Tolkien and the Classical World
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A great part of the appeal of J.R.R. Tolkien’s worldbuilding for the new reader must lie in its comprehensive hermetic consistency. The sub-created world of Arda, which includes Middle-earth, offers us the appearance of an internal, systematic coherence which seems at first divorced from our own reality—a world with its own cultural histories, natural environments, as well as physical and cosmological laws. Tolkien’s painstaking creative engagement with such detailed worldbuilding provides the reader with a sense of depth when journeying through the plots of *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955). This comprehensive, profound otherness from our own reality disorients the reader and fills him or her with a feeling of awe when confronted with this alternate realm, a feeling perhaps reminiscent of a sailor drifting upon some uncharted shore.

Conversely, the reader is also struck by an opposing emotion, an equally strong, stirring, even eerie sense of familiarity and, thus, nostalgia as the events and people of these alien histories in this foreign landscape are unrolled before him or her. The evocation of such a feeling is not surprising since, as hundreds upon hundreds of academic researchers and writers have now illustrated, Tolkien was the master in twentieth-century popular fiction at working, kneading, and recasting the time-worn archetypal figures of Western cultural history and thought into new models, models which, once extracted from the kiln of his imagination, are both familiar and strange. The identification of Tolkien’s raw materials across various cultures, histories, literatures, and intellectual movements has been the ‘genetic’ pursuit of source studies, which is one of the major fields of enquiry in academic studies of his works. Thus, broadly speaking, scholars have been able to show us the ‘medieval world of Tolkien’, ‘the

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1 For a similar assertion, see Risden 2011: 24.
2 Legolas’ anti-gravitational exploits in Peter Jackson’s *The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies* (2014) probably take this fantastic element a ‘leap too far’.
3 Fisher (2011: 41) uses the same word – *awe* – to describe our general response as readers to Tolkien and his worldbuilding.
This edited volume resides in such a critical tradition of exploring and understanding how Tolkien constructed his own hermetic world through incorporation of the various spheres of his inherited cultural and literary histories. In particular, this volume tracks the reception of ‘the Classical world’ — that is, the history, literature, myths, philosophy, and society of ancient Greece and Rome — in Tolkien’s life, thoughts, and writings. The verb receive might indicate a relatively neutral action of information being simply transmitted from ancient Greco-Roman cultural material (the sender) to Tolkien (the receiver); however, as Hardwick and Stray have suggested, the term reception is probably best rendered in the plural form receptions so as to convey the wide array of different processes involved: “the ways in which Greek and Roman material has been transmitted, translated, excerpted, interpreted, re-written, re-imaged and represented” (2008: 1).

4 This is by no means an exhaustive list for all of Tolkien’s sources. Outside of his inherited cultural histories and literary traditions, one might want to add to the mixture of possible sources the influence of, for example, his personal life, his war experiences, his religious sentiments, and, above all, his primarily linguistic sensibilities (Risden 2011: 18).

