Middle-earth, or There and Back Again, edited by Łukasz Neubauer

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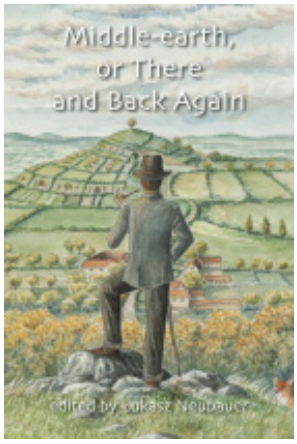
Łukasz Neubauer, ed. *Middle-earth, or There and Back Again*. Walking Tree, 2020. Paperback. 156 pg. $19.45. Cormarë Series. ISBN 9783905703443.



Łukasz Neubauer's edited collection *Middle-earth, or There and Back Again* covers an eclectic array of works from J. R. R. Tolkien's oeuvre. Four of the six essays focus on Tolkien's Middle-earth legendarium while the other two discuss *The Fall of Arthur* and *The Story of Kullervo*. Each essay focuses on the texts that influenced Tolkien's world-building, examining the ways in which Tolkien took themes, characters, and even worldviews from earlier mythologies and changed, elaborated, or otherwise recapitulated them in order to create his own mythopoeic texts. In all, this collection leaves the reader with a deeper understanding of just how fertile Tolkien's familiarity with ancient and medieval literature was for his writing.

Neubauer's own contribution to the volume, "'You cannot pass': Tolkien's Christian Reinterpretation of the Traditional Germanic Ideals of Heroism and Loyalty in *The Lord of the Rings*", is the most notable essay in the collection. Neubauer argues that the scene in *The Lord of the Rings* in which Gandalf battles the Balrog in the depths of Moria was inspired by Beorhtnoth's actions in *The Battle of Maldon*. Both texts envision a battle against formidable foes where a leader's followers come to his aid, as well as a setting where the enemies must cross a bridge in order to engage in battle. The major difference between the two texts, Neubauer argues, is that while Beorhtnoth allows the Vikings to cross in a hubristic desire to increase the glory of a supposed victory, thus allowing his followers to die needlessly, Gandalf positions himself on the bridge to prevent the Balrog's passing and refuses help from his company, thus sacrificing himself for the greater good. As Neubauer comments, Tolkien's "understanding of what truly defines heroism goes well beyond the somewhat narrow and oversimplified framework of the oft-examined Germanic 'heroic ideal'" (34). In this way, Tolkien takes an older story and reimagines it to adhere to his Catholic worldview, transforming what had been a story of warrior heroism into a parable of heroic sacrifice.

In the same vein, Michał Leśniewski in "Tolkien and the Myth of Atlantis, or the Usefulness of Dreams and the Methodology of Mythmaking" examines the influence of Plato's tale of Atlantis on Tolkien's creation of Númenor. While scholars elsewhere have made this connection between these two doomed societies before, Leśniewski emphasizes how the fallen nature of the Edain

constitutes a significant theme throughout the Middle-earth mythos. As Leśniewski observes, "the Edain are … inclined to make the same mistakes, over and over again" (17). This, Leśniewski argues, also falls in line with Plato's thinking, as "Tolkien appears to share Plato's pessimistic view concerning the fallible character of human nature" (17). Plato's influence on Tolkien's legendarium therefore extends beyond just the tale of a civilization doomed by punishment for its wickedness, it also inspires a paradigm for all human actions on Middle-earth and the way in which its history unfolds.

Barbara Kowalik's essay, "Tolkien's Use of the Motif of Goldsmith-craft and the Middle English *Pearl*: Ring or Hand?," offers a fascinating look at how one of Tolkien's favorite medieval poems influenced his creation of the Ring of Power. While previous scholarship has largely focused on how Tolkien was inspired by the rings from *Niebelungenlied* and Plato's "Ring of Gyges," Kowalik instead convincingly argues that *Pearl* provides the model for the One Ring. Yet, as in the essays discussed above, it was not inspiration merely for one object; rather, it offered an entire framework of beliefs around rings that Tolkien used throughout his Middle-earth Legendarium. Kowalik notes how the symbolism of precious metals and gems found in Pearl are recapitulated in *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Kowalki points out that both works contain "a story of attachment and loss, and of regret, pain, and quest for a jewel" (48). In addition to similarities in plot, Kowalki demonstrates that these works both contain similar themes, such as how the jewels "must not be isolated to please a single individual" (53) because "isolation is shown to be at the root of … evil-doing" (54), that "personal dignity and goodness is preserved through acknowledging authority" (53), and that the circular shape of the rings "suggest both perfection and entrapment" (59), amongst others. Tolkien scholars have long noted how Tolkien's interest in medieval literature affected his creation of Middle-earth, and Kowalki's essay should bring more critical attention to *Pearl* as source material for Tolkien's mythos.

The final essay that focuses on Middle-earth, "The Wisdom of Galadriel: A Study in the Theology of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*" by Andrzej Wicher, looks at the many influences that Tolkien drew upon to construct Galadriel, from Saint Paul's Epistles to John Ruskin's ideals of womanhood. Wicher's interpretation of Galadriel focuses on how she is "an unlikely heroine of the struggle with Sauron" (128) because she herself took part in Fëanor's rebellion against the Valar. This, however, gives her wisdom and helps her understand humanity's sinful nature, making her, as Wicher says, into a character "through whom many Biblical echoes reverberate" (128).

The two essays that focus on Tolkien's works outside of his Middle-earth legendarium, "The Mythical Model of the World in *The Story of Kullervo*" by Andrzej Szyjewski and "J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Fall of Arthur* in the Context of the Medieval Tradition of Romance" by Bartłomiej Błaszkiewicz, both look at Tolkien's direct adaptations of older mythic cycles. Szyjewski's assessment of *The Story of Kullervo* is that while composing this work Tolkien honed his skills in creating new languages and pantheons, thus teaching him the principles of mythopoeic creation that would ultimately result in his tales of Middle-earth (110). Błaszkiewicz explicates Tolkien's

adaptation of the Arthurian language and likewise argues that Tolkien's experiences in writing this poem contributed to his creation of Middle-earth (81).

This volume provides a valuable overview of some of the sources Tolkien was familiar with as a medievalist and that he used to create his own literary works. While readers of the Cormarë series may expect a more focused theme for an edited collection, these essays are connected (even if somewhat loosely) by their explorations of how Tolkien reworked medieval and ancient literature into his own writings. These essays provide important studies of Tolkien's sources and, as with all the other volumes put forth in the Cormarë series, this collection makes a valuable contribution to Tolkienian scholarship.

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