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There and Back Again: Tolkien and the Greco-Roman World



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Right – The One Ring shown on a page from J. R. R. Tolkien: The Lord of the Rings, part I The Fellowship of the Ring, with the text of the Elvish song Galadriel’s Lament. Photo credit: Zanastardust, Wiki Commons, CC BY 2.0.
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There and Back Again: Tolkien and Greco-Roman Antiquity

Preface

Abstract The following introduction sketches the *status quaestionis* of the research on the influence of Greco-Roman antiquity on the works of Tolkien and provides details about the volume's theoretical impetus and its broad themes. The editors discuss Tolkien's complicated and indirect relationship with classical models, underscoring certain emergent themes in this volume's contributions, such as decline, multifocal reception and relationship with nature.

Keywords Tolkien, classical reception

THERE AND BACK AGAIN: TOLKIEN BETWEEN CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES

When one thinks of Tolkien, the first thing that comes to mind is probably not the ancient Greco-Roman world. Although Tolkien received a thorough classical education, cherished Latin poems, and started his university studies with classical philology, he soon turned to Anglo-Saxon literature and Norse mythology. His passion for the Anglo-Norse legendarium manifests clearly in his Middle-earth legendarium, so much so that when scholars of other ancient cultures argue for Tolkien being influenced by antiquity, they are often met with rebuttals such as “But Tolkien was a medievalist!”. However, Tolkien’s predilection for the Germanic cultural stratum does not mean other influences cannot be found lurking in the depths, especially if one considers how deeply and passionately Tolkien engaged with Roman poems. In fact, we believe that there is still much to be said about Tolkien’s classical inspirations – the conviction that gave powerful impetus to us as we were working on this journal issue.

STATUS QUAESTIONIS

The premise of this collection of papers is that Tolkien’s early work with Greco-Roman antiquity has had more influence on his Middle-earth than previously agreed upon. We have chosen to focus on ancient Greece and Rome as these cultures stand at the center of our research interests. Significantly, Greco-Roman reception in Tolkien is becoming an increasingly popular topic of scholarly investigation. For a long time, research on this topic was published as individual articles in Tolkien-specific journals such as *Tolkien Studies*, *Mythlore*, and *Mallorn*. Examples include Pace (1979), Morse (1980), Greenman (1988, 1992), Reckford (1988), Houghton (1995), Flieger (2004), Moreno (2005, 2007), Obertino (2006), Prozesky (2006), Smith (2007), Manni (2009), Markos (2009), Branchaw (2010), Bruce (2012), Livingston (2013), Testi (2013), Lynch (2018), and Williams (2020). What we listed above is by no means an exhaustive list of articles.

Beyond journal articles, certain authors produced individual contributions on Tolkien’s debt to the classical antiquity and published them in collected volumes, although the number of these chapters is considerably smaller than that of journal articles on the same topic. Reckford (1974) published a chapter in *Perspectives of Roman Poetry: A Classics Symposium*; Bartoňková (2008) appears in

Sborník Prací Filosofické Fakulty Brněnské University: Rada archaeologicko-klassická; Piętka (2011) was published in *Symbolae Philologorum Posnanensium Graecae et Latinae*; Delattre (2011) has a chapter in *Présence du roman grec et latin: actes du colloque tenu à Clermont-Ferrand*; and Stevens (2017) has a chapter in the edited volume *Classical Traditions in Modern Fantasy*. There are also three chapters on Tolkien and authors from antiquity in Arduini, Canzonieri, and Testi (2019), *Tolkien and the Classics*.

To wrap up this brief *status quaestionis*, it seems pertinent to briefly examine longer works dedicated solely to Tolkien and Greco-Roman antiquity, as this special edition now counts as part of that list. The earliest is Morse's (1986) *Evo-cation of Virgil in Tolkien's Art: Geritol for the Classics*, which argues that "both Virgil and Tolkien present myth as an aspect of a historical continuum. For them, myth does not seem to represent a falsehood, but rather it seems to narrate a record of experience from which man learns."¹ Kohns's and Sideri's (2009) *Mythos Atlantis: Texte von Platon bis J. R. R. Tolkien* examines literary depictions of Atlantis from Plato to Tolkien's Númenor. In a similar vein, Delattre's (2009) *Le cycle de l'anneau: de Minos à Tolkien* examines rings and ring cycles from the myth of Minos up to Tolkien. However, the most recent addition to the Tolkien reception studies family is Williams's (2021) *Tolkien and the Classical World*. We will not go into too much detail on this volume in this introduction as this special edition includes its review. This brief examination shows that, despite the continuing efflorescence of works about the influence of Greco-Roman antiquity on the works of Tolkien, scholars still find novel ways to engage with the Tolkienian corpus. The contributions featured in this issue show that this avenue of research continues to inspire and elucidate.

