

Book Review Supplement

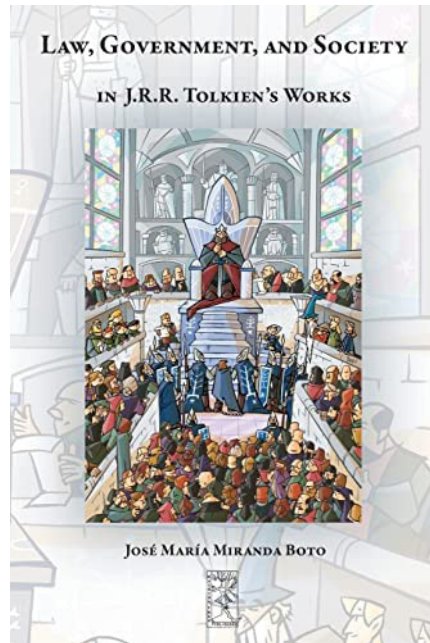
VII: *Journal of the Marion E. Wade Center*, Vol. 38.2

José María Miranda Boto, *Law, Government, and Society in J.R.R. Tolkien's Works*. Comarë Series No. 43. (Zurich and Jena: Walking Tree Publishers, 2022).

Law, Government, and Society in Tolkien's Works is a clear title covering innumerable detailed riches. Tolkien's works: mostly of fiction, and not only *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings* (with lots of attention to the Appendices), *The Silmarillion*, and even *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth*, but shorter works such as 'The New Shadow', 'Leaf by Niggle', *Smith of Wootton Major* (if briefly), and, especially, *Farmer Giles of Ham*. To the benefit of reviewers and potential readers, Walking Tree Publishers include the Table of Contents in the book's entry on their website, giving a lucid glimpse of what is covered, and how. José María Miranda Boto is professor of labour law at the University of Santiago de Compostela in Spain, and, as he says,

has been an avid reader of Tolkien's works 'for more than three decades, years before I started studying law' (xxiii). If that correctly suggests breadth of knowledge and thoroughness of approach, the book's cover illustration and Table of Contents may surprise with their accents on humor as well: the fourth part is entitled 'Law as a Joke in Tolkien's Works'. Miranda Boto merrily as well as seriously attends to what is playful as well as what is earnest in Tolkien's 'Legal Imagination', especially in what Tolkien himself called 'an elaborate form of the *game* of inventing a country' (xxv).

Miranda Boto says one of his main goals is 'to identify pre-existing legal institutions that could have been a source of inspiration for Tolkien', adding, with a wink, the 'merit that this book aspires to is that of boring exhaustivity' (xxv-xxvi). But he moves comfortably and fruitfully between 'Tolkien Studies and Middle-earth Studies' (xxvii), Tolkien as maker and the invented worlds as objects of study in their own right. He later summarizes, 'I want to lay



out when and where things happen in Arda, i.e., the facts, and what—when and where—might have been the inspiration’ (4). He does this thoroughly in keeping with what each topic permits, comparing the Valar and Maiar (the subcreative angelic powers), and different groups of elves, dwarves, men, hobbits, and even ents in the different ages of Middle-earth, in various locations. He does so very readably, yet in a way that allows the book to serve as a handy reference work as well. And he does so in discussion with numerous other scholars—not least, Spanish-speaking ones, conveniently translating any quotations—in footnotes. (There are twenty pages of bibliography. Those lively discussions enjoyably include acknowledging debts to scholars, colleagues, and friends in conversations apart from any publications—beginning with the Mercedarian priest Fr. José Anido Rodríguez who contributed so many ‘wise opinions that they are literally uncountable’ (xxxiii).)

‘The common source for Natural Law in Arda’ is Eru Ilúvatar, ‘the origin of all good things in the world’(14), though differences are also noted: ‘the absence of a holy book, such as the Bible, where all these commandments and rules are written’ (14) and of ‘priests’ (20). And, with a few exceptions, ‘all societies described in Arda, since [. . .] Manwë took up the job, are organized as monarchies’ (41). For example, ‘at some moment during the journey to Valinor’, seat of the angelic powers, the three Elvish ambassadors from Middle-earth, ‘Ingwë, Finwë and Elwë became kings’ (14). Miranda Boto’s care here in distinguishing what we do and do not know is characteristic, just as he has earlier noted ‘we have very limited information about the real extension of the powers [...] of all these kings’ (20). The names in these examples illustrate his assumption that his readers will ‘have a strong knowledge of Tolkien’s works’ (xxxi). My general impression, however, is that he supplies sufficient context that we can read on unruffled where our knowledge is not quite strong enough. I certainly read the book right through enjoyably, without pausing to consult the indexes of *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion*, or *Unfinished Tales*, or a handy online source such as Tolkien Gateway. (I did, however, read with pencil in hand, cross-referencing and indexing as seemed useful in the blank pages in the back.)

