

Review of The Body in Tolkien's Legendarium, ed. Chris Vaccaro

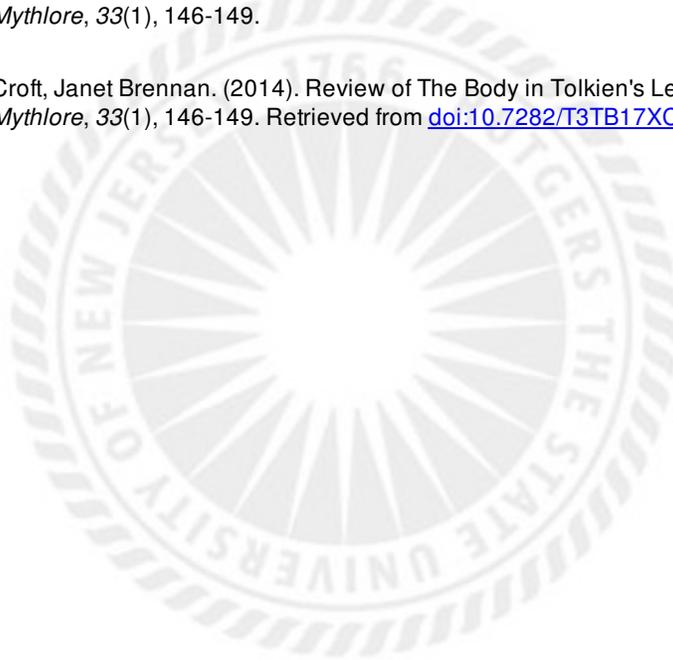
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THE BODY IN TOLKIEN'S LEGENDARIUM: ESSAYS ON MIDDLE-EARTH CORPOREALITY. Edited by Christopher Vaccaro. Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2013. 9780786474783. \$40.00.

CHRIS VACCARO'S INTRODUCTION TO THIS UNIQUE COLLECTION poses the central question: "Do bodies matter in Middle-earth?" (1). Is the corporeality of the "incarnated spirits" of Tolkien's world something that deserves our critical attention? Indeed it does, and the introduction is not to be missed as it provides a concise overview of issues related to the body in literature and points out the themes that are of most interest to readers of Tolkien: death and resurrection, pain and suffering, metamorphosis, fertility and celibacy, spirituality and materiality, purity and pollution.

Verlyn Flieger's insightful lead chapter, "The Body in Question: The Unhealed Wounds of Frodo Baggins," proposes to show that "[w]hat happens to Frodo's body over the course of his journey is the outward manifestation of his changing inner condition" (12). Tracing a pattern of images of "thinning," transparency, invisibility, inner light, and contrasts with Frodo's "shadow," Gollum, Flieger demonstrates Tolkien's intent that we pay attention to Frodo's unhealed wounds, which show that the hobbit "pays the highest price and gets the least reward" (18).

Yvette Kisor, in "Incorporeality and Transformation in *The Lord of the Rings*," contrasts incorporeality and invisibility, asserting that they are in fact quite different: fading or invisible things in Tolkien in fact retain their corporeality. She bolsters her argument by examining the transparency and physicality of the Ringwraiths and Gandalf, and contrasting the more "ambiguous" (27) case of Frodo. The Ring, she argues, is "everywhere associated with embodiedness; it necessitates its wearer maintain a physical form in order to wield it, [...] and the invisibility it grants is simply [...] a trick of sight" (24). Kisor also considers the case of the "twilight world" where Frodo encounters both the solidified shadows of the Nazgûl and the white flame-like figure of Glorfindel; usefully, she traces Tolkien's development of this concept through his earlier drafts of this chapter (28-30).

Anna Smol draws our attention to parallels between trauma inflicted on the bodies of soldiers in both World War I's literature and its harsh reality and Tolkien's similar treatment of Frodo. In "Frodo's Body: Liminality and the Experience of War," Smol uses the critical frameworks of the uncanny and the abject to trace out Frodo's lifelong pattern of loss (beginning with his parents) as it culminates in the disintegration of the physical and psychological "boundaries of his self" (48). His wounding and maiming over the course of his quest make visible his "loss of autonomy" (56), making the comparison to shell shock inescapable.