THEMES OF THE VOLUME

When putting together the pieces that appear in this volume, the guest editors had only one specific request of the authors – to engage with reception theory. Our relationship with the theoretical underpinnings of classical reception is best expressed by the following quote by Lorna Hardwick:

¹ Morse (1986), vii–viii.

“[B]ecause reception is concerned with the relationship between ancient and modern texts and contexts, as well as with those separated by time within antiquity, it has implications for the critical analysis of both. It used sometimes to be said that reception studies only yield insights into the receiving society. Of course they do this, but they also focus critical attention back towards the ancient source and sometimes frame new questions or retrieve aspects of the source which have been marginalized or forgotten.”²

Since we felt that a strong grounding in reception theory was vital to articulating Tolkien’s relationship with Greco-Roman antiquity, we asked each author to read selections from works by Hardwick (2003) and Keen (2006, 2016). The proposed readings offer a constructive methodological matrix within which to concretize “the ways in which Greek and Roman material has been transmitted, translated, excerpted, interpreted, rewritten, re-imaged and represented” by Tolkien.³ Our contributors engaged with Hardwick’s and Keen’s typologies of classical reception to define what sort of relationship exists between their chosen work(s) of Tolkien and its classical antecedents. By grounding their research in theory, the contributors to this issue perceptively reevaluated Tolkien’s debt to the classical antiquity with several broader themes emerging across a range of papers.

One such emergent theme is that of decline, a perennial subject of Greco-Roman antiquity that captivated Tolkien to such a degree that it arguably became Middle-earth’s *Leitmotiv*. Cristini’s and Pezzini’s contributions both speak of tangible decline reflected in the people and social structures of Middle-earth, while Matz shows how this decline has led to a loss of knowledge about Middle-earth’s non-human inhabitants within Tolkien’s works.

Another theme that spans several entries in this issue is diffuse, multistage reception. Contributors to the issue demonstrated that Tolkien often drew upon the classical models via late antique and medieval intermediaries. Capra’s paper traces Tolkien’s Orphic substratum, percolating through the medieval *Sir Orfeo*, whereas Praet’s contribution demonstrates that the throne room of Minas Tirith manifests its classical heritage through the medium of Byzantium. In addition, Keen’s entry examines an example of recursive reception with cinematic portrayals of Middle-earth shaping subsequent film representations of classical antiquity.

2 Hardwick (2003) 4.

3 Hardwick & Stray (2008) 1.

Other contributions touch upon the natural world, famously beloved and lovingly described by Tolkien. Matz traces the intertextual fates of Tolkien's Ents, the animated shepherds of trees who watched over nature and acted against those who dared to harm it. In turn, Chinn and Thompson draw intertextual parallels between Tolkien's wonderland of Ithilien and Augustan depictions of supernaturally fertile flora.

THE ARRANGEMENT OF PAPERS

The pieces in this volume are arranged chronologically in accordance with stages of the history of Middle-earth they refer to. The two pieces that do not speak specifically about *The Lord of the Rings* and the history of Middle-earth (Stutz and Keen) found their place at the end of the issue.

There are three pieces which examine the influence of Greco-Roman antiquity on the ancient history of Middle-earth, long before the events of *The Lord of the Rings*. Marco Cristini builds with in "The Fall of Two Cities. Troy and Gondolin," upon the previous research of Greenman (1992) and Bruce (2012) to examine how Gondolin's last day in 'The Fall of Gondolin' is modeled on the fall of Troy in Aeneid Book 2. Giuseppe Pezzini shows in "(Classical) Narratives of Decline in Tolkien. Renewal, Accommodation, Focalisation" how Tolkien's conception of history as a "long defeat"⁴ constitutes the pivotal myth of Middle-earth, making comparisons to narratives of decline in Hesiod, Homer, Plato, and Vergil. Elena Sofia Capra, in "Orfeo out of Care. The Reception of the Classical Myth of Orpheus from Sir Orfeo to Tolkien," looks at the reception of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in the story of Beren and Lúthien, filtered through the medieval *Sir Orfeo*, a text which Tolkien both translated and took inspiration from.