5 For Tolkien’s negative attitude towards source studies and their value, see Fisher 2011: 29-30; Shippey 2011: 7ff. In defence of source studies, Tom Shippey discusses our “justification for ignoring the writer’s own views about how to critique his writings” (2011: 7) through several arguments. First, Shippey points to certain rhetorical, discursive tendencies which Tolkien was prone to when making an argument, such as ‘exaggeration’ and ‘controversialism’ (7-8); one might even add ‘captiousness’ to this list. In other words, Tolkien’s statements cannot always be taken at face value as definitive declarations of his thought. Second, Shippey (9) cites the growing tendency in intellectual and literary circles during Tolkien’s professional career to interpret literary figures and their works through Freudian psychoanalysis. It is possible that Tolkien, being “something of a ‘dinosaur’, a man old-fashioned even in his own time” (9), was concerned more about misguided source enquiries (such as the aforementioned Freudian interpretations or ill-informed philological guesses) than source studies in themselves (9-10). Third, Shippey suggests that Tolkien, like many a creative artist, would have been defensive about claims which diminished his own originality and imagination (9; see Fisher 2011: 30). Tolkien was concerned that such a pars pro toto approach, as in source studies, would mean that a given reader might not appreciate the work of art as an object of hermetic, aesthetic beauty in its own right (Fisher 2011: 29-30). Fourth, Shippey suggests that Tolkien was more aware than most about the enormity of the task which source studies would require (2011: 10; see Risden 2011: 17). Fifth, from a more positive perspective, Shippey (2011: 10-12) shows how a source study (in his case, a close comparative philological enquiry) can enhance our appreciation of Tolkien’s literary creations: for example, “the way in which Tolkien managed to blur the boundaries between reality and fantasy” (12). For more on the value of such enquiries, see Risden 2011: 18. Last, we might raise the question put forth by Roland Barthes (among others) as to whether an author should be allowed to maintain a clear control in how his or her work is received and interpreted (see next footnote).
Our aim in this volume of Classical reception is not simply to show how well read Tolkien was with regard to the broad gamut of ancient disciplines, texts, cultures, and periods (reception as simple ‘transmission’). Far more important is some critical engagement with the hermeneutic significance of these source leaves in Tolkien’s mind-compost. How have they been rewritten or re-presented in order to enhance our understanding of Tolkien’s creative works both as aesthetic artefacts and as important cultural products of their times? How do they help to emphasise and understand essential themes in Tolkien’s thoughts and writings? Can a knowledgeable reading of the Classics change how we view Middle-earth itself as a constructed sphere (see Stevens, Section 2)?

But, more concretely, what Classical-based content does this edited volume entail? What is the scope and what are the limits of the subject matter? As the individual chapters reveal, the academic discipline of Classics incorporates a vast, ambitious chunk of Western cultural history. We can start this timeline with the Homeric poems (Pezzini, Section 2), ‘composed’ [very] approximately around 750 BCE, which reminisced about the earlier Bronze Age of the Mycenaeans (ca 1600-1100 BCE) and, of course, about the Trojan War. The latter event became a major subject of nostalgia for later Classical artists such as the Latin poet Virgil (Freeman, Section 2), who lived during the late Roman Republic, around the second half of the first century BCE. We can perhaps conclude this ‘Classical’ timeline with the collapse either of the Western Roman Empire around the famous marker of 476 CE or, more liberally, of the Eastern

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6 See Risden 2011: 19. The ‘authorial control’ behind these acts of reception (authorial agency, consciousness, even intention) has always been an important consideration in source studies of Tolkien’s works. As Risden says, however, “source’ need not imply direct borrowing, but merely the stimulation or inflection of response. Source criticism thus becomes not just a multifaceted search for direct influences, but a nearly endless attention to background noise, generating innumerable mysteries, resonances, problems” (2011: 17-18). For further discussion in this volume on the nuances of reception (including different acts of reception and different degrees of agency), see Clare, Kleu, Stevens.

7 Similarly, the key word in Risden’s definition of source criticism would seem to be “elucidate” (2011: 20, italics added). Fisher (2011: 30) recommends source studies should ask both what and why, investigating what the putative sources might be and exploring why they were used (see 40-41).

8 See Risden 2011: 24, 27.

9 More and more, the academic discipline of Classics is including studies of ‘Classical’ Near Eastern cultures and the connections between these and the ‘Western’ Greco-Roman sphere. This volume largely restricts itself to the Greek and Roman-centred Classical world.

10 Such grand periodic timelines are always subjective, and some might want to commence our discussion of the Classical world at some point during the Bronze Age (e.g. Lushkov 2017: 1), although Linear A and Linear B do not necessarily make for exciting reading.
Roman Empire, with the sack of Constantinople by the Ottoman Empire in 1453 CE (Harrisson, Section 4). However, while this marked the end of the Classical world from an imperial, political, civil perspective, the influence of Classicism through art, literature, and philosophy had a profound impact on the Renaissance and later periods of Modernity, and Tolkien himself was educated and acculturated into a late-Victorian, Edwardian cultural sphere in England that viewed the world, in part, through a Classical lens, a fact which continued to have resonances throughout his life (Williams, Section 1).

