Verlyn Flieger, *A Real Taste for Fairy-stories: Essays*. Zurich and Jena: Walking Tree Publishers, 2025. 226 pp. ISBN: 978-3905703542.

In the postscript to her latest collection of essays on J.R.R. Tolkien, Verlyn Flieger calls these sixteen chapters 'a well-intentioned but disorderly bunch' (199). Running the gamut from peer-reviewed articles to book chapters to conference papers to popular lectures, they range across multiple decades of diligent scholarship. Readers will find here close readings of specific narratives and passages, investigations into the legendarium's multilayered textual history, speculations regarding possible sources, considerations of the impact of Tolkien's biography on his fiction, and reflections on that fiction's core themes and concerns. Some are the equivalent of extended footnotes, others have become canonical texts. Nevertheless, they achieve a kind of patchwork unity, stitched together with the accumulated wisdom and expertise of perhaps our most accomplished living Tolkienist.

It is fitting that *A Real Taste for Fairy-stories* begins with 'The Arch and the Keystone', which synthesizes nearly half-a-century of academic labor in a matter of fourteen pages. J.R.R. Tolkien and his legendarium are dialectical and dynamic, impossible to pin down to 'One Interpretation to Rule Them All'. Shaped by his personal experience, historical context, and native temperament, Tolkien simultaneously 'yearns for the Happy Ending but anticipates the dragon' (14). Indeed, the tension between fairy-story eucatastrophe and the inescapable human experience 'of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure',[1] is the paradox that animates his work (14). Flieger here recapitulates a central thesis of her classic *Splintered Light*, recast as a late-career manifesto.[2] 'The Arch and the Keystone' has become a classic in the field. For the neophyte who wants to dip their toes into the Great Sea of Tolkien scholarship, I say: start here.

The remaining chapters constitute an investigation of the very tensions and contradictions which Flieger flags up in her opening essay. 'Tolkien's Great Tales' takes up the narrative triumvirate of Beren and Lúthien, the Children of Húrin, and the Fall of Gondolin, all three of which 'have particular relevance to Tolkien himself, touching – each in its separate way – on one or another of the most compelling and formative elements in his personal life' (18). The chapter's chief innovation is the elevation of a fourth story to the status of a Great Tale: Eärendil the Mariner, whose appearance in 1914 arguably gave

1. J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tolkien On-Fairy-stories*, ed. Verlyn Flieger and Douglas Anderson (London: HarperCollins, 2008), 75.
2. Verlyn Flieger, *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World*, rev. ed. (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2003), 1–34.

birth to the legendarium yet whose tale remained forever unwritten, sketchy and allusive.

'A Lost Tale, a Found Influence: Eärendel and Tinúviel' suggests that this may have been intentional (40). Eärendil's story, often referenced but never written, has much the same effect on Tolkien's literary mythology that the now-lost 'Tale of Wade', the shadowy figure of Germanic legend whom Tolkien seems to have identified with his celestial mariner, has on ancient mythology. It creates a sense of living history, an 'impression of depth'[3] where crucial texts are too often lost to 'attrition and the ravages of time' (45). The second, unconnected half of the essay speculates that the narrative voice of the 1917 'Tale of Tinúviel' may have been inspired by the twelfth-century Breton noblewoman Marie de France (49–53). Flieger's evidence here is more tenuous; but she makes it clear that she is extrapolating from incomplete data, not advancing firm conclusions.

'Tolkien's Lúthien(s)' turns from a possible literary source of the tale of Beren and Lúthien to its obvious biographical one: his relationship with his wife Edith. So porous was the line between fiction and reality for its author that when Edith died in 1971, he sought refuge in 'his own fiction to find a context for his grief' (57). Even Tolkien's most devout fans will never share the man's intense identification with Middle-earth's star-crossed lovers. But perhaps the 'bi-focal vision' (56) with which Tolkien 'double expos[ed]' his Secondary World on top of his Primary World and vice-versa can help to explain the enchanting power of this most personal of Great Tales, even as it appears to have enchanted the man who wrote it.

'The Scouring of Frodo' turns from Beren One-handed to Frodo of the Nine Fingers, tracing how, as he revised *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien progressively scrubbed his hobbit[4] hero of the warlike role he initially played in the Battle of Bywater. In the published text, Frodo's postwar trauma leads him to retreat into the background, leaving Merry and Pippin to organize the defense of the Shire instead. Here we witness Tolkien's trademark movement from heroic triumph to something both sadder and, Flieger maintains, truer to life (69). If Beren mythologizes Tolkien's youthful romance, Frodo might be said to mythologize his wartime experience, 'arrang[ing] for us to meet in fiction what we would shrink from in real life' (71) – and, maybe, what Tolkien might have shrunk from as well.[5]

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3. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* (London: HarperCollins 1983), 27.
4. Because Tolkien was inconsistent with respect to orthography, I use upper-case 'Hobbits', 'Elves', etc. for the fantasy races of Middle-earth considered as a collective and lower-case 'hobbits', 'elves', etc. for discrete individuals or groups of individuals.
5. Clyde Kilby, *Tolkien and the Silmarillion* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1976), 33–4.

