



A review of
**J. R. R. Tolkien:
the Forest and
the City**

Alaric Hall

This is an elegant collection, comprising elegant essays, which for the most part stick closely to the collection's theme; many are by postgraduate students, and the contributors and the editors are to be applauded for gathering such fine work by young scholars. While tending to focus on *The Lord of the Rings*, the collection does make welcome forays into Tolkien's wider legendarium. Most of the contributions are around 5,000 words, giving them a bite-sized appeal: academic enough to provide insights to specialists, but digestible enough to entice the general reader. Specialists will often wish that ideas had been developed further, but that doesn't detract from the volume's success in floating ideas and flagging possibilities for future work.

Predictably, given Tolkien's famed enthusiasm for trees, there is more here on forests than cities. It is easy to read Tolkien's cities as figures for industrial dystopias, as Dominika Nycz does (convincingly) in her study of Tolkien's wizards, or to interpret his ruins as strategies for exploring nostalgia, as Michael D.C. Drout does in his sophisticated article. Verlyn Flieger's exploration of *faërie* and its forests emphasises the threatening side of Tolkien's forests, but less so the welcoming side of his cities; likewise, Dimitra Fimi, in showing how *The Children of Húrin* is based on *Oedipus Tyrannos*, indicates how Tolkien viewed the *polis* as a locus of civilisation – but also how little of his fiction Tolkien chose to set there.

The most stimulating contributions, then, generally have an eye to the urban, disrupting Tolkien's foregrounding of the wilderness: Karl Kinsella situates Tolkien's imagined worlds in relation to Arts and Crafts architecture, particularly the work of Edward Schroeder Prior, while Jennifer Harwood-Smith's comparison of Tolkien's cities with Fritz Lang's 1927 *Metropolis* certainly leaves the reader wanting more and deeper analysis in this vein. I particularly appreciated Ian Kinane's insightful Marxist reading of wealth in *The Hobbit*, partly because it goes beyond reading Tolkien merely through his own secondary literature (principally 'On Fairy-Stories') or through comparison with other literature, instead analysing Tolkien through cultural theory in order to use his work as a platform for cultural studies – though I did find Thomas Honegger's application of Gramarye: *The Journal of the Sussex Centre for Folklore, Fairy Tales and Fantasy*, Summer 2015, Issue 7

Claude Lévi-Strauss's theories of the raw and the cooked to Middle-earth, which Honegger deploys without much sensitivity to Middle-earth's fictionality, a little flat-footed.

Parts of the collection are in the well-established mould of Tolkien criticism which combines biographical study of the author with spotting sources and analogues. This is engaging enough (and insofar as I have written on Tolkien myself, it's what I have done). Meg Black makes a spirited case for Tolkien's interest in Spanish politics, and the influence of reporting on the bombing of Guernica in 1937 on his drafting of the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings*. Tom Shippey notes some striking correspondences between dates in the history of the Shire and in the history of England, and uses exam papers set by Tolkien at Oxford to explore his complex affinities with Gothic identities in the late Roman Empire. This work blends into a tranche of articles which offer good, old-fashioned literary criticism, exposing Tolkien's literary technique and possible meanings of his writing. Of their kind, these are deft pieces: Rebecca Merkelbach demonstrates the importance of fairy-tale forests to the motifs and structuring of *The Lord of the Rings*; Jane Carroll neatly explores politeness and etiquette in this and *The Hobbit*; and Alison Milbank explores similarities between Tolkien's literary technique and Dante's *Commedia*, bringing a welcome theological dimension to the collection. Erin Sebo doesn't say much about forests or cities, but does give a powerful reading of riddles in Tolkien's writing and in his sources, making a neat case for the legitimacy in the riddle-genre of so-called 'neck riddles' (ostensibly unanswerable questions of fact of the 'what have I got in my pocket?' kind).

This is a serious and not adulatory collection, but nor is it a prickly one: Tolkien's integration into discourses of class, nationalism, and racism, for example, are seldom tackled head-on. One of the best-developed pieces, Gerard Hynes's use of Tolkien's Númenor narratives to study Tolkien's attitudes to the intersection of environmental degradation and imperialism, seems poised for further development in relation to postcolonial theory and the burgeoning work travelling under the loose banner of 'ecocriticism', but doesn't take that step. The fact that this collection merely skirts these areas indicates how Tolkien criticism is still fighting shy of reading some of the key questions of the 20th century through the work of one of the key authors of the 20th century. But it does a fine job of taking us to the borders of those questions.

Editors: Helen Conrad-O'Briain and Gerard Hynes.
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