have simply been a 'Christian' worldview; nothing is distinctly Jewish about it, and Whittingham's occasional citations of midrashim fail to convince.
3. *eoikonmene* [a bizarre impossibility] for *he oikoumene* on p.112, although the reviewer's copy of Carpenter's Letters misprints this as *he oikonmene* #151.
4. p103; Prof. Byock is a man, for the record.
5. In that they can intermarry fruitfully; cf. Chronicle 5-3, 'Heaven and the Human Condition in Tolkien's "The Marring of Men"' by B. Charlton.
6. Despite misunderstanding all the Bible verses cited on p. 126, and using without comment a very contentious and probably wrong translation of Job 19:26.
7. That she characterizes this as a departure from 'mythology' suggests that she misunderstands what Tolkien and Lewis mean by myth, since their definition most certainly includes the stories of Christianity, true though they hold them to be.