JOURNAL FOR TRANSCULTURAL PRESENCES &
DIACHRONIC IDENTITIES FROM ANTIQUITY TO DATE

thersites

15/2022

Alicia Matz and Maciej Paprocki (Eds.)

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

www.thersites-journal.de

Imprint

Universität Potsdam 2022
Historisches Institut, Professur Geschichte des Altertums
Am Neuen Palais 10, 14469 Potsdam (Germany)
https://www.thersites-journal.de/

ISSN 2364-7612

Contact
Principal Contact
Prof. Dr. Filippo Carlà-Uhink
Email: thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de
Support Contact
PD Dr. Christian Rollinger
Email: thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de

Layout and Typesetting
text plus form, Dresden

Cover pictures:
Left – Hadrian's Villa, Tivoli. Photo credit: Alicia Matz.
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.
https://www.flickr.com/photos/zanastardust/146652127/

Published online at:
https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol15

JOURNAL FOR TRANSCULTURAL PRESENCES &
DIACHRONIC IDENTITIES FROM ANTIQUITY TO DATE

thersites

15/2022 | pp. 314–320

CHRISTIAN BECK
(Universität Trier, Fachbereich III)

Review of Hamish Williams: *Tolkien and the Classical World*

Walking Tree Publishers (Zurich/Jena 2021) (= Cormarë Series No. 45), 414 pp. ISBN: 978-3-905703-45-0, 44 €.

The monumental volume is dedicated to the challenging task[1] of exploring the extent to which Tolkien received and drew on the classical world in creating his own world. The book contains 14 contributions divided into 5 chapters, as well as a preface by the editor Hamish Williams, an accounted Tolkien expert[2], and closing remarks by D. Graham J. Shipley. Except for the last chapter (5: Shorter Remarks and Observations), the chapters are coherent in their content and their order is structured.

Already in the introduction, Williams shows that he is aware of the challenges of researching classical influences in Tolkien's work. He makes it clear that the reception process is wide-ranging and consists of different processes such as transmission, translation, excerption, interpretation, re-writing, re-imagining, and representing. Therefore, the articles included not only consider the works of classical antiquity, beginning with

1 It has already been shown in detail that Tolkien's works were mainly influenced by the medieval world, Williams (2020) xx, with reference to Fisher (2011) 32–34, and Honnegger (2005) 45 f., 50 f., whereas the study of classical influences has so far played only a minor role.

2 Williams continues to research Tolkien's relationship with the classical world and a new book titled J. R. R. Tolkien's Utopianism and the Classics is scheduled for publication in 2023.

URL https://thersites-journal.de
DOI https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol15.230

Homer up to the fall of the Western or Eastern Roman Empire (750 BC–476/1453 AD), but also the reception of antiquity in the late Victorian Edwardian period, which influenced Tolkien throughout his life. He also points out that contemporary readers have difficulties recognizing classical motifs and he can show that this development goes so far that such elements can even disappear from modern adaptations of "classical" fantasy literature[3].

Consequently the first chapter is devoted to Tolkien's education in order to show how well versed he was in classical studies and how his training affected his work. In this way, Williams creates a common framework for the following chapters and contributions. He devotes himself in detail to the letters written by Tolkien and is thus able to convincingly demonstrate to the reader that Tolkien's interests have fluctuated over time. Not surprisingly for his time, Tolkien received a thorough classical education and excelled in Latin and Greek followed by his years as a student before the First World War, in which his interest in classical subjects waned in favor of a turn to themes and motifs of the Nordic sphere[4]. Nevertheless, Williams shows that Tolkien incorporated his classical training into his works during his professional years. He distinguishes Tolkien's way of thinking in five points[5]. His third point, "intertextuality", is especially striking, for Williams chooses examples in which Tolkien himself has his say on his work[6]. Only a single example among many can be pointed out here, namely Tolkien's view of Gondor as a "venerable and proud but increasingly impotent Byzantium", which by implication gives Arnor the role of the Western Roman Empire[7].

The introductory chapter concludes with a contribution by Ross Clare, who compares the history of Númenor and its Kings, as recorded in the Appendices of *The Lord of the Rings,* the *Silmarillion,* and *The Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth,* to that of Athens in the 5th century BC, handed down through

3 Vividly demonstrated through the absence of Bacchus and Dionysian elements from the film adaptations of The Chronicles of Narnia, created by Tolkien's contemporary and friend C. S. Lewis, see Williams (2020) xxii.

4 A situation that has been reinforced by a growing "Nordic turn", an overemphasis on classical texts, Tolkien's social environment and his tutors, Williams (2020) 16.

5 Explanations of classical concepts, artistic legacy, intertextuality, analogy, recreational reading, Williams (2020) 20.

6 Especially the *Letters* 131, 150–154 in which he draws a connection between Túrin Turambar and Oedipus and *Letters* 154, 197 f. in which the fall of Numenor is compared with the myth of Atlantis, see. Williams (2020) 22 f.; Scull & Hammond (2006) 371.