Apart from the enormous temporal range of Classics as a discipline, our study also spans a vast geographic area and incorporates a diverse range of peoples: from the east, where we can situate the Classical world within a broader Indo-European cultural-linguistic context across, for example, central and south-west Asia (Burton, Section 4); to the north, where Germanic tribes were acculturated under the sway of the mighty Romans (Gallant, Section 4); and even to the far mythical west, where Plato placed his island of Atlantis (Kleu, Section 3). In the context of Tolkien scholarship, it is also worth pointing out that Classical reception studies, when sensitively approached by scholars, should also study the oscillation between the Classical and the non-Classical (Hardwick and Stray 2008: 1; see Section 4: Around the Borders of the Classical World). Lastly, the diversity of this volume can also be measured in terms of the disciplines studied, entailing the philosophy of Pythagoras (Filonenko and Shchepanskyi, Section 5), Plato (Neubauer, Section 3), and Aristotle (Eilmann, Section 3); the histories of Herodotus, Thucydides, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio (Clare, Section 1); and the pastoral-themed poetry of Virgil and Ovid (Sundt, Section 2; Jordan, Section 5).

From a broader theoretical perspective, the relevance of this edited volume must be appreciated in terms of the changing evaluation of the Classical tradition by readers in modern times and, accordingly, of the apparently non-Classical quality of modern fantasy as a genre. There was a time when the study of Classical influences in an important (‘classic’) writer such as J.R.R. Tolkien would require little justification. The advent of Classicism and the cultural sense of

11 "Interactions with a succession of contexts, both classically and non-classically oriented, combine to produce a map that is sometimes unexpectedly bumpy with its highs and lows, emergences and suppressions and, sometimes, metamorphoses" (Hardwick and Stray 2008: 1).
our residing in a post-Classical tradition\textsuperscript{12} since at least the Renaissance\textsuperscript{13} had imbued the Greco-Roman world of the Mediterranean with cultural notions of being complete,\textsuperscript{14} paradigmatic, and essential – even approaching perfection.\textsuperscript{15} These connotations are captured in the definitions of the related noun/adjec-
tive \textit{classic} in the \textit{Oxford English Dictionary} (2\textsuperscript{nd} ed.):\textsuperscript{16} “Of the first class, of the highest rank or importance; approved as a model; standard, leading”; “A writer, or a literary work, of the first rank and of acknowledged excellence; \textit{esp. (as originally used) in Greek or Latin}” (italics added). The belief that the academic field of Classics (that is, Classical studies or Greek and Roman ancient studies) is the proper domain for studying (and comparing) the \textit{classic} (the perfect, the ideal, the paradigmatic) is further reinforced by its capitalised first letter \textit{C}, which places the Classical period in close conversation with a number of other culturally fabricated temporalities of capital importance: the so-called Dark Ages (the loss of the Classics as the guiding light of Western civilisation), the Middle Ages (between the Classical world of Greece/Rome and the rediscovery of the Classics), the Renaissance (the rebirth of the Classics), the Enlightenment (with Science gradually displacing our faith in Classics), and [post-]Modernity (see below).

The contemporary unease about the intrinsic association of Classical studies with the study of the classic, as the realm of the ‘cultural pluperfect’, is reflected in the current grammatical uncertainty about whether to capitalise the words which relate to Greco-Roman antiquity; such uncertainty can be detected through the varying conventions of capitalisation employed by the contributors

\textsuperscript{12} The precise recognition of this tradition, however, was a product of twentieth-century scholarship (Kallendorf 2007: 1-2).

\textsuperscript{13} Petrarch’s “polemical call for a revival of antiquity led him to define the Middle Ages as the period between ancient Greek and Rome, now seen as definitively past, and a present that could be \textit{influenced by the best} that had been said and done in that past. For the next several centuries […] the literature, art, and social structures of antiquity were handed down to successive generations, to be transformed and absorbed into new institutions and cultures” (Kallendorf 2007: 1, emphasis added). Petrarch’s characterisation of medieval culture with regard to Classics has of course been debunked in recent times (Kallendorf 2007: 2-3).

\textsuperscript{14} See Stray 2007: 6.