Matthew Dickerson, in "The *Hröa* and *Fëa* of Middle-earth: Health, Ecology, and the War," expands on some of the themes he and Jonathan Evans discussed in

their 2006 book *Ents, Elves, and Eriador*. Here Dickerson examines the tension between seen and unseen reality in Tolkien's Arda. In contrast to materialistic philosophies, Tolkien holds that "what happens in the unseen world has profound influence on the seen" (66), but does not accept the Gnostic or neo-Platonic conclusion that matter and body are therefore evil or at least to be rejected. The implication, then, is that Tolkien "affirmed the reality of the spiritual world, [but] also affirmed the value and goodness of the material world" (72). Dickerson uses this conclusion in support of his assertion that Tolkien was a type of environmentalist, valuing the ecological world for its own sake, and bolsters his arguments with examples both mundane (the relationship of Hobbits to the Shire) and mystical (Yavanna as subcreator, channeling Eru's Flame Imperishable to bring life to matter). Environmentalism, care of the earth as "the dwelling place of God," thus becomes "a spiritual activity" (79).

In "The Ugly Elf: Orc Bodies, Perversion, and Redemption in *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*," Jolanta N. Komornicka takes on a question that vexed Tolkien even in some of his final notes relating to his legendarium: the redeemability of the orcs. "[H]ow we read the orcs" (84) should not only be influenced by the arguments of Augustine and Boethius on the nature of evil, but also by Tolkien's own consideration of the centrality of the monsters in Beowulf: evil must have an ultimate origin in good, as orcs do in elves and humans. She points out several revealing patterns in the way orcs are depicted—we rarely see an individual orc (83), they are frequently seen as segments or pieces or glimpses rather than as whole bodies (89-90), and while human, elf, hobbit, or dwarf blood is rarely graphically described, orc blood is (91). What is particularly compelling about orcs is their kinship to us, the readers: "A monster becomes truly horrifying and fearsome when it proceeds from the known. [...] [S]o long as there is the elf, or humanity itself, there is the *potential* for the orc" (89). Indeed, "The monster that shares our traits haunts us more viscerally, more hungrily than one who bears us no resemblance" (93).

Robin Reid takes us in what is a fairly new direction in Tolkien studies with her article on female bodies in *The Lord of the Rings*: using stylistic methodologies to gather and analyze statistical data about the text. As she admits, "[s]tylistic methodology rarely uncovers interpretations at odds with critical consensus" (101), but having actual hard data makes critical conclusions more readily supportable. In this article Reid uses these tools to read "against the grain" (100) and examine the "grammatical construction of female characters' bodies" (98). She analyzes such data as the types of words used to describe characters, the number of times they speak or act, how they are referred to, what types of verbs describe their actions, and so on. One interesting conclusion, for example, is that Tolkien's women have little or no interaction with other women; while one might have suspected this, having data to back it up is useful, and much of Reid's supporting data is included in an appendix. This article includes a footnote on the history of Tolkien scholarship about women characters and by women scholars nearly substantial enough to have been its own

article—and indeed Reid draws on the research presented here in her essay in the soon-to-be-published *Perilous and Fair: Women in the Works and Life of J.R.R. Tolkien*.

Gergely Nagy's article is dense theoretical going but certainly thought-provoking. He points out, first of all, that the stories of mythological beings like the Valar and Maiar are always narrated by others—they are never viewpoint characters who tell their own tales. As creators, they are “generators of both subjects and the subject matter of stories” (121). Sauron is a special case in that, even when disembodied, he works on and through the physical. In his desire to “produce [his] own meaning” in opposition to Ilúvatar's plan, he becomes involved in the world in a physical way (122)—and thus is trapped in corporeality, unable to control or change his form after the downfall of Númenor. The Eye becomes a representation of Sauron, both as a symbol for his body and for his power of the gaze (125). But in fact the Ring itself also represents Sauron's body and ability to act materially on the world. The particularly interesting insight here is that Sauron's goal is to “become the ultimate meaning simply by erasing all other meanings or subjects able to produce them” (128); but ultimately, “[i]t is not gods who make myths but people” (130)—it is only in the stories narrated by characters within the *legendarium* that Sauron has meaning.