Narrower in scope, 'The Dragon and the Railway Station' probes a passing reference to Bletchley Railway Station in 'On Fairy-stories',[6] drawing a line between Bletchley's status as a code-breaking center during World War II and the dragons with whom Tolkien juxtaposes it in the essay, 'mythic embodiment[s] of the power of words, usually to persuade, confuse, deceive, spin, or distort reality' (77). Again, direct influence remains a matter of speculation, but it is a neat bit of detective work.

Some scholars have framed the 'Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth', a fictive debate between the Noldorin prince Finrod and the human woman Andreth on the nature of death, as Tolkien's final word on the meaning of mortality in Middle-earth.[7] 'Whose Myth Is It?' counters that Tolkien is posing theological problems rather than offering theological answers, using the partial, culturally situated perspectives of his disputants to ask 'with whatever means are at hand the same cosmic questions' (88) as the Roman Catholic faith he professed. In this Christian's view, Flieger's is the finest exegesis of the 'Athrabeth' to date, and a caution against exclusivist readings that would reduce this remarkable dialogue to the 'parody of Christianity'[8] which so Tolkien feared.

As 'A Fearful Weapon' makes clear, the 'Athrabeth' was only one facet of Tolkien's attempt to radically revise his legendarium in the late 1950s. The mythic cosmology on which the whole edifice had heretofore been constructed was – so his thinking went – a body of mere legends 'handed on by *Men* […] blended and confused with their own Mannish myths and cosmic ideas.'[9] Tolkien never managed to disenchant his own creation; the proposed changes would have dismantled the very foundations of his mythology. But 'we cannot pretend the [proposed] changes do not exist' (96). The Tolkienian corpus is as complex and multivocal as its narrators – and its creator.

'"The Lost Road" and "The Notion Club Papers": Myth, History, and Time-travel' updates Flieger's earlier treatment of these texts in *A Question of Time*.[10] Serving as the conduit through which the Downfall of Númenor entered Tolkien's legendarium, they posit dream-travel as a potential

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6. Tolkien, *On Fairy-stories*, 71.
7. See Bradley Birzer, *Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth: Understanding Middle-earth* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2002), 58 and Austin Freeman, *Tolkien Dogmatics: Theology through Mythology with the Maker of Middle-earth* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2022), 318f *inter alia*. For an alternative view, see Magnus Bergland, '"This gift of freedom": The Gift of Iluvatar, from Mythological Solution to Theological Problem', *Tolkien Studies* 18 (2021), 140–2.
8. J.R.R. Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), 354.
9. Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring*, 370, emphasis in original.
10. Verlyn Flieger, *A Question of Time: Tolkien's Road to Faërie* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1997), 64–85, 131–41.

mechanism by which his 'mythical "proto-prehistory"'[11] could be 'transmitted' across the gap from fiction to history. Of particular interest is Tolkien's proposal to incorporate the legendary King Sheave into the mythology, grafting it onto the Primary World in much the same way as he seems to have planned with Eärendil and the 'Tale of Wade' (109–112). As Flieger settles into scholarly retirement, other Tolkienists should take up her invitation to give these 'relatively little studied' (97) texts the attention they deserve in future.

'Defying and Defining Darkness' gets off to a shaky start, rambling somewhat until we win through to the Cracks of Doom and the unexpected salvation of Middle-earth through the actions, not of Frodo, but of Gollum. In its 'mind-blowing alternation' between light and darkness and back again, Frodo's victorious failure is 'as close to real life as Tolkien can bring it, as realistic as fantasy can be' (123). The very moment of his liberation from the domination of the Ring is the moment in which he is 'wounded, wounded; it will never really heal.'[12] It is 'the realism even more than the fantasy that makes [Tolkien's] work stand out from the others in that genre' (127). I am in no position to argue.

