Tolkien and the Classical World
Tolkien and the Classical World

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Hamish Williams
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Hamish Williams

Tolkien the Classicist: Scholar and Thinker

Abstract

This paper undertakes a biographic analysis of Tolkien as a Classicist, a study which can be roughly broken up into three parts: (1) his early education in Classics at King Edward’s School in Birmingham and his initial undergraduate years at the University of Oxford; (2) his movement away from the prescriptive canon of Classics, especially during the First World War; and (3) his ‘return’ to Classics later in life as a means of thinking about the world, politics, art, and his own creative works.

The aim of this essay is to reconstruct a narrative of J.R.R. Tolkien as a Classicist. This narrative has been broken up into three parts: Part One: Formative Education; Part Two: A Decline in Classical Interests; and Part Three: Thinking Classics. Part One measures his early background and proficiency in Greek and Latin language, literature, and history at school and university; Part Two discusses his declining interest in the Classics during his undergraduate years and his early professional years; and Part Three focuses specifically on the Letters to show the relevance of Classics to Tolkien’s thinking, particularly at a later stage in life.

This study is interested both in asserting Tolkien’s general acquaintance with, proficiency in, and subject knowledge of the Classics and in illustrating how he was, at various periods, captivated by the Classical world. One of the principal outcomes of this study is a coherent, comprehensive exploration of relevant data in order to construct a more united and persuasive portrait of Tolkien as a Classicist. Lastly, this paper is not concerned with the development of scholarship on the Classical influences in Tolkien’s works — a report which would necessitate an entire paper in itself.¹

Part One: Formative Education

Tolkien’s journey in Classical education commenced at the age of 4 in 1896, when, under the tuition of his mother, Mabel Tolkien (née Suffield), he began to learn some of the basics of Latin; Humphrey Carpenter writes that the ancient language “delighted” (Carpenter 2002: 38) the young Ronald Tolkien, in particular, for its phonetic appeal (Carpenter 2002: 38). In a later recollection of his first encounter with Latin, Tolkien wrote: “Latin – to express now sensations that are still vivid in memory though inexpressible when received – seemed so normal that pleasure or distaste was equally inapplicable” (MC 191). In contrast to his aptitude for both English and Latin language, musical literacy and French instruction were less appealing for Ronald (Carpenter 2002: 38).

In 1900, his homeschooling at an end, Ronald was admitted to King Edward’s School, Birmingham, where the high academic standards entailed a strong education in both Latin and, for older boys, Greek (Carpenter 2002: 42). In the spring of 1903, after a brief hiatus spent at the more affordable (and Catholic) Grammar School of St Philip, Ronald won a Foundation Scholarship and returned to King Edward’s. Typically, prestigious English public schools at this time awarded such entrance scholarships based on examinations which either tested all-round academic abilities through an aggregate mark in Classics, English (History, Geography, and Divinity), Mathematics, and French or through a specific subject mark in Classics, Mathematics, or a modern language (namely, French, not English) (Lynam 1900: 107). Given the young Ronald’s disinclination towards French and with no data attesting to his early ability in Mathematics, one can assume that a solid performance in Latin was most likely achieved by Ronald to obtain the Foundation Scholarship. Latin papers in such entrance examinations typically could include unseen translations (for example, from Caesar or Virgil), prose or verse composition, and grammatical...

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questions. Furthermore, to win this scholarship, Tolkien, as a homeschooler, would probably have had to compete with boys already at King Edward’s and other boys from preparatory schools (Lynam 1900: 107).

Upon re-entering the school at the age of 11, Ronald subsequently advanced in the autumn of 1903 to the Sixth Class, where he was first taught Ancient Greek (Carpenter 2002: 45). As a marker of his quick progress in Greek, his mother, when informing her mother-in-law of Ronald’s progress, had boasted: “he knows far more Greek than I do Latin” (Carpenter 2002: 47). Ronald’s overall academic excellence was such that he tied for first place in the Sixth Class in August 1905 and received a book prize, *Roman History* (1879) by W.W. Capes (Scull and Hammond 2006a: 11). The thoroughness of his Classical education was later reflected upon by Tolkien: “I went to King Edward’s School and spent most of my time learning Latin and Greek” (*Letters* no. 163, p. 213, 7 June 1955).