James T. Williamson suggests that “the female body in *The Lord of the Rings* is emblematic rather than biological” (134) in his contribution, and demonstrates what he means by this through an examination of terms used to refer to Goldberry, Arwen, Galadriel, and Éowyn. These women are described most frequently using words that relate them to nature, water, and fertility; even descriptions of their clothing, adornments, hair, movements, and voices tie back to this type of imagery. While this sort of imagery can also be found in the medieval literature Tolkien worked with professionally, Williamson's observation is that this “links their bodies to broader thematic significances” (146): to issues of barrenness and fertility, mortality and renewal, that underlie the entire deep thematic structure of *The Lord of the Rings*. The reader may or may not take issue with Williamson's description of Éowyn's “evasion [...] of what she is” in “male disguise and denial of her womanhood” as “madness” (145), but it is an interesting perspective on the sources of her later change of heart. This article makes me curious to see what could be done in reading imagery associated with the male body in Tolkien's works.

The Germanic gifting tradition and its economic, political, and interpersonal implications is the point of departure for Jennifer Culver's essay. In the literature in which Tolkien was well-versed, such as *Beowulf*, “[w]ith the extension of the open hand, a lord broadened his reach” (158). Public exchanges of gifts defined the status and relationship of the participants to the community. While a gift is meant to be an exchange, the repayment may take the form of an obligation to the community or world as a whole; in other words, the recipient of a gift may offer fealty in exchange. For example, Pippin offers to serve Gondor in exchange for Boromir's sacrifice; at a corporeal level, he is offering his body as a gift. Culver also includes “peace brides”

as a type of bodily gift that establishes a bond between communities; this is part of the function of Arwen's and Éowyn's marriages (164-5). She concludes with an interesting analysis of the nine Ringwraiths as participants in an exchange of gifts with Sauron—their acceptance of the rings binding them to return all they had to offer, their own lives (166)—and the One Ring and its particularly ambiguous function as an exchanged gift.

Vaccaro's concluding essay, his own "Tolkien's Whimsical Mode: Physicalities in *The Hobbit*," examines the gradual shift in tone in *The Hobbit* in how it treats physical bodies, particularly those of Bilbo and the dwarves. While the book starts in a low mimetic, almost carnivalesque style, Vaccaro locates the fulcrum of a change to a higher style in the Rivendell chapter. The series of similes used to describe Elrond marks a shift towards the epic and poetic. Particularly interesting is Vaccaro's observation that "Bilbo's physicality is tied to invisibility and to a comedy of smallness" (180) which eventually morphs into a more mature "concern over [his] enfeeblement" (181) and serves to underline the divide between his Baggins and Took sides.

This is a solid collection of fairly consistent quality with an interesting approach to Tolkien's legendarium. The articles by Flieger and Smol in particular are well worth seeking out. There is certainly more that could be done on the topic of corporeality; I feel that applying some of the concepts raised by the contributors to *Farmer Giles of Ham*, *Smith of Wootton Major*, and "Leaf by Niggle" would be particularly interesting.

—Janet Brennan Croft



CRITICAL ESSAYS ON LORD DUNSANY. S.T. Joshi, ed. Lanham MD: Scarecrow, 2013. 304 p. 9780810892347. \$80.00.

S.T. Joshi's edited collection *CRITICAL ESSAYS ON LORD DUNSANY* is a strong addition to the field of Dunsany studies. Dunsany was a well-known author in his day, but suffered a decline in appeal and accessibility until recent decades. Joshi points out the increasing scholarly interest in Dunsany, and of note to *Mythlore's* readership, Joshi observes, "the journal *Mythlore* has been particularly open to studies