

Tolkien and the Classics

Edited by Roberto Arduino, Giampaolo Canzonieri, and Claudio A. Testi.

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Tolkien and the Classics is a Walking Tree Press publication. Walking Tree is known among Tolkien fans and scholars for its series of Tolkien related academic works. This volume comes from the Italian Association of Tolkien Studies (AIST) and is edited by Roberto Arduino, Giampaolo Canzonieri, and Claudio A. Testi. The editors state the purpose of this collection is to support the realisation that Tolkien's work is worthy of scholarly interpretation and to offer a study that can be used and enjoyed by students and teachers alike. The AIST notes that academic study and writing about Tolkien is becoming more prevalent at the secondary and university levels. Considering its purpose, this volume could very well be an effective tool. The essays are written in a wholly approachable style and yet do not dumb down the content.

The material is presented in three sections, each focusing on authors and texts from specific literary eras. There are four essays on Tolkien and Antiquity, six on Tolkien and the Middle Ages, and eleven concerning the Modern Period. Finally, these essays started as AIST presentations, from which members' suggestions and comments about individual research are all considered in creating the final piece.

The first series of essays focuses on works from Antiquity. In this section we get comparisons to Polyphemus in *The Odyssey*, Apollonius Rhodius, Euripides, and Virgil. It is not hard to make connections to Tolkien, as it is the understanding that he would have been familiar with almost any of these classics. However, these are not low-hanging-fruit as much as solid examples of this collection's purpose. Each author makes connections to the classics without hard claims that Tolkien was inspired by them. The focus of each essay is how the works communicate with one another – an intriguing example being the similar historical framework in which Tolkien and Apollonius wrote and how each created a hero very different from their contemporaries.

In the second section, Tolkien's extensive studies of the Middle Ages allows for a wide assortment of topics. These essays show that there are connections large and small to be made. The first essay, comparing Marco Polo's travels to those of Bilbo in *The Hobbit*, is a surprise encounter. The stated reason for the book's publication is most supported in this approach since it places Tolkien's work beside a long-studied text, thus adding to a larger literary conversation.

Each of the other essays attempt to do the same, with varying degrees of success. An essay on Dante and one on Aquinas focus on Tolkien's creation music. Two others, one a comparison to Malory and the other to deTroye's *Gauvain*, relate to Tolkien's inspiration and scholarly work with King Arthur and the Grail myth. The final essay in this section, 'Common Folk in Tolkien and Chaucer', supports the assertion that Tolkien's oeuvre stands with accepted classics.

The section focusing on authors from the Modern Period was the most interesting and challenging to this reader. There is a time-spanning array of authors. Sir Walter Scott, Shakespeare, Joseph Conrad, and Edgar Allan Poe are familiar in schools and each the subject of an essay, so all of these could be a worthy and easy source for the intended audience of this collection. There is also a short piece on war poets that may be used as a starting point in the study of said works.

I am sorry to say that I was unfamiliar with two of the subjects in this volume, and they are both in this section. One is Vittorio Alfieri, and the other is Alessandro Manzoni: both Italian authors who, considering the origin of the collection, should be expected. Each essay, read without the context of familiarity, was engaging enough that both authors are on my 'Read Next' list.

Four essays discuss other fantasy (in a loose definition) works and authors: respectively Kenneth Grahame, J.M. Barrie, Canzonieri (Pinocchio) and William Morris. Anyone less familiar with classical literature will find these to be refreshing topics. Perhaps William Morris is the most esoteric of these authors, but Tom Shippey's approachable writing and story-teller authorial voice make for an engaging article with surprising connections, despite the known inspiration Morris had on Tolkien. For anyone who has read Shippey's other works about Tolkien, this particular essay, being the final one in the collection, is like being with an old friend.

The positive and the negative of the pieces overall is that they are short. The brevity may be the magic in this volume in that each essay can be ingested in a short sitting. The intended focus being to aid teachers in presenting Tolkien within a legitimate milieu, these are a perfect place to begin asking 'and what else?' The brevity creates an urge for more information, however, as anyone looking for deep-dives into works will be left wanting more. As the texts cited are often quite large, they beg a deeper reading and interpretation. However, I would not assert that the amount of potential material is the fault of these pieces. It is perhaps a glimpse into Galadriel's mirror.

Each topic allows a return to, or first discovery of, a text through the lens of Tolkien study. Any reader familiar with Tolkien's work and the classic would be able to dive into each essay and follow the arguments and evidence. However, even if one is unfamiliar with a particular work (I had never heard of Vittorio Alfieri), familiarity with Tolkien's work affords the reader a compulsory

understanding. Evidence of a clear power within this collection is that during or after every piece I had a desire to revisit or start reading the subject of the comparison. Anyone who approaches academic writing with a deep-dive will likely want to read each essay with a recently (re) visited volume of the compared work. First up, Alfieri.

Reviewed by Tom Hewitt