'Listening to the Music' takes us from the climax of *The Lord of the Rings* to its conclusion, with Sam listening to 'the sigh and murmur of the Sea on the shores of Middle-earth'[13] at the Grey Havens. As he grieves Frodo's departure and the End of the Third Age, he is unwittingly hearing the secret song of Creation: for 'in water there lives yet the echo of the Music of the Ainur more than in any substance else that is in this earth; and many of the Children of Ilúvatar hearken still unsated to the voices of the Sea, and yet know not for what they listen'.[14] On Flieger's reading, Sam's closing declaration, 'Well, I'm back',[15] is 'a reminder of all that is lost – of all those who are *not* back' (139, emphasis mine). It is a moving interpretation, made all the more moving by its posthumous dedication to the memory of Christopher Tolkien (136–7, 140).

Tolkien's claim that 'Mythology is language and language is mythology'[16] serves as the jumping-off point for 'Words, Words, Words', situating his philosophy of language in discourses of *fin de siècle* Romantic nationalism. The material on Owen Barfield will be familiar to readers of *Splintered Light*

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11. Dimitra Fimi, *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History: From Fairies to Hobbits* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 125.
12. Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, 1025.
13. Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, 1030; cf. J.R.R. Tolkien, *Sauron's Defeat*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), 110, 119, 128.
14. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 2nd ed., ed. Christopher Tolkien (Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 19.
15. Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, 1031.
16. Tolkien, *On Fairy-stories*, 181.

(148–152). The essay's novelty lies instead in its treatment of Tolkien's use of Romantic literary techniques to generate the 'arresting strangeness'[17] of his world: 'We don't apprehend the "Magic" directly, we see someone else seeing it and experience it through that person's experience' (1551). This is as true of scenes of startling Elvish beauty as it is of scenes of sobering violence like Sam's encounter with the dead soldier of Harad in Ithilien (159). My only criticism is that the essay drifts steadily away from its ostensible subject of Romantic *nationalism* as it goes along.[18]

While we do not usually think of Orcs as particularly hobbitlike, 'Putting Words in Their Mouths' shows how these seemingly opposed fantasy races are both deliberately anachronistic moderns in a premodern world.[19] Even as they are linguistically familiar, however, 'talk[ing] as much or more like real people than do the rest of the species that inhabit Middle-earth' (162), they are also the quintessential 'Dark Other,' racialized and demonized.[20] Flieger sidesteps the issue of race to focus on language. This may serve to focus her analysis, but were she to write the essay in 2026 instead of 2017, she would need to address the matter head-on as a matter of intellectual honesty (162).

'The Fate of Free Will in Tolkien's World' interrogates the paradox of its title as 'a structural component built into Middle-earth at the time of Creation' (177). Drawing on case studies from the Years of the Two Trees to the End of the Third Age, the essay covers thematic and philosophical ground which Flieger has charted more thoroughly elsewhere.[21] Yet it is also of a piece with 'Whose Myth Is It?', insisting that, just as Tolkien ultimately declines to adjudicate the nature of death, he deliberately 'stir[s] together fate and free will and leave[s] the reader to wrestle with the mixture' (183).

The final two chapters are brief, and can therebefore be treated in brief. 'A Note on a Name' locates a potential source for the name *Trotter*, later to become *Strider*, in the Scottish-English Border wars of the early modern period (190f). 'Credit Where It's Due' meanwhile is a celebration of Christopher Tolkien's contribution to the study of his father's works, which constitutes 'a

17. Tolkien, *On Fairy-stories*, 60.
18. I encourage those who want a deeper dive into this aspect of Tolkien's work to consult Michael Saler, *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 158–95.
19. Tom Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 5–7.
20. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic: Race and Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 19–25. See also Charles Mills, 'The Wretched of Middle-earth: An Orkish Manifesto', *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 60, no. 1 (2022), 131–135.
21. Verlyn Flieger, 'The Music and the Task: Fate and Free Will in Middle-earth', *Tolkien Studies* 6 (2009), 151–181.

scholarly tour de force in its own right' (195). Interesting as they may be, the pair are more akin to blog posts than academic essays, albeit well-written ones.

A Real Taste for Fairy-stories will likely be Flieger's final book; at time of writing, she is well into her nineties. The collection is admittedly uneven and at times repetitive, both from chapter to chapter and with respect to Flieger's previous work. This is a consequence of the disparate provenances and aims of its constituent parts, as its author readily admits (199). Taken as a whole, however, it reaffirms Flieger's place as the preeminent dialectician of Tolkien studies, drawing our attention to the man's dynamic tensions and refusing easy answers, allowing the complexities of his work to enlarge rather than diminish it. In her final essay, she writes that we owe an 'incalculable debt' to Christopher Tolkien for a lifetime of dedication to his father's literary legacy (198). The same could be said of Verlyn Flieger.

Tom Emanuel https://orcid.org/0009-0003-3762-0369
University of Glasgow
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