

# The Heroes of Tolkien

By David Day. Translated by Jan Lipšanský  
Praha: Dobrovský, 2019.

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According to the general academic opinion, David Day is deemed to be a highly controversial writer in the field of Tolkien studies. Renowned Tolkienists, such as David Bratman and Michael Martinez, do not recommend his books. While Day likes to present himself as a Tolkien expert, his work does not meet the standards of academic research, as will be shown later. So when I received one of Day's books, *The Heroes of Tolkien*, I decided to read and review it for myself to find out whether the criticism is deserved.

As the title suggests, this book is concerned with the characterisation and interpretation of both greater and smaller Middle-earth heroes in relation to ancient Greek and Roman mythology. The book's seven chapters are each focused on different historical periods of Arda, from the creation of the world by Valar through the three ages. The last three chapters deviate from this chronological division, as they are focused on the events of the Third Age with regard to the specific 'hobbit stories' in which they appear. The book is rich with fascinating illustrations by Mauro Mazzara, such as the blue leather-imitation cover with imprinted synopsis and a picture of an elf warrior. This, along with the golden-lettered title and author name, gives an impression of luxury and respectability.

Day's description of races and characters simply recounts the information provided in the appendices of *The Lord of the Rings*. Thus, readers familiar with Tolkien's works are not presented with anything new. Occasionally, Day complements his descriptions with compacted (read incomplete) charts taken therefrom, such as the genealogy charts of the leaders of Númenor or Gondor (Day, p. 93, 117). This can be pardoned, since the information left out is irrelevant to Day's exegesis. However, criticisable is the fact that he never mentions the original source of his information. And his interpretative argumentation is no better.

The foreword itself suggests taking a cautious approach to reading *The Heroes of Tolkien*. Day's interpretation includes groundless ideas such as likening various Tolkien characters to ancient heroes or fairy-tale figures (e.g. Isildur and Ánarion as analogies of Romulus and Remus or elven queens as the images of Snow-White) and presents these ideas as indisputable facts. In addition, he sometimes ascribes these statements of comparison to Tolkien himself, although none of Tolkien's published works or his Letters include a hint of such ideas. At other times he ignores the obvious symbolism, parallels, and interpretations that were confirmed by Tolkien himself, his son Christopher, and other prominent Tolkienists, such as Tom Shippey and John Garth. Moreover, he does not acknowledge taking inspiration from these scholars even though readers well acquainted with their work may easily recognize ideas introduced by others in Day's book. For example, the theory on etymological origin of the name Baggins seems to be stolen

from Shippey (Day, pp. 180-181).

At times, while explaining the name symbolism, Day seems oblivious to the fact that Tolkien kept changing the names long into the process of writing (e.g. the names of the characters who eventually became Frodo and Aragorn). He bases the analogies with the ancient legends on forms of names that Tolkien later rejected (as is the case of Broceliand, a former name of Beleriand). Readers well versed in Tolkien criticism may get the impression that Day picks from the available material only such information as fits his intended interpretation. And no one can overlook such a factual mistake as referring to the ancient philosophical-mathematical school of Pythagoreans as a mystic sect.

But not to be only negative, it must be acknowledged that Day also presents some interesting views on the interpretation of symbolism in Tolkien's stories. He points out remarkable parallels between the legendarium and Greek, Roman, Celtic, and Northern mythologies, as well as Gothic, and British legends. Unfortunately, the biggest problem of this publication is the total absence of proper sourcing of the arguments. These are especially wanted in cases which either contradict Tolkien's own ideas or were never confirmed or even hinted at by the professor (e.g. the analogy between Aeglos the elven sword and Gungir the mythical spear). However, the use of adverbs expressing certainty he uses create the impression that his theories are indisputably true.

While pointing out the parallels between Tolkien's stories and real-world legends and events is valid, a critic should not assume the truthfulness of his interpretation with god-like authority, as Day does, unless his claims are well-founded, sourced, proved, and properly referenced. He should not proclaim a one-to-one analogy between Tolkien's characters and mythological figures in a manner that implies this is the only right interpretation, and ignore other, verified academic interpretations. Instead, one should approach these analogies as diverse ways of reflecting some common universal archetypes (for example, not identifying Morgoth with Odin, but interpreting them as two separate, unique images of the archetypal diabolic divinity).

A big problem in Day's book is the lack of proper referencing or at least the acknowledgment of the true authorship of some relevant arguments taken from other academics, because otherwise it may seem that Day appropriates their ideas. And the fact that the book does not include any bibliography or resource list (though an index is there), a horrendous academic faux pas, speaks for itself.

