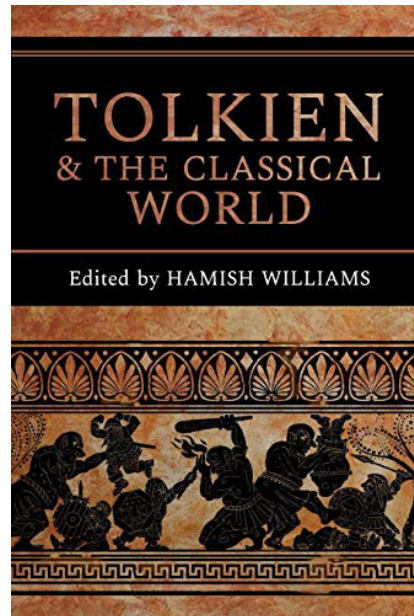


# Book Review Supplement

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*Tolkien & the Classical World*, Ed. by Hamish Williams. Conmarë Series, No. 45, Ed. by T. Honegger and D. Triebel. (Zurich and Jena: Walking Tree Publishers, 2021).

This book is a compilation of 14 essays (plus introduction and afterword) by various scholars investigating literary parallels and thematic similarities between Tolkien's legendarium and what is commonly referred to as the classics, that is, famous and influential literature from the ancient Greco-Roman world. In his introduction, Hamish Williams (the volume editor) illustrates how many contemporary readers of Tolkien, due to "de-emphasis of the Classics . . . are not necessarily equipped with the necessary training to detect Classical figures and tropes in certain allusive texts" (xvi). This work intends to fill that gap by demonstrating that Tolkien himself both studied and was highly influenced by the classics. While Tolkien's taste for and appropriation



of Greco-Roman literature waxed and waned throughout his career, classical motifs and themes were always present in Tolkien's mind when crafting his own legendary world. Not only this, but the modern reader can identify definitively certain patterns of both comparison and contrast between the works of Tolkien and classical authors such as Homer, Sophocles, Plato, Virgil, and others.

The volume's contributors are a mix of mostly European and North American scholars of classical literature, with a few Tolkien specialists also represented. Accordingly, the compiled essays aim to clarify Tolkien's *reception* of Greco-Roman literature and not necessarily his *application* of classical motifs or themes. In other words, this volume engages in comparative analysis between Tolkien and the classics rather than direct literary analysis of Tolkien's legendarium itself.

The collected essays are organized in five sections: 1) "Classical Lives and Histories" (two chapters); 2) "Ancient Epic and Myth" (four chapters); 3)

“In Dialogue with the Greek Philosophers” (three chapters); 4 “Around the Borders of the Classical World” (three chapters); and 5 “Shorter Remarks and Observations” (two chapters). In the first essay, Hamish Williams puts forth evidence that Tolkien both studied the classics himself and retained interest (to varying degrees as time progressed) in classical literature throughout his career as a scholar and author. In the second essay, Ross Clare identifies specific parallels between Tolkien’s Númenorian legends and Greco-Roman historiographies, particularly those of Herodotus and Thucydides.

Moving into the second section of the book, Giuseppe Pezzini speculates that the patterns of interaction between the Valar and other creatures in Tolkien’s legendarium find their prototypes in the actions of the gods within classical myths. Benjamin Eldon Stevens then traces how the entire narrative of Middle-earth inverts the classical literary trajectories of both “‘underworld journey’ (*katabasis*) and ‘encounter with the dead’ (*nekylia*)” (105). Next, Austin M. Freeman describes how Tolkien appropriates the classical concept of piety (Latin *pietas*), the English concept of courage, and the Christian concept of faith (Greek *pistis*) to define an original virtue that he calls by the Elven term *estel*, that is, “active trust and loyalty” (131). Finally, Peter Astrup Sundt explores how Tolkien both borrows from and builds upon the classical story of Orpheus and Eurydice in various elements of both *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*.

In the third section, Michael Kleu shows both explicit and implicit resemblances between the fall of Númenor in Tolkien’s literature and the Atlantis myth told by Plato in his dialogues *Timaeus* and *Critias*. In a similar vein, Łukasz Neubauer draws comparisons between the ring of Gyges in Plato’s *Republic* and the One Ring that dominates Tolkien’s entire narrative of the Third Age of Middle-earth. Julian Eilmann then demonstrates convincingly that Tolkien’s great tale *The Children of Húrin* is rightly classified as an Aristotelian tragedy, fully incorporating the defining concepts of *peripeteia* (“turning point”), *anagnorisis* (“recognition”), and *pathos* (“suffering”) to produce the cathartic experiences of *phobos* (“fear”) and *eleos* (“pity”) within the reader.

In the fourth section, Philip Burton writes compellingly that Tolkien was convinced by the works of German philologists Victor Hehn and Otto Schrader concerning the spread of Indo-European languages across the Eurasian continent, and that the effects of these theories are illustrated in the various terms for trees, wine, elephants, and dragons in Tolkien’s multilingual world. Richard Z. Gallant then argues that the “Noldorization” of the Edain (i.e., Elven hegemony over the “free” peoples of Man) in Middle-earth follows similar patterns of acculturation exhibited in the “Romanization” of the Germanic peoples of Europe during the classical Migration Era (376-568 CE). The section concludes with Juliette Harrisson’s essay, in which she presents various and sundry parallels between Tolkien’s kingdoms of Gondor

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and Rohan and the cultures of the ancient Mediterranean and Germanic worlds, respectively.

In the fifth and final section, Alley Marie Jordan compares the concept of pastoralism in Virgil's *Eclogues* and Tolkien's hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings*, concluding that "The Hobbits fight, the Arcadians sing, but both regrow" (358). Oleksandra Filonenko and Vitalii Shchepanskyi compare and contrast the classical cosmological concept of *the music of the spheres* with the prominent role Tolkien assigns to music in his stories, particularly in Ilúvatar's creation of the world and the "mighty magical songs" (373) sung by various characters in Tolkien's legendarium. In the Afterword, Graham J. Shipley sums up beautifully the basic thrust of the entire volume: "The claim is not that the Classics provided the most important foundation for Tolkien's imagination, but that Greece and Rome were as vital as the medieval components and deserve to be foregrounded more than they have been, while also being contextualized" (392).

As a general rule, this volume utilizes a satisfying balance of both primary and secondary sources to bolster the presented arguments, although this reviewer would have liked to have seen more interaction with Tolkien's own opinions regarding the relationship(s) between his own works and the works of classical literature. At times, this reviewer was not fully convinced that the comparisons being drawn were deliberate on Tolkien's part. Perhaps some are merely circumstantial due to similar literary typology. Nevertheless, these essays elucidate many enlightening—and even delightful—parallels between Tolkienian and classical literature that make this volume well worth reading by the Tolkien scholar and enthusiast alike. The arguments presented by Freeman, Eilmann, and Burton stand out as particularly strong.

On the whole, the book achieves its purpose of presenting and defending the position that the Greco-Roman classics influenced Tolkien's thought and imagination throughout his life. The observant reader can discern these influences through attentive reading and careful consideration of the conceptual themes in Tolkien's works.

JOEL D. RUARK  
Faculty, Wheaton College  
Wheaton, IL