

2019

Pagan Saints in Middle-earth (2018) by Claudio A. Testi

Jonathan Evans

University of Georgia, jdmevans@uga.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch>

Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Evans, Jonathan (2019) "Pagan Saints in Middle-earth (2018) by Claudio A. Testi," *Journal of Tolkien Research*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol7/iss1/3>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Christopher Center Library at ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Tolkien Research by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at scholar@valpo.edu.

Pagan Saints in Middle-earth, by Claudio A. Testi. Zurich and Jena: Walking Tree Publishers, 2018. [x], x, 196 pp. \$24.13 (trade paperback) ISBN 9783905703382.

C.S. Lewis begins his 1939 lecture “Christianity and Literature” by saying “I was at first tempted to refuse” the invitation to address the subject because “[it] did not seem to admit of any discussion.” He goes on to question whether “Christian Literature . . . has any literary qualities peculiar to itself.”

Christian Literature can exist only in the same sense in which Christian cookery might exist. It would be possible, and it might be edifying, to write a Christian cookery book. Such a book would exclude dishes whose preparation involves unnecessary human labour or animal suffering, and dishes excessively luxurious. . . . But there could be nothing specifically Christian about the actual cooking of the dishes included. Boiling an egg is the same process whether you are a Christian or a Pagan. [*Christian Reflections* (1967), ed. by Walter Hooper, pp. 183-184]

In “On Fairy-stories,” J.R.R. Tolkien’s metaphor for the creation of fantasy literature admits of a similar series of observations: “the Pot of Soup, the Cauldron of Story” from which the *Legendarium* of Middle-earth draws and to which it contributes “has always been boiling, and to it have continually been added new bits, dainty and undainty.” Tolkien says “We must be satisfied with the soup that is set before us, and not desire to see the bones of the ox out of which it has been boiled.” In some respects, then, questions concerning the presence or absence of pagan or Christian elements in Tolkien’s work, or the horizon of readers’ responses to it, or the genre of writing with which it might be classified, may seem analogous to fishing out the ox-bones and quarreling over which bits that went into his sub-creative *oeuvre* are compatible with, or drawn specifically from Christianity and which are not. Tolkien abjures that “if we speak of a Cauldron, we must not wholly forget the Cooks” and admits that “the Cooks do not dip in the ladle quite blindly. Their selection is important.” Claudio Testi’s *Pagan Saints in Middle-earth* nonetheless asks these questions, and implicit in his explication is a significant difference on the other side: we also must not wholly forget the diners, either. Writing a fantasy novel or creating an imaginary world, like cooking soup or boiling an egg, may be the same process whether you are a Christian or a pagan, but when Christians and pagans eat eggs or soup—satisfied though they (“we”) may be—what they find may say as much

about their *a priori* tastes as it does about the cook's intentions.

In publishing Testi's book, Walking Tree Publishers continues to fulfill its mission of "mak[ing] available research in [English and] languages other than English to a wider audience." While the sub-industry of scholarly books and articles on Tolkienian subjects published in serious academic venues is by now an enormous sub-industry (initiated in part three decades ago by Verlyn Flieger and Tom Shippey, whose "Foreword" and "Afterword," respectively, frame this book), Walking Tree's large and growing catalogue—especially the "Cormarë" series, of which this book is no. 38—occupies a niche market for books like Testi's that otherwise might not reach print in the traditional way.

Testi's title comes from an argument explicitly expressed only late in the book. Borrowing from Jean Danielou's *Les Saints 'païen' de l'Ancien Testament* (translated as *Holy Pagans of the Old Testament* [1957] but still relatively unknown to English readers), Testi asserts that the perspective harmonizing and synthesizing the "pagan" versus "Christian" interpretations of Tolkien's work is evident in the understanding that Old Testament figures like Abel, Noah, Melchizedec, and the Queen of Sheba, while not having yet received the New Testament revelation, nevertheless are regarded as "just" men and women, i.e. "pagan saints."

This understanding, built on assertions by St. Paul, held by Patristic theologians from Justin to Augustine and by Thomas Aquinas, but rejected by the Reformers, was known to Tolkien and exemplified in heroic characters whose analogous ethical virtues help to identify the Middle-earth *Legendarium* on a par with other works of ancient culture which Catholic theology has regarded as *praeparatio evangelii*, "preparations for the gospel." This point—that the (quoting Tolkien) "fundamentally" and ultimately "consciously" Catholic nature of his work harmonizes the superficial dichotomies of Nature/Grace, Pagan/Christian—is part of Testi's larger argument for an interpretive synthesis in which the *Legendarium* is "a sort of prefiguration" of the Christian message. In an "Enunciation of the Proposed Synthesis" (sect. 4.3) that presents the core argument, Testi says "Tolkien's world manifests an essential natural level and is therefore pagan because of the absence of specifically Christian elements"; however, "it is in harmony with the supernatural level of the Christian revelation" and as a result, "Tolkien's work is an expression of an authentically Catholic way of thinking." It's "both/and," and though the two are not identical, a choice between "either" and "or" not only is not required, but on the strength of Testi's argument, such a choice doesn't make satisfactory sense.

