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The Body in Tolkien's Legendarium (2013) ed. by Christopher Vaccaro

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The Body in Tolkien's Legendarium: Essays on Middle-earth Corporeality, edited by Christopher Vaccaro. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2013. viii, 190 pp. \$40.00 (trade paperback) ISBN 9780786474783. [Also available as a Kindle ebook].

In his introduction to this volume, Christopher Vaccaro rightly observes that many of the preoccupations of Tolkien scholarship to date touch upon the body, although this is the first collection to take it up as a central theme. The chapters in the collection take two broad approaches. One—found in the five chapters which comprise the first two sections—focuses on the body as it functions in Tolkien's imagined world, while the second—in the five chapters of the second half of the volume—is concerned with the ways that bodies are textually constructed. The former accepts—or at least works with—the Sub-created world very much in the terms that Tolkien himself argued and was aiming for, and often ground their commentary in the personal experiences of the author; while the latter is more inclined to consider Middle-earth as a textual construct. Its chapters are interested in the works' connections with society and culture more broadly.

The first section, "The Transformation of the Body," includes contributions from Verlyn Flieger, Yvette Kisor, and Anna Smol. Frodo's presence—traumatized, liminal, and shifting—is a constant in all three; he is a key figure in Tolkien's exploration of the edges and possibilities of corporeality. Many beings of Arda metamorphize, voluntarily or involuntarily, but Frodo slips back and forward between the mundane textual world and that of wraiths as he puts the Ring on and off, and is wounded and (partially) recovers, in a more extended and in-depth narrative than that accorded the transformations of any other. Flieger argues that his bodily trauma reflects, and is intimately tied to, his spiritual trauma, and that neither is healed. The voyage to Valinor, she shows, raises the hope of healing but does not ensure it, and he does not escape death in the Undying Lands. Kisor's chapter takes Frodo's experiences as a point with which to compare and contrast evil bodies—of the Ringwraiths and Sauron—and argues that they may be largely invisible, but are not insubstantial. Even those beings whose power is principally spiritual—whether they are good like Gandalf or evil like the Ringwraiths—are tied to corporeality in Middle-earth. Flieger cites Tolkien's war service, and that of his generation and his sons' generation, at the end of her chapter, a theme which Smol takes up at length. Smol reads Frodo's experience of the loss of bodily comfort—and comforts—through the lens of World War I writing.

Flieger and Smol's chapters together gesture towards the growing interdisciplinary field of Trauma Studies, which focuses on individual and social

trauma, but recognizes the significance of culture and cultural productions.¹ Each is concerned principally with explicating the links between Tolkien's personal experiences—albeit in Smol's chapter he is representative of his generation of soldiers of the fathers of soldiers—and his writings and do not make explicit links to that body of theory. They nonetheless provide footings upon which such bridges might be built for future work which has a broader impact and significance outside the immediate field of Tolkien Studies.

The second section takes up themes of “The Body and the Spirit” with chapters by Matthew Dickerson and Jolanta N. Komornicka. Dickerson suggests that Middle-earth has both unseen and seen realities—as is also demonstrated in the earlier chapters. Incarnate beings in Middle-earth reflect the tenets of Tolkien's Christianity in that they are a fusion of body and soul. He argues that throughout the *legendarium* the health of the individual body and spirit are entwined and links this dual form of being to Tolkien's environmental vision: both the physical body and the physical world have value and should be loved and cared for. His chapter closes by linking spiritual battles with physical ones, taking Theoden's last ride and the fall of Boromir as exemplary. Komornicka draws on Augustine and Aquinas, and Monster Theory, in her reading of orc bodies as the corporeal manifestations of evil, reflecting the medieval trope of the visible soul. They are, she argues, spiritual and physical perversions of the natural order and thus embody Tolkien's conception of evil as the corruption of good, a corruption which may ultimately be redeemed.