\textsuperscript{15} “The term ‘the classical tradition’ has in the past been used to focus on the transmission and dissemination of classical culture through the ages, usually with the emphasis on ‘influence’ or ‘legacy’ (Hardwick 2003a: ch. 1). This was sometimes combined with the assumption that classical works yielded a ‘meaning’ which could be grasped and passed on, as could the aesthetic and (sometimes) moral and political values of antiquity” (Hardwick and Stray 2008: 4-5).

to this volume, a variation which has been left unedited. In cultural studies, theoretical approaches such as postcolonialism, which has questioned the primacy of Western or Classical thought in academic fields and which has shown the implicit power structures which lie behind the construction of knowledge (Hardwick 2007: 1-4), have heightened our sense of self-consciousness when we capitalise Classical history or Classical architecture (along with the Western tradition) and, thus, when we construct more broadly the Classical world as the temporal past-perfect foundation for orienting ourselves in modernity. As part of this growing cultural and educational movement towards de-emphasising the Classical world of ancient Greece and Rome, we can add the growing faith which modern society (and funding bodies) has placed in The Sciences.

This de-emphasis of the Classics has meant that many modern readers who have been educated in ‘postmodernity’, roughly since the 1980s, are not necessarily equipped with the necessary training to detect Classical figures and tropes in certain allusive texts they read, and they, therefore, find different kinds of meanings in such texts. While this might seem obvious to many, a brief assimilation of reader-response theory, semiotics, and genre theory might help to seal our point and, ultimately, its relevance to modern receptions of fantasy and of Tolkien’s works.

As German literary theorist Wolfgang Iser (1974: 274-279) posited, meaning is brought about through the interaction between the text, which provides a series of potential patterns to be noticed, and the reader, who picks up and pieces together these patterns. Both text and reader impinge upon one another in an equal manner in order for meaning to be realized (274-275). A text which is not read is an inert, inactivated, meaningless object; in order to garner meaning, it must invoke a reader and be read (274; cf. Foley 1991: 40). But as soon as it is read, problems are created. The reader has to use his or her subjective, creative imagination to fill in the gaps which naturally ensue from the text’s arousal of the reader’s various expectations and its subsequent failure to resolve these expectations completely (Iser 1974: 275, 278-280; cf. Foley 1991: 41). At the

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17 For a good introduction to the history and evolution of Classics in post-Classical, modern education, see Stray 2007.

18 Foley defines these gaps as “those uncharted areas in the textual map where the reader is invited and indeed required to contribute an imaginative solution” (1991: 42).
same time, as much as this oblique quality of a text challenges the reader to set loose the imagination, it also places certain restrictions on him or her by providing keys – textual signals which must be decoded (Iser 1974: 274-275, 282-284; cf. Foley 1991: 40, 42).19 “The reading process thus becomes an effort toward ‘consistency building’, toward a realization of potentials that makes good aesthetic sense of the panoply of signals and gaps presented to the reader’s imagination by the literary text” (Foley 1991: 42).

Importantly, however, this pattern making is not only *intra-textual*, that is to say, occurring within the ‘hermetic text-world’ of a given story, but also *inter-textual*; readers are meant to pick up textual signals across multiple works which are (or could be) linked to on another. Thus, a student who has read some of Homer’s *Odyssey* in the original Greek at school will have a vastly different experience when encountering a work of modernist literature such as Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) or, in recent times, a film such as the Coen Brother’s *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000) than a pupil whose eyes have been trained to the economic rhythms of spreadsheets in modern educational or institutional asylums. The signposts which a reader identifies between different narrative works and (more and more) other cultural representations are basically behind the notion of a *genre*. *Genre* is a flexible, mutually subjective designation which points to *semiotic agreements* (‘common signposts’) across a pool of readers (and writers) regarding how a certain class of cultural texts is to be read and understood. The dynastic, temporal relationship between related texts within such a group (such as fantasy) – and also, importantly, across related generic groups (such as fantasy and ancient epic) – can be referred to as a *tradition*:

> Readers’ presumptions of a tradition sustain their confidence that the way in which they derive meaning corresponds to the work’s encoding, and encourages their discovery of a network of allusions and responses to other work in the same genre. It makes possible, in short, the governance of a generic contract. (Morson 1981: 74)