In retrospect, Tolkien seems to have regarded his early encounter with ancient Greek literature as a kind of formative awakening in aesthetic taste: “I was brought up in the Classics, and first discovered the sensation of literary pleasure in Homer” (*Letters* no. 142, p. 172, 2 December 1953). This declaration is in contrast to a professed ignorance of modern English literature, an ignorance which, according to the writer, was due to the lack of affective and intellectual stimulation triggered by such literature. Classics was the first means by which Tolkien achieved this double aesthetic awakening of “heart and head” (*Letters* no. 142, p. 172).

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5 For several examples of then typical Latin and Greek public school entrance examinations, cf. Lynam 1900: 109-137. For an example of an 1898 entrance examination given to prospective pupils who wished to attend King Edward’s School, cf. ‘Dumbing Down: The Proof’ 2004 (my thanks to Graham Shipley for alerting me to the relevant article in the archives of *The Spectator*). It is likely that this paper is similar in structure and content to that which Ronald would have written some years later. In the Latin section of this examination paper, as transcribed in *The Spectator*, questions are divided according to grammatical questions (primarily, the correct morphology of verbs and nouns), prose composition (English into Latin), and a short unseen translation (Latin into English).

6 On the structure of these classes, the different streams, and a general overview of the syllabus, cf. Scull and Hammond 2006a: 8; 2006b: 447-449. One ‘Class’ ≠ one year, cf. Scull and Hammond 2006a: 6.

7 Tolkien described his first encounter with Joseph Wright’s *Primer of the Gothic Language* as entailing “a sensation at least as full of delight as first looking into Chapman’s Homer” (Carpenter 2002: 58). The writer’s encounter with Homeric poetry is, again, connoted as the formative aesthetic experience which serves as a model for later experiences; Tolkien’s phrasing here is also a learned allusion to Keats’ sonnet ‘On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer’ (thanks to Graham Shipley for this observation).
Apart from the literary and aesthetic wonder which Classical literature (particularly epic) triggered, Classical languages also afforded Ronald the chance to engage in the sort of philological experimentation and discovery which would later yield his own private languages and poetry. Thus, Ronald created his own artificial Greek words when he first began to learn the ancient language (Carpenter 2002: 57), Latin played a seminal role in forming the early languages he invented as a child (Nevebosh and Naffarin) (Garth 2003: 15; Librán-Moreno 2007: 344-345), and the translation of English verse into Greek and Latin stanzas entailed his first venture into the possibilities of poetic verse (Garth 2003: 13; Letters no. 163, p. 213, 7 June 1955).

It is unsurprising, then, that both Latin and Greek were important constituent languages in Tolkien’s later, more refined language of Quenya, an archaic Elvish tongue: “Actually it [Quenya] might be said to be composed on a Latin basis with two other (main) ingredients that happen to give me ‘phonaesthetic’ pleasure: Finnish and Greek” (Letters no. 144, p. 176, 25 April 1954). Of this phonaesthetic quality in Greek, Tolkien elaborated elsewhere: “the fluidity of Greek, punctuated by hardness, and with its surface glitter, captivated me, even when I met it first only in Greek names, of history or mythology […] but part of the attraction was antiquity and alien remoteness (from me): it did not touch home” (MC 191).

After the death of his mother, Ronald’s dedication to languages flowered further at King Edward’s, where “the study of Latin and Greek was the backbone of the curriculum” (Carpenter 2002: 53). Of the teachers who taught Ronald the Classics, C.H. Heath was the master in charge of the Fifth Class, which Tolkien entered in the autumn of 1905 (Scull and Hammond 2006b: 449). In his discussion of the school’s assistant masters, the school historian Hutton

9 On the extremely high proportion of Latin and Greek classes that were given (upwards of 50% of classes) in contrast to other subjects, educational surveys of the syllabuses from other English public schools around the late Edwardian period can provide representative evidence of some typical time-tables, cf. Fletcher 1910: 106. “In the 1980s, it remained true that a boy at a large public boarding school would spend about 40 per cent of his time on classics at age 13, increasing to about 60 per cent at age 15” (Stray 1998: 186). Thus, writing in 1917, H.G. Wells lamented the preponderance of Classical languages in English public schools: “the great advantage given to these subjects swamps the time-table of our schools […] with the elementary study of the Latin and Greek languages, to an extent that cripples any successful attempt at an alternative education” (1918: 184). The continued dominance of Classics in school syllabuses during the late Victorian period is a reflection of the social status which the subject carried in England, especially at public schools (cf. Stray 1998: 178-183).
writes of Heath: “he was a good classic and good teacher, competent equally to make plain the principles of Greek and Latin syntax to beginners and to guide the pens and influence the styles of those older boys who were just beginning to discover that writing Latin prose is an art” (1952: 107). Clearly, Ronald was sufficiently advanced in these elements since he soon advanced to the Fourth Class (under R.W. Reynolds) in less than a year (Scull and Hammond 2006b: 449). Another significant figure was certainly the headmaster and Classics teacher Robert Cary Gilson (in charge of the Second and First Class), who installed in his pupils a deeper understanding of Classical linguistics (Carpenter 2002: 54-55). Ronald also undertook New Testament Greek under the headmaster’s instruction (Scull and Hammond 2006b: 335).