The cover illustration by the cartoonist Gonzalo Díez García, signed with his nom de plume, Chapu, is entitled ‘The Judgement of Beregond’, a subject to which Miranda Boto returns more than once. (I noted it on pages 6, 18, 23-24, 106-08, 172, and 212). Beregond, brought before Aragorn as King Elessar, faces a death penalty. Miranda Boto notes ‘the absence of interest by the new king in the strict enforcement of law. . . . [H]e chose to start his government with an act of mercy, under the name of justice. . . . [W]e will see how the king ruled in equity rather than in law. Justice was his lodestar’ (23). Chapu seems to capture the moment before this eucatas-

trophe, this ‘sudden joyous “turn”’ of events, to apply Tolkien’s term from *On Fairy-Stories* (75).

Such things as the contract the Dwarves offered Bilbo in *The Hobbit* (181-84), or Bilbo’s, Lobelia’s, and Frodo’s last wills and testaments in *The Lord of the Rings* (144-45, 187-88) spring easily to mind as examples of legal matters in Tolkien’s fiction. But readers may be surprised yet persuaded by the range and variety of matters and topics the author attends to, such as measures (59), forestry (60), the Houses of Healing and their Warden (61-62), ‘the measurement of time’ (149-57), terms of family relationship (142-49), guilds (159), slavery (160), precious metals and coinage (160-66), and hereditary legacies and heirlooms, including swords and regalia (167-70). A fine example: ‘One object particularly remarkable is a ring, not the One Ring, but that of Barahir, as it crosses thousands of years, and even three times the Great Sea, as its origin was, most probably, Valinórean’—to end up being given by Aragorn ‘to Arwen Undómiel as a token of trothplight’ (168). The exhilarating packed paragraph detailing the ring’s history may invite readers to spend a long time among the indexes (with or without a visit to Tolkien Gateway) finding what to (re)read, in admiration and delight. The book is both a delicatessen and a supermarket of food for thought. For one striking example: Miranda Boto’s detailed answer to his own question ‘What did Sauron do for Mordor?’ includes building cisterns and repairing roads, and ends, ‘everything in his mind revolved around the rationalization of resources. The Romans did much less for Judea’ (26-27).

In his Foreword to the book, Tom Shippey writes,

There can be no doubt that a great deal of thought underlies what appear to be casual scenes in Tolkien’s narrative, and it is vital that this hidden complexity is brought out: the current work is perhaps the most fruitful and unexpected way of approaching what so many have sought, the core of Tolkien’s thought and his philosophy. . . . Professor Miranda Boto’s is a remarkable study of a neglected topic. Even those of us most familiar with Middle-earth will learn from it much that is new, and also become more aware of things that we thought we knew already: such insights into familiarity are among the most welcome insights any work of criticism can provide. (xvii-viii)

While it is not a theme or thesis emphatically pursued, Tolkien’s imagination of fallen but faithfully repentant people(s) without Revelation before the Incarnation is also subtly but substantially illuminated by this book.

Discussing the difficulty of deciding what to include and exclude, Miranda Boto refers to Tolkien’s posthumously published works edited by his son Christopher Tolkien, including ‘independent, self-standing texts’ like ‘Laws

and Customs Among the Eldar' and 'the different versions of a final text, the glory of *The History of Middle-earth*, the nightmare for a lawyer' (xxviii). In deciding to leave most of that twelve-volume series out, he adds (xxix), "if this book is ever on the verge of a second edition, *The History of Middle-earth* would be the focus of the enlargement of the text' (xxix). We can only hope that verge may be easily reached, and that vow kept.¹

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Work Cited

Tolkien, J.R.R. *Tolkien On Fairy-stories: Expanded Edition, with Commentary and Notes*.
Edited by Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson, HarperCollins, 2014.

Notes

¹ In the process, some proofreading and correction is called for. For example, when something struck me as odd about a quotation from *Farmer Giles* (209), I was rattled to discover it appeared to be quoted from memory, though the correct page number was given.