Part of the goal of this volume is to illustrate that Tolkien’s fantasies are encoded with data, patterns, and ideas received from the Classical world and Classical

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19 “Though this [the individual disposition of the reader] in turn is acted upon by the different patterns of the text” (Iser 1974: 274-275).
These semiotic tokens are, however, not necessarily picked up by many modern readers\textsuperscript{21} firstly because of a general decline in Classical training and background knowledge among readers, as I have discussed above, and secondly because, increasingly, the modern fantasy genre has changed\textsuperscript{22} and become re-coded by readers over time according to different world visions; in other words, new pools or traditions of readers have \textit{reselected} which ‘texts’ to place alongside one another and, thus, which codes are given importance.\textsuperscript{23} Tolkien, because he has been so influential in shaping the modern fantasy genre (Shippey 2000: xvii-xix, xiv-xxv),\textsuperscript{24} has of course been retained in this generic contract, but we need to consider how his works are now re-imag[in]ed and what other generic works his fantasies have been placed alongside.\textsuperscript{25}

On the notion of \textit{re-imaging}, popular genres such as fantasy are viewed and played now far more than they are read by the mass public, and the ‘semiotic pull’ of this modern genre can best be observed through popular representations in such audio-visual mediums. One might consider, then, the following popular films produced over the past three to four decades which are typi-
cally placed in the fantasy genre: Conan the Barbarian (1982), The Princess Bride (1987), Dragonheart (1996), Peter Jackson’s The Lord of the Rings trilogy (2001-2003), the Harry Potter series (2001-2011; eight films), The Chronicles of Narnia (2005-2010; three films), Eragon (2006), Peter Jackson’s The Hobbit trilogy (2012-2014), and Warcraft (2016). To this list of filmic representations (which is probably not nearly deferential enough towards Rotten Tomatoes ratings), one might also add a hugely popular television series such as Game of Thrones (2011-2017) as well as video games series such as Diablo (1997-) and The Elder Scrolls (1994-2019). How do Peter Jackson’s recent reimaginings of Tolkien’s epic (1954-1955 contra 2001-2003) and his children’s story (1937 contra 2012-2014) situate them within the popular codes of the modern (high) fantasy genre, as reflected in such representations? Broadly speaking, one can surmise that these films, series, and video games reside in a quasi-medieval or Gothic sphere.

Thus, the architecture and urbanscapes of the populated settlements seem to reconstruct the castle culture of high medieval Europe (for example, the wall, parapets, causeway, and keep of Jackson’s Helm’s Deep) or, otherwise, the more ‘barbaric’ dwellings of the earlier medieval period (the thatched homes, muddy streets, and stockades of Jackson’s Edoras); the hierarchies seem based on a feudal division of peasants, knights, lords, and kings (the various scenes within Minas Tirith in The Return of the King (2003), for example); the relationship between men and women is often governed by visions of romantic, courtly chivalry (Aragorn and Arwen, as in the extended edition scenes in Rivendell; Kíli and Tauriel, which is an entirely fabricated love story); and the imagined people often conform loosely to various medieval people (Jackson’s Rohirrim being a mesh of Vikings and Anglo-Saxons). Alternatively, apart from this medieval-inspired milieu, we can also trace the influence of Gothic literature in fantasy films (such as Jackson’s depiction of the grimy, dark town of Bree), which is not

26 One should note the distinction Shippey (2000: vii-viii) makes between fantasy as a literary genre and fantasy as a mode; the latter incorporates a vast array of literature. The fantastic mode can also be discerned in ancient literature, such as Odysseus’ wanderings in the Apologue (Odyssey Books 9-12) (see Rogers and Stevens 2017: 5-9).

27 The selection of these films is meant to reflect the particular branch of ‘high’ or ‘quest’ fantasy into which Jackson’s adaptations fit. More broadly, the fantasy genre can include, among other sub-genres, low or intrusive fantasy, such as Pan’s Labyrinth (2006), or magical realism, such as the fiction of Jorge Luis Borges. For more scholarship on the many individual sub-genres, see James and Mendlesohn’s (ed.) The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature (2012).
surprising since eighteenth and nineteenth century Gothic literature, entailing a kind of reimagined ‘Dark Age’, was one of the “feeder genres” for modern fantasy (Rogers and Stevens 2017: 1).

