

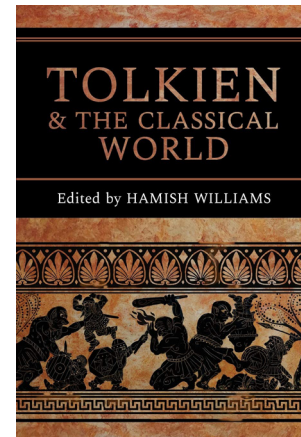
Tolkien and the Classical World, edited by Hamish Williams



James Hamby

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When tracing the origins of Middle-earth, most scholars over the years have focused on Tolkien's deep knowledge of German philology. While this is indeed a rich field for Tolkien's mythopoeic vision, it is only a portion of the much larger well from which Tolkien drew his inspiration. The essays in *Tolkien and The Classical World*, edited by Hamish Williams, explore the ways classical influences shaped the stories, characters, and ideas found in Tolkien's works. In a wide-ranging collection of essays that focus on everything from Tolkien's early training as a classicist to Greco-Roman myth to ancient philosophy, this volume demonstrates how the oft-neglected classical influences on Tolkien's writing truly are some of the most powerful forces in his creative imagination.



The volume is organized into five major sections of two to four essays each. The first of these sections, "Classical Lives and Histories," serves as an excellent introduction to the topics of the volume. Williams's essay, "Tolkien the Classicist: Scholar and Thinker," traces the long period of Tolkien's life in which he studied the Classics, from his home schooling through his undergraduate years at Oxford. Williams's detailing of the curriculum at King Edward's particularly illustrates how well Tolkien was acquainted with the Classics and how they shaped his literary sensibilities. Williams notes how students at King Edward's School were inculcated in the classical world through "various Anglified popularisations of the Classics" (9), including Lord Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome*, which inspired the young Tolkien to write his own mock epic in Macaulay's style. Additionally, in his study of ancient Greece, Tolkien found models for social construction that would shape the peoples of Middle-earth. Williams observes how Tolkien saw in the ancient Greeks "an anarchic, diverse, inefficient, and quarrelsome form of human virtue which can resist power without succumbing to it" (27). Tolkien saw in these troublesome Greeks a society of independent, strong-minded people capable of resisting tyranny. Here may be seen the genesis of the free peoples of Middle Earth and their struggles against Sauron. The next essay in the opening section, "Greek and Roman Historiographies in Tolkien's Númenor" by Ross Clare, ties in nicely to Williams's opening piece. Clare compares the history of Númenor to that of the Delian League, pointing out how both grew into autocracies. These two essays combined make a compelling foundation for the volume's argument that Tolkien's created world has deep roots in the Classics.

The next section, “Ancient Epic and Myth,” delves deeply into the literature of the Classical world that influenced Tolkien. All four essays in this section are excellent works of scholarship, but two, “Middle-earth as Underworld: From *Katabasis* to *Eucatastrophe*” by Benjamin Eldon Stevens and “Pietas and the Fall of the City: A Neglected Virgilian Influence on Middle-earth’s Chief Virtue” by Austin M. Freeman, work particularly well together by showing how Tolkien transformed ancient concepts such as *katabasis* and *pietas* into ideas such as *eucatastrophe* and *estel* that underpin his own created world. Freeman, likewise, finds in the “leaf mold” of Classics the ideas that Tolkien developed into his own concepts. Freeman argues that Tolkien took the ideas of *pietas* (Virgilian notions of duty), Northern courage, and *pistis* (Christian faith) and combined them into *estel*—firmly believed hope that inspires action (153). *Estel* is the force that spurs Aragorn in his quest against Sauron, for instance. Freeman’s essay provides a particularly illustrative look at the way Tolkien combined Classics, Germanic philology, and Christianity into his own vision for human experience.

Section Three, “In Dialogue with the Greek Philosophers,” looks at Tolkien’s engagement with Plato and Aristotle, and many of these essays tie in with those from earlier in the volume. Michael Kleu, for instance, in his essay “Plato’s Atlantis and the Post-Platonic Tradition in Tolkien’s Downfall of Númenor,” again examines the Greek influence on Númenor but this time in its relationship to Plato’s *Timaeus*. Łukasz Neubauer’s contribution, “Less Consciously at First but More Consciously in the Revision: Plato’s Ring of Gyges as a Putative Source of Inspiration for Tolkien’s Ring of Power” ably demonstrates how the magic ring from Plato’s work provided inspiration, along with other literary rings (such as the one from *The Niebelungenlied*), for Tolkien’s One Ring. As in Freeman’s essay above, Neubauer also explores how Tolkien combines Classical and Germanic influences. Once again, all of the essays in this section look at Tolkien’s art not as one derivative of the Classics, but as one that transforms ancient ideas and narratives into something new.

Section Four, “Around the Borders of the Classical World,” further examines the connections between Tolkien’s interest in Germanic philology and the Classical civilizations of the Mediterranean. Juliette Harrisson’s “‘Escape and Consolation’: Gondor as the Ancient Mediterranean and Rohan as the Germanic World in *The Lord of the Rings*,” astutely examines how Tolkien recreated the relationship between these two cultures and instead envisioned a happier, symbiotic union instead of one fraught with conflict. This reworking of the history between Germany and Rome demonstrates the heavy influence both cultures had on Tolkien. The volume concludes with a miscellaneous section of two essays and an afterword by Graham Shipley. The final section is a bit disappointing; not because of the quality of the essays but rather because they seem like an afterthought by not being grouped into other sections. The afterword, however, does make a satisfying ending for the volume.

These essays should be of great interest to both Tolkien scholars and to Classicists. Tolkien scholars will appreciate the ways in which these essays expand the pool of Tolkien’s source material. While it is not new to find Classical influences on Tolkien’s work, they have been

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overshadowed by the study of his Northern influences, and as a result have been undervalued. Scholars of classical reception theory will find in this volume engaging works on how the ancient world continues to exert its influence over our literature and society. Indeed, *Tolkien and the Classical World* is one of the best volumes the Cormarë Series has produced, and it will no doubt prove to be a necessary text for anyone studying the connections between Tolkien and the Classics.

James Hamby is the Associate Director of the Writing Center at Middle Tennessee State University, where he also teaches courses on composition and literature, including Victorian Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Fairy Tale. His dissertation, *David Copperfield: Victorian Hero*, explores how Charles Dickens created a new hero for the Victorian Age by reconceiving his own life through the prism of myths and fairy tales.