In contrast to biographies of C.S. Lewis which can provide an extensive list of Classical literature ‘clocked’ during his tuition (especially under Kirkpatrick; cf. Wilson 1990: 40-41), there are not a great deal of personal references in either the biographies or the Letters of Tolkien to the precise Classical texts encountered during his school years. One exception occurs in Letters no. 272, which was written in response to a letter from a certain Zillah Sherring. Sherring had discovered an old copy of Book Five of Thucydides’ History of the Peloponnesian War in a second-hand bookshop in Wiltshire and had postulated that this book belonged to Tolkien since his name was printed on the flyleaf and because the pages had been inscribed here and there with Gothic text. In his epistle, Tolkien confirmed his ownership of the book and his authorship of the Gothic script (Letters no. 272, pp. 356-357, 20 July 1965). Although Tolkien is primarily concerned in this epistle with discussing his early efforts in the Gothic language, Tolkien’s translation of his own long Gothic inscription at the back of the Thucydides book (as copied to him by Sherring) does illustrate both his youthful thoroughness in “carefully” (Letters no. 272, p. 357) going through Book Five of Thucydides’ History word for word in the original Greek and his competitiveness in trying to “gain the prize given every year to the boy knowing most about Thucydides” (Letters no. 272, p. 357).

10 “[Latin and Greek] were taught particularly well in the First (or senior) Class, which Ronald reached shortly before his sixteenth birthday” (Carpenter 2002: 53). On Robert Cary Gilson as teacher and headmaster, cf. Hutton 1952: 92-95.

Importantly, our knowledge of the specific Latin and Ancient Greek texts which Tolkien encountered and most likely studied during his school years at King Edward’s has been greatly advanced by Oronzo Cilli’s recent comprehensive bibliographic study *Tolkien’s Library: An Annotated Checklist* (2019). Thus from original books which were inscribed, signed, and often dated by Tolkien during his school years, an approximate syllabus of required reading material at King Edward’s can be reconstructed that would likely have entailed *selections* from the following ancient works in the original Latin and Greek (I have placed in parentheses the years during which the relevant books were inscribed by Tolkien and, thus, when he most likely studied the works of an ancient author): Caesar’s *About the Gallic War* (1907) (Cilli 2019: 38); Virgil’s *Eclogues*, *Georgics*, and *Aeneid* (1907, 1910) (Cilli 2019: 298-299);¹² Homer’s *Iliad* (1908, 1909) (Cilli 2019: 126); Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* Book 5 (1910) and Book 6 (1911) (Cilli 2019: 291); and Juvenal’s *Satires* (undated) (Cilli 2019: 139).

Further information on the exact dates of Tolkien’s inscriptions, the particular modern editions, individual volumes, and commentaries of the ancient works that were used, and other useful source information can be found in the relevant pages of Cilli’s monograph. Some words of caution are necessary here. The above list of Classical works is not exhaustive since it only recognises those books which Tolkien clearly inscribed during his school years, which he wanted to keep in his collection, and which have been located since. Moreover, the list only pertains to Greek and Latin texts encountered at school, not to English translations which Tolkien would have read at leisure: for example, Chapman’s translation of Homer’s *Odyssey* (Cilli 2019: 126). Lastly, the list also does not indicate how great a selection the King Edward’s boys were required to read from each of the various ancient works.

Apart from books of ancient literature, during his King Edward’s days Ronald certainly studied books on Latin and Greek prose composition (Cilli 2019: 26, 259), on Greek grammar (Cilli 2019: 269-270), and on Greco-Roman culture, history, and philosophy (Cilli 2019: 103).