This is not to suggest that Peter Jackson’s ‘generic’ interpretation of Tolkien’s works as lying in a quasi-medieval or Dark Age (Gothic) milieu is wrong; in fact, the medieval world, broadly understood, was probably Tolkien’s primary influence in his worldbuilding (Fisher 2011: 32-34; Honegger 2005: 45-46, 54-65), which is not surprising given his academic training and research interests (Honegger 2005: 50-51). But we should query whether the contemporary bundling of a number of different fantasy works together might not obscure other, more elusive components of Tolkien’s works, which were, after all, conceived in the first half of the twentieth century.

To this end, as an exemplification of contemporary, anti-Classical recoding of modern fantasy,28 we can turn to the film adaptation of Prince Caspian (2008) by director Andrew Adamson, based on the second book of The Chronicles of Narnia (1951) written by Tolkien’s friend C.S. Lewis. Like the novel, the film

28 Following a similar genetic rationale, George R.R. Martin’s hugely popular fantasy series A Song of Ice and Fire (1996-) and the serialised television drama Game of Thrones (2011-2019) have been explored by critics both from a medieval perspective (see Larrington 2016) and from an ancient world perspective (see Lushkov 2017). In the case of these more modern cultural productions (compared to Tolkien’s), however, it is worth considering to what extent a perceived Classical world has been mediated through a medieval lens or a modern lens. Regarding the former, Lushkov (2017: 2) describes how the immediate appearance of the series (book and film) is, in part, medieval (as well as modern and British), although Classical ‘items’ can be manifestly found: “there are deep and influential layers of ancient precedent buried beneath the medieval trappings and modern prose” (17). Regarding how Classics is viewed through a modern lens, Lushkov herself writes that “[s]ome of the classical items I’ve so far discussed [as relevant to items in Martin’s novels and the television series], like Hadrian’s Wall or gladiatorial games, have become familiar in contemporary culture as markers of the grandeur of Rome. Others, like the Trojan War […] still reverberate with the glory of Greece. Recent movies like Troy or Gladiator have brought the ancient world to new audiences […]” (2017: 16). I would take this argument a bit further. Given the history of American cinema and the explosion of a whole genre of epic Roman-Christian films during the 1950s from Quo Vadis (1951) to Ben Hur (1959) (a “must-watch”, incidentally, is the Coen Brother’s recent satire on this genre of American cinema, Hail, Caesar! (2016)), it seems likely that ancient aspects of Martin’s worldbuilding owe their provenance just as much (if not more) to modern American cinematic reimaginations of the Classical world than to engagement with primary source material in Latin and Greek. Conversely, while Tolkien’s Classicism was of course culturally inflected – through Edwardianism, through the British education and class system, through his extensive study of medieval literature and society, and through his reading of historical fiction on the Classical world such as those, first, of William Morris, and, later, of Mary Renault – his own primary-text grounding in the Classics at least provides greater justification for the close readings and comparative interpretations of this volume. Thanks to Thomas Honegger for alerting me to these readings on Martin’s works and also for the possible disparity between his and Tolkien’s perceived Classicism.
tells of the return of the four Pevensie children (Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy) to the land of Narnia. Narnia has advanced by more than a millennium since the events depicted in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and has been colonised by a group of humans known as the Telmarines. The story is essentially one of environmental destruction and deterioration. The talking animals of Narnia are no longer ‘heard’, and their sentience has become mythologised by the dominant human inhabitants of the lands; however, when the Telmarines learn of the existence of the talking animals and of other ‘fairy-tale’ inhabitants (Dwarves, Minotaurs, Centaurs), the true Narnians, their response is to wage war on the natural world, hewing down trees for their war industry and slaughtering innocent animals.

In the final ‘eucatastrophic’ scenes of the film, however, we witness the joyful spectacle of nature fighting back. The besieged animals of Old Narnia make a brave last stand together with the Pevensies and the hero Prince Caspian; moreover, in a scene reminiscent of Peter Jackson’s *The Two Towers* (2002) wherein the Ents demolish Isengard, slaughter the Orcs there, and cast free the shackles from the river Isen so as to purge the corruption of Saruman, the trees in Narnia give the pre-industrial Telmarines (who look a lot like Spanish conquistadors) a thorough thrashing with root and branch, and, finally, the colonisers are defeated by a river god, summoned by Aslan, which takes the form of an old man.