Both chapters argue for the profound influence of Tolkien's faith on his construction of Middle-earth, strengthening an already significant thread in scholarship. Having demonstrated this, the chapters extend their arguments outwards from the text in ways which seem to implicate Tolkien's readers as well as their own not in their arguments about the *legendarium* but with Tolkien's theology. Dickerson has “our care for the earth is not just our care for our own dwelling place but our care for the dwelling place of God” (79), and Komornicka has “we watch the fallen for signs that the evil inside does not have to win and that our own failings may be forgiven” (93); the reader of this book is included with the readers of Tolkien's books in not just receiving his theological arguments but in acting upon them. Reporting Tolkien's gospel—and the Christian theology structuring Middle-earth which both chapters reveals is “good news” of hope and redemption not damnation and despair—slides into repeating it.

The third section, “The Discursive Body,” has two chapters which explore the ways that such bodies are imagined and represented textually; these chapters are the most theoretically engaged and complex of the volume. Robin Anne Reid uses

¹ T. J. Reynolds, a Masters candidate at California State University, Fullerton, delivered a paper which suggested this connection and read Frodo's body through trauma theory at the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts in Orlando, FL, in March 2015.

queer and feminist theory and functional grammar to explore the ways that gendered bodies—specifically female ones—are constructed through language. Her chapter examines the clause structure and word choice in Tolkien's descriptions of female characters—of Arwen, Éowyn, Shelob, Galadriel, and Goldberry—considering grammatical agency (as opposed to material in the narrative) and imagery, and models a methodology which integrates theory and stylistic analysis. Reid also offers an approach to considering the social situatedness of the author and of readers, and of reading which is productive because it is “contrarian” (99). Gergely Nagy's chapter on the representation of Sauron's body in *The Lord of the Rings* makes the critical point that stories about Middle-earth are always textual *even within that world*, and that as a result, his being is always mediated by and fixed through the language of others; even the name by which he is known is an elvish word. Yet Sauron is also, Nagy argues, an agential mythological subject in his own right, that is, he has power within the world he inhabits and can act on others, and in doing so attempts to subvert their autonomous subjectivity into his own discursive structure. Both Reid's and Nagy's chapters are concerned with the body as text which is both written and read.

The final section in the collection, “The Body and Source Material,” has three chapters which variously take up one of the major preoccupations of Tolkien scholarship. James T. Williamson considers the major female bodies of *The Lord of the Rings* explored by Reid—with the exception of Shelob—and argues that they are not biological but emblematic. Each is, he argues, a thematic conduit, constructed chiefly through imagery rather than as an independent biological being. Williamson finds inspirations for Tolkien's approach to constructing female bodies in medieval sagas, Arthurian romance, and Welsh and Irish medieval poetry. Jennifer Culver explores the gift-giving economy of Middle-earth, framing her discussion with the practices of medieval Germanic cultures, particularly as evinced through *Beowulf*. Considering the gift, the giver, reciprocity, and the dark side of gifting, to argue that Middle-earth functions largely as a gift-giving economy. Vaccaro's concluding chapter is the only one in the collection to engage in any depth with *The Hobbit*. He suggests that a range of physicalities are constructed throughout the novel, which are both a result and indicative of its stylistic inconsistencies, and reflect the varied sources—in his own and other writings—on which Tolkien drew at various points.

Source studies are a fruitful topic for explorations of Tolkien's work, whether or they focus entirely on medieval material. Throughout several decades of the field's existence they have been a way of legitimizing not only the author himself but scholarship on his works by linking them to the canon and thus demonstrating their validity as serious Literature worthy of study in an academic environment which often viewed both with suspicion. A defensive tone, or at least a

defensively explanatory one—as might be discerned in my own attribution of the inspiration for orcs in the Saracens of medieval Romance literature in the *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* or Jane Chance’s work on race and gender—can be discerned in some of the source work which engages with social and cultural issues. Comparison of Williamson’s chapter and Reid’s in this volume is illuminating, with the two taking very different approaches to reading Tolkien’s acts of writing female bodies, and those bodies themselves.