The book's range and reach are impressive: the overview of scholarship on Tolkien's work ("Introduction") is both efficient and exhaustive, incidentally alerting English-language readers to the fact that Tolkien is appreciated

internationally by important scholars writing in other languages (including, in this case, Italian) whose ideas should not be overlooked. In the three chapters of Part I (at 63 pages, almost exactly half the book) Testi's analysis of divergent perspectives is fair-minded and balanced towards both those who have made convincing claims that Tolkien's work is unequivocally Christian and those who have rejected this claim and assert, equally convincingly, that its paganism is inescapably opposed to a Christian perspective. Testi is to be commended for his familiarity with dozens of critics on both sides of this divide—and if not for anything else, this book is indispensable for its exhaustive review of scholarship pertinent to the question. This analytical section concludes with a *précis* of the central argument that follows: “Only if we acknowledge [that the terms ‘pagan’ and ‘Christian’ are never conceived as contradictory] will it be possible to understand how the fully pagan horizon of the *Legendarium* is in complete harmony with the supernatural level of Christian revelation.”

Part II, likewise, is a tour de force demonstrating that the harmonious synthesis he sees in *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion*, and other works in the total *oeuvre* may be found also in Tolkien's academic studies of *Beowulf*, “The Battle of Maldon,” and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and in “On Fairy-stories,” *Finn and Hengest*, *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, and—a revelation to some readers—in an unpublished manuscript in the Bodleian Library in which Tolkien began writing a history of the Church in England. Like the *scearp scyldwiga* in *Beowulf*, the “sharp-minded fighter” who *gescad witan*, “knows the difference” between one thing and another, in “*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics” and in lectures (1933-35) leading up to it, Tolkien distinguishes differences between Beowulf's, Hrothgar's, and the *Beowulf* poet's natural/pagan and the supernatural/religious views of God, in what Michael Drout—quoted by Testi—has called “a lifelong intellectual project of recovering . . . the old, lost stories and harmonizing them with the new Christian Truth.” Testi doesn't decide whether or not Tolkien borrowed the idea from the *Beowulf* poet or had already developed this harmonic view and applied it to his interpretation of *Beowulf*; but he demonstrates that this view is a central theme unifying most of Tolkien's academic scholarship and his imaginative fiction together. Besides the book's core argument, the summary of Tolkien's analytical and interpretive themes in the scholarly work is another invaluable benefit.

The book is carefully organized and systematically presented. Division of the text into numbered parts, chapters, sections, sub- and sub-subsections seems to this writer as something of a distraction, though it must be acknowledged too that the subtlety and care with which Testi prepared his argument involve much cross-referencing and may have been unavoidable. On the other hand, upon finishing the book, I felt compelled immediately to begin re-reading.

In the “Foreword,” Flieger alludes to her familiarity with the development of

Testi's ideas over "a span of years" from "an idea to a thesis to a conference paper to a scholarly article and now . . . to a book whose value to the current state of Tolkien studies cannot be overstated." This process continues. In the April 2019 issue of *Beyond Bree*, Testi offers to correct the idea (criticized in a 2018 review by John Houghton) that the absence of Providence from the texts of the *Legendarium* demonstrates its fundamental paganism. Testi says "this pagan concept, like the elvish one, is different from (but in harmony with) the wider Catholic idea . . . which explicitly includes also human free choices," thus supporting his larger argument. He also concedes Houghton's point that the harmony of Nature and Grace on which Testi's argument turns isn't exclusively "Roman" Catholic. In exploring the context of "cultural" Catholicism within which Tolkien wrote, Testi replies that he did not mean "confessional" Roman Catholicism, and though in *Letters* nos. 195 and 213, Tolkien specifies his "Roman" Catholicism, his claim in no. 142 that *The Lord of the Rings* is "fundamentally Catholic"—minus the qualifier—supports the cultural (non-exclusively Roman) Catholic assumption of the harmonious synthesis which is central to Testi's argument. The author expresses hopes for a second edition, which, if realized, would improve only marginally upon what Shippey calls "a better and truer understanding of Tolkien's work . . . the deepest appreciation yet written of Tolkien's Catholicity" ("Afterword"). *Násië*. Amen.

Scholars and enthusiasts owe a debt of gratitude to Thomas Honegger, the Cormarë series editor, and to Claudio Testi, who, in this book, puts to rest finally and utterly the false dichotomy of pagan/Christian that has divided commentary on Tolkien's work for more than sixty years. Pagans and Christians, it turns out—Catholic (Roman and English) and Protestant—can dine together at the same table, enjoying albeit for different but yet compatible reasons, the substance and many-layered nuances of seasoning blended in the feast.

Jonathan Evans
The University of Georgia