The film version of *Prince Caspian* is a decent enough watch (the book itself is lacking in plot complexity), and the theme of nature fighting back has certainly become another important signpost in modern articulations of the fantasy genre. Good characters in fantasy usually have as one of their defining characteristics an intrinsic understanding of, even communication with, nature, whether fauna or flora. One thinks of Harry Potter communicating with the Hippogriff called Buckbeak in the film version of *The Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004), whereas bad-boy Malfoy’s misunderstanding of the creature engenders his subsequent injury and the near execution of the Hippogriff. This endorsement of the environment often goes hand in hand with the threat of an industrialising, urbanising humanity in high fantasy, as captured, for example, in Tolkien’s chapter ‘The Scouring of the Shire’ or in Richard Adams’ *Watership Down* (1972), where humans are generally malevolent agents in their interactions with the rabbit protagonists.
The problem with the film adaptation of C.S. Lewis’ *Prince Caspian* is that it neglects an obvious Classical component of the book during the scenes of environmental liberation, triggered by Aslan’s roaring (*PC* 164ff.). Along with the Huorn-like tree people – “pale birch-girls” and “shaggy oak-men” (*PC* 166) – there appears a colourful procession:

[A] youth, dressed only in a fawn-skin, with vine leaves wreathed in his curly hair. His face would have been almost too pretty for a boy’s, if it had not looked so extremely wild. You felt, as Edmund had said when he saw him a few days later, “There’s a chap who might do anything—absolutely anything.” He seemed to have a great many names—Bromius, Bassareus, and the Ram were three of them. There were a lot of girls with him, as wild as he. There was even, unexpectedly, someone on a donkey. And everybody was laughing: and everybody was shouting out, “Euan, euan, eu-oi-oi-oi.” (*PC* 167)

Lucy later helps to identify these figures (*PC* 169): the youth is, of course, the Greco-Roman god Bacchus (also called *Dionysus* in Greek), and his elderly companion is Silenus. Unlike in the film version, Lewis’ Bacchus plays an important role in the environmental liberation story; ultimately, it is he whom Aslan orders to free the river-god.29 In this Dionysian context, the appearance of a mass of wild girls is not surprising: they are Maenads, the frantic, ‘possessed’ followers of Bacchus, familiar to us from Euripides’ *Bacchae*, in which play they tear apart the body of the irreverent, impious ruler of Thebes, Pentheus. Lewis’ Maenads have a similar function to those in Euripides’ tragedy in that they act in opposition to the control, strictures, and institutions of urban civilisation (whether Telmarine or Theban):

The walls [of a school in Narnia] became a mass of shimmering green, and leafy branches arched overhead where the ceiling had been. Miss Prizzle [a strict school mistress] found she was standing on grass in a forest glade. She clutched at her desk to steady herself, and found that the desk was a rose bush. Wild people such as she had never even imagined were crowding round here. Then she saw the Lion, screamed and fled, and with her fled her class, who were mostly dumpy, prim little girls with fat legs. Gwendolen [one of the girls] hesitated.

“You’ll stay with us, sweetheart?” said Aslan.

“Oh, may I? Thank you, thank you,” said Gwendolen. Instantly she joined hands with two of the Maenads who whirled her round in a merry dance and helped her take off some of the unnecessary and uncomfortable clothes that she was wearing. (*PC* 214)

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29 “Bacchus and his people splashed forth into the shallow water, and a minute later the most curious things began to happen…” (*PC* 212).
While Lewis’ Maenads do not exactly attack ‘unbelievers’ in a Euripidean fashion, one oppressive man, who is beating a young boy, is re-membered – his body, part by part, turned into a tree (PC 215) – which is perhaps reminiscent of how Pentheus is de-membered limb by limb by the Maenads (including his own mother). In the same narrative in Lewis’ work, a group of cruel schoolboys, looking to get their benevolent tutor into trouble, are turned into pigs by Bacchus (PC 216), an act of magic which is a distinctly Classical trope going back to Circe, the witch in the Homeric Odyssey, who turns several of Odysseus’ men into swine (Hom. Od. 10.233-243).