7 *Letters* 131, 157; Williams (2020) 23.

the historiographies of Herodotus and Thucydides,[8] , as well as to the descriptions of Roman emperors by Roman and early Christian authors.[9] The great strength of Ross's contribution is that she sees her examples as only a part of thinkable influences on Tolkien's work and identifies other sources of inspiration as well. Sauron, thus, can be seen as a bad ruler as described by early Christian biographers and as an evil entity as described in the New Testament[10].

On this general basis, the individual sections are devoted to specific comparisons with Tolkien's work. The first section deals with the influence of ancient mythological and epic stories which are reflected in the work of Tolkien. The first contribution by Giuseppe Pezzini shows that there are several classical patterns of interaction (dreams, inspiration), but these differ from the *Silmarillion* to *The Lord of the Rings* and are re-negotiated by Tolkien. In this context, the relationship between the gods and their children is crucial. Pezzini concludes that the Valar do not treat humans and elves as tokens but act out of compassion towards them, even when they anger them, a strong contrast to the Olympian deities. In addition, he can show through the arrow-shot *topos* that Tolkien made use of a popular ancient theme. The second article by Benjamin Eldon Stevens analyses how themes of loss, death, and forgetting play with ancient models in Tolkien's works. The ancient *topos* of the 'underworld journey' (*katabasis*) serves as the central point of his article and he can show that several Stories bear resemblance to the works of ancient authors, for example the Fellowship in Moria in *The Fellowship of the Ring* with Virgil's Aeneas hoping to meet the shade of his father. In the third paper, Austin M. Freeman argues that Tolkien's most important virtue (*estel*) derives not only from the Northern (indomitable will) and the Christian (*pistis* or 'faith/trust'), as previously thought, but also from Virgil (*pietas*) and thus stands on three pillars (Classical, Nordic, Christian). To do this, he compares Virgil's story of the fall of Troy with Tolkien's narrative of the fall of Gondolin and the siege of Minas Tirith. Freeman can show that Tolkien's notion of duty cannot be explained solely by Northern notions of courage (as expressed in the fall of Gondolin), which always carry an element of self-focused pride. In strong contrast, Beregond, Pippin and Faramir are acting during the siege of Minas Tirith, coming close to Virgil's ideal of *pietas* in their virtues.

8 Clare (2020) 41–56.

9 Mainly Tacitus, Sueton, Cassius Dio, St. Augustine and the New Testament, Clare (2020) 58–62.

10 Clare (2020) 62 shows that the persecution of believers and the prohibition of the Elvish language in Númenor by King Ar-Adûnakhôr bears features similar to the persecution of Christians instructed in the fourth decree of Diocletian.

In the last contribution to the second section, Peter Astrup Sundt argues that the mythological story of Orpheus and Eurydice is not only reflected in the story of Beren and Lúthien but also in *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Simarillion.* Orpheus can be found in the Ents as well as in Tom Bombadil.

The third section is dedicated to the dialogue between Tolkien and the Greek philosophers. Michael Kleu shows in detail Tolkien's enthusiasm for the sinking of Atlantis as described by Plato in the dialogues *Timaeus* and *Critias.* Although Tolkien mentions Plato only in a single letter, details of his story show clear connections to the Greek philosopher. For example, his account of the downfall of Númenor, the *Akallabêth,* ends with notes on being and becoming, topics that are also discussed by Plato. Kleu also identifies several post-Platonic Atlantis narratives that found their way into Tolkien's Númenor narrative. As a result, he concludes that the story of the fall of Númenor is a fantasy version of the fall of Atlantis according to Plato.

Łukasz Neubauer's article attempts to present Plato's story of the Ring of Gyges as a model for Tolkien's One Ring. Besides the fact that both render the wearer invisible Neubauer also lists similarities in the narrative between Plato's Republic and The Hobbit. However, the connection to Gyges is only another option to the numerous medieval and Norse models for the Hobbit.

The last contribution of the section undertakes a reinterpretation of the story *The Children of Hurin* in terms of Aristotle's theory of tragedy. In addition to the fact that Tolkien himself described the story as tragic, the author Julian Eilmann elaborates on aspects of the story which, in Aristotle's understanding, also lead to the hero's failure through error or frailty. These shortcomings of the hero include his excessive pride, his difficulty in making friends, his poor judgment, and his fury.

The fourth section deals with the limits of the classical world in Tolkien's works. In the first article, Philip Burton uses four case studies (plant names, wine, oliphants, and dragons) on an ethnological and linguistic background to argue that Tolkien fundamentally assumes a unity of northern Europe and the Mediterranean. The author also considers medieval receptions of ancient individuals who were known to Tolkien. For example, the apocryphal letters of Alexander to Aristotle in middle English speak of *oliphantis* and *serpentis* which the Macedonian king encounters in a desert in India. The text thus connects all spheres with each other.

In his article, Richard Z. Gallant shows similarities between the Noldorisation of the Edain in the First Age and the Romanisation of the Germanic tribes in the Western Roman Empire. Like the Romans, the Noldor have an ideological framework that is adaptable and designed to cooperate to maintain

their power and to integrate foreigners into their reign. Eventually, both Edain and Germanic people develop into rulers within this structure. However, the author argues that Tolkien might not have been fully aware of these references and that this model of cultural adaptation of tribal societies to an 'advanced' culture was common in Tolkien's time.

