

2020

## Poetry and Song in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien (2018), ed. by Anna Milon

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### Recommended Citation

Swank, Kristine A. (2020) "Poetry and Song in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien (2018), ed. by Anna Milon," *Journal of Tolkien Research*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol11/iss1/6>

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*Poetry and Song in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien: Proceedings of the Tolkien Society Seminar 2017*, ed. by Anna Milon. Edinburgh: Luna Press Publishing, 2018. xii, 81 pp. \$14.99 (trade paperback) ISBN 9781911143499. \$7.49 (Kindle ed.) ISBN 9781911143505. Peter Roe Series XVIII.

According to biographer Humphrey Carpenter, J.R.R. Tolkien “regarded himself chiefly as a poet” (29). On July 2, 2017 in Leeds, the Tolkien Society celebrated that fact by making Tolkien’s poetry and verse the focus of their annual seminar. *Poetry and Song in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien* is a slim collection of four papers from that seminar, each engaging with a different poetic work.

Massimiliano Izzo’s “In Search of the Wandering Fire: Otherworldly Imagery in ‘The Song of Ælfwine’” is an accomplished piece of scholarship tracing the development of Tolkien’s poem, “The Nameless Land”/ “The Song of Ælfwine” and its image of “the Wandering Fire.” Izzo considers the influence of Irish Otherworld lore, medieval conceptions of the Earthly Paradise, Tolkien’s *Oxford English Dictionary* entry on the verb “wander,” Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, Yeats’s “The Madness of King Goll,” and the biblical Pentecost. Yeats’s influence on Tolkien has long been suspected but, as the author observes, there is a noteworthy “lack of any reference to Yeats in Tolkien’s writings, letters and notes” (20-21, Kindle loc. 490-491). Izzo’s paper proposes a critical new link between Tolkien and Yeats specifically in their similar usage of the image of the “wandering fire.”

Kristine Larsen proves once again why she is called “The Tolkien Astronomer” with her insightful essay “‘Diadem the Fallen Day’: Astronomical and Arboreal Motifs in the Poem ‘Kortirion among the Trees.’” Tolkien originally wrote “Kortirion” in 1915 and revised it at least twice several decades later. Larsen writes, “some of [Tolkien’s] most masterful and scientifically accurate [allusions] appear in his poetry” (29, Kindle loc. 659). She then illustrates this using textual, astronomical, and dendrological evidence—yet writing in a completely accessible style for the non-specialist—to unpack Tolkien’s careful and accurate descriptions of the positions of stars and constellations, and the state of the foliage on the trees according to the season.

In “The Magical and Reality-Transforming Function of Tolkien’s Song and Verse,” Szymon Pyndur examines several verse forms which have magical functions in both Tolkien’s works and the Finnish *Kalevala*: the oath, the curse, the spell or prayer, and the song duel. The paper is a well-written analysis on Tolkien’s adaptations of the very systems of magic inherent in the Finnish tradition. Pyndur’s argument that Tolkien adapted the *Kalevala* song duel, “in which two singers fight each other exclusively by singing,” is not original (49, Kindle loc. 993). Yet, his comparison of the song duels between Väinämöinen and Joukahainen in *Kalevala*, and Sauron and Felagund in *The Lay of Leithian* is detailed and illuminating.

Pyndur writes that the singers and chanters of such reality-transforming verses participate “in the very act of creation of these worlds,” making them, in effect, sub-creators within the sub-creation, certainly an act of magic itself (52 Kindle loc. 1046-1047).

The final paper in the collection, “Translating *The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun* into French: Across the Channel Here and Back Again” by Bertrand Bellet, recounts the author’s experience and considerations when translating Tolkien’s metrical form, particularly his “Breton lay” for a French audience. Bellet includes a useful historical overview on the development of the lay form, as well as discusses ways in which Tolkien mimics traditional lays (for example, by using octosyllabic couplets), and ways in which he innovates (by his “highly frequent and sometimes even heavy use of alliteration”) (62, Kindle loc. 1225-1226). Bellet describes his decision-making process, such as whether to attempt Tolkien’s octosyllabic verse, whether to rhyme or not to rhyme, or how to deal with Tolkien’s intentional archaisms. While this essay only includes a few brief glimpses of Bellet’s final translation, the full French translation as *Le Lai d’Aotrou et Itroun* is forthcoming, with additional texts and commentary translated by Aurélie Brémont and Michael Devaux, in *La Feuille de la Compagnie no. 4*.

*Poetry and Song in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien* has a few limitations. First, the Kindle version has some typos and grammatical errors that undercut the scholarly tone of the collection. (I do not know if those same errors exist in the printed edition.) Second, also on the Kindle version, the font-size has to be shrunk so far down in order for the verses to line up correctly that they are hard to read. Third, the Tolkien Society Seminar of 2017 included eleven presentations with topics ranging from philology and geography to feminism, history, sub-creation and transformation as they relate to Tolkien’s poetry. It is always disappointing when official proceedings do not include more selections from the day. While there are several legitimate reasons why this happens, with only four papers available, the volume does not adequately represent the seminar as a whole, nor does it systematically address Tolkien’s poetic corpus, as the title may suggest. Readers seeking a more encompassing treatment of Tolkien’s poetry should consider [Tolkien’s Poetry \(2013\), edited by Julian Eilmann and Allan Turner](#).

Nevertheless, all four papers which are included here are outstanding, and each brings a fresh perspective to some of Tolkien’s less-studied works. The volume is also inexpensive and its purchase aids the continued work of The Tolkien Society to support and disseminate Tolkien-related scholarship. Overall, the merits of this little collection outweigh its limitations, and anyone interested in Tolkien the Poet should find it both informative and enjoyable.

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**Reference**

Carpenter, Humphrey. *The Inklings: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams and their Friends* (London: HarperCollins, 2006).