Williamson acknowledges in his conclusion Tolkien’s construction of female bodies and lack of interest in romantic or sexual love might be seen by “some readers” as “blemishes,” but argues that these are merely “tangential to Tolkien’s core conceptual pre-occupations and thematic intentions” and that they reflect his intentions (153). He privileges the author over the reader, as Literary Studies as a discipline is wont to do. Reid’s close analysis of the language and syntax of Tolkien’s textual constructions of female bodies is no less situated within Literary Studies approaches for all its use of theory and linguistics but explicitly eschews argument over authorial intentionality or belief. Her avowedly “contrarian” reading, written from her perspective “as a queer woman, and a feminist” (99), engages with the author through his text, acknowledging and engaging with those aspects that are problematic without arguing that they “*should*” have been done otherwise, as Williamson suggests feminist readings often do (153).² Both chapters make explicit arguments for their own positions, which demonstrates that the two do not sit entirely comfortably alongside one another. In my own reading of the two together, they reveal very similar points about the textual world of Middle-earth and the construction of women within it, but Williamson’s chapter leaves the implications for and found by readers undiscussed whereas Reid does not. The difference, as I see it, stands as synecdoche for a broader—albeit not universal—tendency in Tolkien Studies, and indeed in scholarship even more generally, to explicate the text itself, or to explicate the text *and* what it does in the world.

A significant absence in this collection is any in-depth engagement with critical race theory, a field fundamentally concerned with the body. Reid points to the dominance of white bodies in the spaces of scholarship, and Nagy rightly suggests that more work drawing on that field is needed in Tolkien Studies. Although, as he says, it is beyond the scope of his chapter it is not beyond that of the volume. The lack is particularly noticeable in Komornicka’s chapter on orc bodies—which are unquestionably racialized even though this is not *all* they are. The chapter cites Anderson Rearick’s 2004 article on orcs—a piece which frames its discussion of racism principally as a defense of Tolkien himself—but does not make any argument of its own. That the volume does not engage with race in

² The italics are Williamson’s.

Tolkien's legendarium—either through the Othered bodies of orcs or the “white” bodies of elves, hobbits, and (most) humans—reflects another broad tendency in Tolkien Studies. There are some works which are outright attacks—generally implying and at times explicitly making—accusations of racism, fascism, and white supremacist tendencies (Paul Firchow's 2008 article in *The Midwest Quarterly* is a case in point), or taking a strongly defensive tone, as Rearick's does. The pattern resonates with arguments in both the mainstream press and fandom. Dimitra Fimi's monograph *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History* (2009) is an important exception to the general pattern, while many of the works which take a measured critical eye—rather than mounting an outright attack—are published in venues *not* dedicated to Tolkien scholarship. Sources studies, meanwhile, often make much of the influence of “Germanic” literature and culture on Tolkien's writing—as Culver's chapter does in this collection—but fall short of engaging with the history of that term or its critical legacy in scholarship. Like philology and the discipline of medieval studies, it is intimately connected with the development of race theory and European racism in the modern era.

I dwell on this at length here not to criticize this particular volume for failing to redress a broad issue, which *would* be beyond the scope of a single book, but reflect more broadly on the past and future of Tolkien Studies as a field of scholarship. Across the past few decades it has carved out a place for itself in the academy as a legitimate field of study—due not least to the work of some of the contributors to this collection—alongside and sometimes in mutual support of medievalism. A certain unwillingness to engage head-on with one of the more problematic aspects of the legendarium in anything but a defensive tone when faced with both outright attack and the need to demonstrate the value of one's work and topic is understandable and not necessarily conscious. Nor is it in anyway unique to Tolkien Studies, but is arguably a tendency of any emerging field. At this point in time, however, to not do so risks both scholarly marginalization and cultural irrelevance. Given the level of discussion and outright praise of *The Lord of the Rings*—on both novel and film forms—in avowedly white supremacist forums such as *Stormfront.org*, there is an urgent and particular need to confront and explore potentially troubling questions if Tolkien Studies is to maintain its legitimacy.

Of course, the aim of the present collection is not to be the final word on bodies in Tolkien's legendarium but rather to provide new perspectives on existing scholarly preoccupations and to break some new ground. It does both, and in the process demonstrates not only the relevance of but the need for engagement with major theoretical fields. A journal like this one, which engages not only with Tolkien's writings but with the vast franchise derived from them through Peter Jackson's films, and the myriad other forms of reception and adaptation which constitute “things Tolkien” in contemporary popular culture

offers an important venue for pursuing a future for the field that looks outwards not inwards.

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