Juliette Harrison draws a compelling image of the historical background of Gondor's and Rohan's relationship with each other. While Gondor (also from Rohan's point of view) appears like a Mediterranean empire, the Rohirrim have many different models (Angles, Saxons, and Jutes). The Author takes up Tolkien's ideas of Gondor as a kind of Byzantium, invoking not only the geography[11] but also the names of the inhabitants of Gondor[12] as an argument. In contrast to the conflicts between the Germanic tribes and the remnants of the Roman Empire, however, a peaceful relationship is established between Rohan and Gondor, which is further strengthened by marriage (Éowyn and Faramir). Tolkien thus creates an alternative history.

The last section starts with a contribution by Alley Marie Jordan, who gives an insight into pastoralism in Middle Earth. Starting with a definition of pastoralism she demonstrates that there are certain landscapes, like arcadia or the shire, which cannot be located but share common features which mark their inhabitants as pastoralists in a bucolic way.

The last paper by O. Filonenko and V. Shchepanskyi reveals references between classical influences on Music in Tolkien's Legendarium. Regarding classical philosophers, they identify some categories (arrangement and disposition, harmony and discord) which Tolkien also refers to.

In my opinion, the otherwise comprehensive volume at this point only lacks a final article dealing with architecture, buildings, and art objects described in Tolkien's works, which could also be analyzed in terms of classical motifs.

The volume is concluded by a paper by D. Graham J. Shipley, who puts the contributions into a wider context. He observes that Tolkien was not only interested in expanding classical themes with a happy ending but reinterpreted them to serve his narrative. In Shipley's view, this reinterpretation is also Tolkien's greatest achievement in dealing with classical themes. He also points out that the ancient references are not the most important part of Tolkien's work but are nevertheless unmistakably present.

11 See Miryam Librán-Moreno (2011) 86–108, who states that "at a macroscopic level, Tolkien made Gondor functionally similar to Constantinople".

12 The residents bear names in Sindarin and are thus part of an older tradition.

In addition, there is a useful index in the appendix in which figures from Tolkien's works are cross-referenced with ancient characters. In this way, the reader can quickly establish references and pick out relevant themes for himself.

This comprehensive volume thus not only sheds new light on classical references in Tolkien's works but also offers the reader easy access to various references between Middle-earth and antiquity.

Contents

Editor's Notes – Hamish Williams – i

Introduction

Classical Tradition, Modern Fantasy, and the Generic Contracts of Readers – Hamish Williams – xi

Section 1: Classical Lives and Histories

Tolkien the Classicist: Scholar and Thinker – Hamish Williams – 3

Greek and Roman Historiographies in Tolkien's Númenor – Ross Clare – 37

Section 2: Ancient Epic and Myth

The Gods in (Tolkien's) Epic: Classical Patterns of Divine Interaction – Giuseppe Pezzini – 73

Middle-earth as Underworld: From Katabasis to Eucatastrophe – Benjamin Eldon Stevens – 105

Pietas and the Fall of the City: A Neglected Virgilian Influence on Middle-earth's Chief Virtue – Austin M. Freeman – 131

The Love Story of Orpheus and Eurydice in Tolkien's Orphic Middle-earth – Peter Astrup Sundt – 165

Section 3: In Dialogue with the Greek Philosophers

Plato's Atlantis and the Post-Platonic Tradition in Tolkien's Downfall of Númenor – Michael Kleu – 193

Less Consciously at First but More Consciously in the Revision: Plato's Ring of Gyges as a Putative Source of Inspiration for Tolkien's Ring of Power – H. Łukasz Neubauer – 217

Horror and Fury: J. R. R. Tolkien's The Children of Húrin and the Aristotelian Theory of Tragedy – Julian Eilmann – 247

Section 4: Around the Borders of the Classical World

"Eastwards and Southwards": Philological and Historical Perspectives on Tolkien and Classicism – Philip Burton – 273

The Noldorization of the Edain: The Roman-Germani Paradigm for the Noldor and Edain in Tolkien's Migration Era – Richard Z. Gallant – 305

"Escape and Consolation": Gondor as the Ancient Mediterranean and Rohan as the Germanic World in The Lord of the Rings – Juliette Harrisson – 329

Section 5: Shorter Remarks and Observations

Shepherds and the Shire: Classical Pastoralism in Middle-earth – Alley Marie Jordan – 353

Classical Influences on the Role of Music in Tolkien's Legendarium – Oleksandra Filonenko and Vitalii Shchepanskyi – 365

Afterword

Afterword: Tolkien's Response to Classics in Its Wider Context – D. Graham J. Shipley – 379

Index – 399

Christian Beck
Universität Trier, Fachbereich III

Suggested citation
Beck, Christian: Review of Hamish Williams: Tolkien and the Classical World. In: thersites 15 (2022): There and Back Again: Tolkien and the Greco-Roman World pp. 314–320. https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol15.230