It is well worth reflecting on what the film version of Prince Caspian (2008) loses by omitting the overt Classical characters, events, and themes of Lewis’ original book (1951). There is, most obviously, a gendered dimension to the emancipation of nature which the film misses. The Maenads are placed in contrast to the controlled masculine oppression of the Telmarines, and they are as much the heroes of the book (along with Lucy and Susan) as are male characters such as Prince Caspian and Peter, who gain greater focalisation in the film. The Dionysian theme in the novel also brings with it tokens of the irrational during the scene of nature fighting back, of the dangerous unpredictable potential of nature, something which is missing in the film version where nature seems more controllable, and with which Tolkien readers are familiar through figures such as Old Man Willow in the Old Forest and the dangerous Huorns in Fangorn.

In any case, Lewis would have probably been irritated by the film’s adaptation and omission of his material. Euripides was among his most beloved authors (either ancient or modern), and, in general, we can identify strong Classical themes across The Chronicles of Narnia: in The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (1950), there is the Latinate suffix and mythic pedigree of the faun Mr Tumnus; in The Horse and His Boy (1954), the imperial Roman-like

30 Susan says: “I wouldn’t have felt safe with Bacchus and all his wild girls if we’d met them without Aslan” (PC 169).

31 “You ask whether I have ever been in love: fool as I am, I am not quite such a fool as that. But if one is only to talk from first hand experience on any subject, conversation would be a very poor business. But though I have no personal experience of the thing they call love, I have what is better – the experience of Sappho, of Euripides, of Catullus, of Shakespeare, of Spenser, of Austen, of Brontë, of, of, anyone else I have read” (from a letter by a young ‘Jack’ Lewis to his friend Arthur Greeves, as in Wilson 2005: Chapter 5 [epub version]).
elites of Tashbaan in Calormen are carried about on litters by slaves; and in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (1952), at one point during their sea adventure, the talking mouse Reepicheep suggests binding Prince Caspian to the ship’s mast, to which Edmund makes the obvious analogy: “like they did with Ulysses when he wanted to go near the Sirens” (*DT* 172).

It does not make much sense cutting out Classical characters, events, themes, and allusions from Lewis’ work; however, such modern excisions are understandable if one takes the view that these Classical elements are no longer common semiotic signposts in the modern genre of fantasy. They are incongruent with *watchers’* expectations of the genre, and so they are cut without great generic loss. Moving from Lewis to Tolkien, from Cambridge don to Oxford don, it is worth interrogating how our contemporary reception of Tolkien’s works might be shaped by similar generic influences. This provocation is, in part, the motivation behind this volume, to illustrate how a reading of the Classical world beneath Tolkien’s writings can enhance our understanding of his works and the multiple traditions within which he was working.

The search for sources in Tolkien’s works is far more difficult than in Lewis’. While the latter engaged in a form of worldbuilding which is literally characterised by open doorways between our own real-world realm and other fantasy realms including Narnia, as depicted in *The Magician’s Nephew* (1955), the former created a world which seems ‘hermetically sealed’, into which there are no ‘doorways’, either spatial or temporal, to enter, although the strange familiarity of Tolkien’s world invokes comparisons with our own world. Inevitably in Tolkien’s works, the bones of Classical influences are mixed with other bones (Christian, Germanic, medieval, Victorian, modern) into his own particular soup, which has its own unique flavour.

Hamish Williams, 14 June 2020

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32 For some recent scholarship on Lewis and Classics, see, for example, Slater 2015; Winkle 2017.
33 The “portal quest” versus “immersive” fantasy (James and Mendlesohn 2012: 2).
34 For the analogy borrowed from Sir George Webbe Dasent, see *TOFS* 39–40.
35 Thanks to Thomas Honegger for reading a first version of this paper and for suggesting several illuminating readings.
Abbreviations

*DT*: Lewis 2008
*PC*: Lewis 1994

List of References