In conclusion, *The Heroes of Tolkien* fails all the criteria for an academic publication, and I would not recommend it as a relevant study source for the analysis of the symbolism of Tolkien's stories. However, the book can be a worthy starting point for novice Tolkienists, to whom it provides with a handful of interesting assumptions. The credibility and relevance of which can then be further examined and academically assessed. Furthermore, I would not recommend *The Heroes of Tolkien* to film-only fans of Tolkien who have not read any of his works but would like to enter his enchanting book universe through Day's book, which, due to its marketing, can seem

to them as a simplified version of *The Silmarillion* or a guide through Middle-earth, which it is certainly not. The danger of acquiring some misconceptions about Tolkien's legendarium is high with this one.

So, who can benefit from reading this book? Readers who are well-oriented in Tolkien's universe and its critical research and at the same time not too sensitive to Day's unorthodox interpretation, who are looking for some light reading to go with their afternoon tea or second breakfast, or who just desire another interesting artsy piece to add to their Tolkien fan book collections.

Reviewed by Martina Juričková

## Tolkien's Library: An Annotated Checklist

By Oronzo Cilli  
Luna Press, 2019.

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'One writes such a story not out of the leaves of trees still to be observed, nor by means of botany and soil-science; but it grows like a seed in the dark out of the leaf-mould of the mind: out of all that has been seen or thought or read, that has long ago been forgotten, descending into the deeps' – J.R.R. Tolkien (*Carpenter*, p. 126).

There have been many biographies written and published about what Tolkien has seen and thought – here, over the course of five years of research (and counting), Cilli attempts to document what Tolkien has read. The title of the book might lead us to think that he has listed the books that Tolkien owned during his lifetime. Were this volume to do only that, it would be a useful research tool for finding possible connections between Tolkien's writings and other authors', looking for inspirations or refutations to better understand Tolkien's own leaf-mould. *Tolkien's Library* goes well beyond such a simple checklist of 'primary' books owned by Tolkien though. It attempts to infer books that Tolkien read or was knowledgeable of through copious annotated notes for secondary sources as well – be they authors or books that his students wrote theses on, titles mentioned by him or close family and friends in interviews and letters, lectures that Tolkien gave, or references that Tolkien would have been exposed to while he worked on the *New English Dictionary* (now the *Oxford English Dictionary*) from 1919-1920.

As a research tool, *Tolkien's Library* does very well at positive confirmation. To find out if Tolkien read or had any opinion on Frank Herbert's *Dune*, looking at page 118 (entry 964) shows two primary sources, both unpublished

letters, where Tolkien states that he 'dislike[s] *DUNE* with some intensity.' For obvious reasons, it does rather poorly for books not listed. There is no entry for any books by Isaac Asimov – does this mean that Tolkien never had any exposure to his works, or that Cilli was unable to document any? There is no way to know based on this book. The sheer number of references, however – almost 2600 at the time of publication – means there is more than enough material for decades of reading to catch up with Tolkien. For example, a researcher interested in Tolkien and George MacDonald will find nine entries on pages 177-178, all with collaborating primary and secondary sources showing that Tolkien found him an important author, allowing the researcher to trace what Tolkien said and when, for each book. Information such as this will prove invaluable for validating existing research, but also discovery of new and interesting potential threads through casual browsing.

There is a note of caution that must be kept in mind when using this as a reference book, however, in order to not infer too much from the small nuggets of solid information that Cilli has assembled. A book may be included in this annotated checklist due to an ownership signature as seen in an auction, or due to Tolkien being given a copy. Beyond these bare facts, there is no indication of what Tolkien thought, or even if he read the cited work. Take for example entry 1009 by Richard Hoffman, 'The Theme of "Judgement Day II"' (p. 123). Cilli adds this to *Tolkien's Library* based solely on the fact that a copy was recorded as being sent by the author to Tolkien. Cilli does an excellent job annotating this entry with exactly this information and nothing more, and the reader should exercise the same caution.

*Tolkien's Library* is a powerful starting point for any research project about Tolkien and his possible inspirations. In the form of an annotated checklist, I expect it will not often be cited as a primary source of information. It is more a conduit between the researcher and hundreds of other primary sources. The value it adds is in the aggregation of all these other sources in a single place, well documented, with enough annotation to enable the reader to quickly move on. Cilli's meticulous research acts more like the librarian who knows where to find the information you are looking for – invaluable and praiseworthy, and hopefully not neglected in the acknowledgements.

Cilli has compressed a very large amount of information into the 432 pages of this book, and with that compression comes a lot of shorthand notation and his methodology for abbreviating and cross-referencing. The methods he has chosen make for a non-trivial amount of moving back and forth through the book to understand fully all of the information for a particular entry. Were Cilli to write everything out in longhand, though, the book would possibly double in length, so these shortcuts are fully understandable but do take some getting used to.

Beyond the primary 'Section A' that covers the book