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Tolkien and the Kalevala (2024) by Jyrki Korpua, translated by Sonja Virta

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Tolkien and the Kalevala, by Jyrki Korpua, translated by Sonja Virta. New York and London: Routledge, 2024. xii, 108 pp. \$66.99 (hardcover) ISBN 9781032852270. Also available in ebook format. [Based on Jyrki Korpua's *Tolkien ja Kalevala* (Helsinki, 2022). "This version is revised and edited by the author" (vi).]

A slim but densely packed monograph on equally densely-concentrated influence on J.R.R. Tolkien of the Finnish folk-epic *Kalevala*, this is a useful addition to a particular corner of Tolkien Studies. Korpua's announced goal has been to bring "the Christian Platonic history of ideologies and research . . . in Finnish into this branch of research" on Tolkien. From a Finnish perspective I would say he has succeeded. There have been more literarily-focused articles — Anne Petty's "England's Lönnrot" and my own work on Kullervo come to mind— but no full-length work on this important subject subject until now. More important for the general reader is Korpua's thorough examination of the many deliberate and consciously built-in interconnections between the two works.

The fact that *Kalevala* is more gathered than composed, more like a string of loosely-related, spontaneously-performed episodes and characters, in no way detracts from the effect of its discovery by Tolkien when he first read it as a teenage would-be poet looking for legendary material. He found it (in translation) when he was a student at King Edward's School in Birmingham and when he went to Exeter College in Oxford he tried to teach himself Finnish so he could read it in the original. This is not easy to do, as I can attest, and Tolkien himself said his first attempt was repulsed with heavy losses. But the effort to do so fits with his later dictum that "mythology is language [and] language is mythology." Belief (or acceptance) is encoded in the words, as *goodbye* "God be with you", *Friday* "Frigga's [wife of Odin] Day" or *Vendredi* "Day of Venus" in French.

The earliest mention of the influence of *Kalevala* came from Tolkien himself when in a c. 1914 letter to his fiancé Edith Bratt, he described his effort to "turn one of the stories [of *Kalevala*] . . . into a short story somewhat on the lines of Morris' romances with chunks of poetry in between" (L 3). The short story was the never-finished "Story of Kullervo", later shifted into Tolkien's own mythos in the story and character of the hapless Turin Turambar. Since that earliest mention many studies of the relationship between the two works have followed and the connection of *Kalevala* to Tolkien's legendarium in both sound and substance — that is to say in its influence on Tolkien's languages, his characters and many of his major episodes or events — has been both an ongoing discovery and a given starting-place for Tolkien scholars, biographers and linguists.

But not until now have we had such an in-depth study from the horse's mouth — that is to say, from a native Finn — someone intimate with both the stories and their language. For that reason if no other, Jyrki Korpua's *Tolkien and the*

Kalevala would be a welcome addition to the scholarly corpus. But there are, of course, other reasons. One is the careful scholarship. Mr. Korpua has done his homework and his study of the connections of Tolkien's legendarium and *Kalevala* is careful and thorough. Another is his sense of humor, as when Mr. Korpua suggests that his career as a scholar might have started because he read *The Lord of the Rings* backward, *The Return of the King* being the only volume available to him in the basement of the town hall where it was temporarily housed. Reconstructing the beginning on the basis of the end might well stand as a cynic's definition of scholarship.

Korpua points out the relationship between the ill-defined but much-desired magical object of *Kalevala*, the Sampo, and Tolkien's mysterious Ring, as well as his Silmarils, the jewels made of light by the Elven Smith Fëanor, and the contention each provokes (though he mistakenly credits Frodo and not Gollum with destruction of the Ring). He draws attention to the attraction for Tolkien of the non-Indo-European strangeness and unfamiliarity of *Kalevala*, a world that is fantastic in its very newness to the English-speaking world. He devotes discussion to specific Finnish and Quenya vocabulary, and cites Tolkien's obvious use of singing contests (Finrod-Sauron, Lúthien-Morgoth) as a dramatic borrowing from *Kalevala*, which opens with a singing context between the magician Väinämöinen and his challenger the brash and boastful Joukahainen. In this regard it is worth noting that *Kalevala*, originally oral and folkloric in nature, is itself structured as a singing context between pairs of singers, usually men, who alternate their rhythmically coherent lines in a kind of Finnic poetry slam.

It comes as no surprise that Korpua calls particular attention to the singing of Tom Bombadil as a *Kalevala*ic feature, and associates him specifically with Väinämöinen as a worker of magic through song. I find it odd in this connection however that Korpua omits any discussion of meter, though the outstanding characteristic of Tom's speech, not just his songs but everything he says, is its patterning in what is conventionally called "Kalevala meter," an octosyllabic line in trochaic tetrameter. The trochee, a metrical foot with the stress on the first syllable, is a comfortable fit with Finnish, which conventionally stresses the first syllable of a word, followed by a weaker stressed third syllable, as for example ***Kalevala***. This was consciously replicated in the English translation first read by Tolkien, that of W.F. Kirby, and it is worth noting that not just Tom's songs, but all his speech is couched in *Kalevala* meter.

That the book, originally in Finnish, has been translated into English by Sonja Virta, slides one more layer in between text and reader. I cannot speak to the quality good or bad of the translation, only to the ease with which I read it.

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