Moving on to *The Lord of the Rings*, we start with Kevin Kambo's "Platonic Tripartation and the People of Middle Earth." Kambo argues that the races of Middle-earth are inspired by Plato's conception of the tripartite soul from the *Republic*, linking the dwarves with Plato's artisans, humans with the auxiliaries who seek honor, and the elves with the guardians. Next is Charles Oughton's "Roman Heroes at Helm's Deep?". Oughton shows how Tolkien's knowledge of Macaulay's "Horatius" provides compelling parallels between Aragorn's actions

⁴ Tolkien (*Letters* 195) 255.

at Helm's Deep and Horatius's on the bridge. Christopher Chinn and Phoebe Thompson look at the intertextual relationship between Ithilien and literature and art from Augustan Rome that show natural 'superbloom' scenes, in "Tolkien's Ithilien and the Landscape of the Ancient Mediterranean". "*Quis enim laesos impune putaret esse deos?* Ents, Sacred Groves and the Cost of Desecration" by Matz argues that there are illuminating correspondences between Roman conceptions of sacred trees and Tolkien's depiction of the Ents, and goes on to show that, in his ambitious deforestation of Fangorn, Saruman can be read as an analogue to Caesar as depicted in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*. Raf Praet argues in "The Throne Room in Minas Tirith an Late Antique Ruler Ideology" that the description of the throne room in Minas Tirith is indebted to how Byzantine throne rooms were depicted, and argues that Tolkien draws this parallel in order to emphasize correspondences between *The Return of the King* and Christ's restoration of a fallen world.

Last but not least, we have two pieces that do not fall within Middle-earth but deal with broader themes of Tolkien's oeuvre. Kathryn Stutz argues in "G. B. Smith's 'Elzevir Cicero' and the Construction of Queer Immortality in Tolkien's Mythopoeia" that the engagement with the ancient world found in Geoffrey Bache Smith's collected poems, published posthumously by Tolkien himself, influenced Tolkien's own mythmaking. The final paper by Antony Keen, "Legolas in Troy. The Influence of Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings movies on cinematic portrayals of Greece and Rome," shows how the cinematography and casting of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* impacted the movies set in the ancient world that came after them.

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Alicia and Maciej, the guest co-editors of this special edition of *thersites*, would like to thank the editors of *thersites* for giving us a venue to present this research as well as the many peer reviewers who read each of the pieces. We would also like to thank our contributors and hope you, the reader, enjoy this volume.

ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THIS VOLUME

Every scholarly collection on Tolkieniana will attempt to impose some order on Tolkien's literary efflorescence: what we propose below is a shorthand referencing system for the most popular and widely quoted texts in this issue. Some of the contributors have opted to use other editions than those listed below. In such cases, abbreviations remain the same, but bibliographies appended to their contributions will specify the edition used.

- BLT*₁ *The Book of Lost Tales, Part One*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (London 1983/Boston 1984) (= *The History of Middle-earth* 1).
- BLT*₂ *The Book of Lost Tales, Part Two*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (London/Boston 1984) (= *The History of Middle-earth* 2).
- FG* *The Fall of Gondolin*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (Boston 2018).
- FR* *The Fellowship of the Ring* (London 1954).
- GPO* *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo*, translated by J.R.R. Tolkien (London 1975).
- HBBS* 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son,' (London 1953) 1–18.
- HME* *The History of Middle-earth*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (London 1983–1996).
- Hobbit* *The Hobbit* (First edition = London 1937; second edition = London 1951; 50th anniversary edition = Boston 1987).
- LB* *The Lays of Beleriand*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (London/Boston 1985) (= *The History of Middle-earth* 3).
- Letters* *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, edited by Humphrey Carpenter, with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien (London/Boston 1981).
- LotR* *The Lord of the Rings*, 50th anniversary edition (Boston 2004).
- LR* *The Lost Road and Other Writings*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (London/Boston 1987) (= *The History of Middle-earth* 5).
- MC* *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* (London 1983/Boston 1984).
- MR* *Morgoth's Ring*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (London/Boston 1993) (= *The History of Middle-earth* 10).
- Myth* 'Mythopoeia,' first published in *Tree and Leaf*, second edition (London 1988/Boston 1989).
- OFS* 'On Fairy-Stories,' *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (London 1947) 38–89.

- PS *Poems and Stories* (London 1980/Boston 1994).
RK *The Return of the King* (London 1955).
Sil *The Silmarillion* (London 2013).
SME *The Shaping of Middle-earth*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (London/Boston 1986) (= *The History of Middle-earth* 4).
ST *The Story of Kullervo*, edited by Verlyn Flieger (London 2015).
TNoME *The Nature of Middle-earth*, edited by Carl F. Hostetter (London/Dublin 2021).
TOFS *Tolkien On Fairy-Stories*, edited by Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson (London 2008).
TT *The Two Towers* (London 1954).
UT *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (London/Boston 1980).
WR *The War of the Ring*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (London/Boston 1990) (= *The History of Middle-earth* 8).

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