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¹² Tolkien owned Arthur Sidgwick’s two volumes on *P. Vergilii Maronis Opera* (1897) (Cilli 2019: 298-299), encompassing the *Eclogues*, *Georgics*, and *Aeneid* of Virgil. The selection of individual passages and books to study may have entailed a range of all three literary works, but most likely the strongest focus was on the *Aeneid*. 
Moreover, boys were exposed to the Classical world not only through the original texts in class but also through various Anglified popularisations of the Classics. Thus, we know, for instance, that Ronald was well acquainted with Lord Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome* (Garth 2003: 19-20). Ronald set out to create his own mock epic narrative, based on Macaulay's model, which was titled 'The Battle of the Eastern Field' and which was published in the school’s *Chronicle* (Garth 2003: 19-20; cf. *King Edward’s School Chronicle* n.s. 26, no. 186 (March 1911), pp. 22-26).13

Regarding his classmates, Ronald’s growing proficiency in Classics during his teenage years at the school was, perhaps, honed by his friendship with classmate Christopher Wiseman; there developed an amiable rivalry and close friendship between ‘top-boys’ who shared a love of rugby, good conversation, and, indeed, Latin and Greek (Carpenter 2002: 53). So too, according to Carpenter (2002: 70), a proficient knowledge of Latin and Greek literature was the initial unifying core of the T.C.B.S. (the Tea Club and Barrovian Society), the informal club which Tolkien formed with Wiseman; however, in contrast to the high-achieving Ronald and Christopher, Robert Quilter Gilson seems to have struggled with the Classics (cf. Garth 2011: 70-72, 76), and Geoffrey Bache Smith, a later member of the club, was not from the Classical part of the school.14

Among the various anecdotes of Tolkien’s Classics-based activities and accomplishments during his later school years, the following are notable. Ronald, like the other King Edward’s boys in the Classical stream, took part in debates held entirely in Latin, during which fictitious names and roles were assumed; thus, in one recorded debate, he played a *haruspex*, or soothsayer, called Spurius Vectigalius Acer (Scull and Hammond 2006a: 14).15 In another Latin debate, he once bettered his classmates by playing his role as Greek ambassador entirely in Greek (Carpenter 2002: 73); appropriately, this envoy was named Eisphorides

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15 The name is a pun: *vectigal* means a ‘toll’ (that is, a ‘tax’), while *acer* means ‘keen’ (Scull and Hammond 2006a: 14) – hence, *toll-keen*; moreover, the first name *spurius* might point to the ‘falsity’ of the nomenclature. For a list of common Latin nicknames given to some of the members of the T.C.B.S. during the Latin debates, cf. Garth 2003: 19. Ronald was also *Portorius Acer Germanicus* (Garth 2003: 19). *Acta Senatus*, a Latin-language school report written by Tolkien (‘the work is not signed, but Tolkien’s authorship is revealed in his papers’ (Scull and Hammond 2006b: 8)) and based on the proceedings of one Latin debate, cf. *King Edward’s School Chronicle* n.s. 26, no. 186 (March 1911), pp. 26-27.
Acribus Polyglotterus, a name pointing to Ronald’s multi-lingualism (Scull and Hammond 2006a: 18). Traditionally at King Edward’s School, part of the year-end festivities (on ‘Speech Day’) included the performance of a Greek play in the original language (Garth 2003: 18; Scull and Hammond 2006b: 226). “In July 1910 Tolkien played the part of the Inspector in The Birds by Aristophanes, and in July 1911 he was ‘a spirited Hermes’ in Peace by Aristophanes (‘Speech Day’, King Edward’s School Chronicle n.s. 26, no. 189 (October 1911) p. 72)” (Scull and Hammond 2006b: 226). According to Tolkien’s recollection, he was so immersed in the latter performance that he was spotted after the performance giving an enthusiastic rendition of a Bacchic dance (Carpenter 2002: 74).

Equally, biographers have discovered anecdotes in Tolkien’s schooling which display his ‘anti-Classical’ attitudes: for example, his decision to give a Latin debate in Gothic or declaring to the literary society, schooled in the centrality of Classics in the Western canon, that the Germanic Volsunga Saga was reflective of the greatest epic genius (Garth 2003: 16). Tolkien was in this way reacting against the Classics orthodoxy or “ethos drummed into King Edward’s school boys” (Garth 2003: 16).

To formalise the completion of his school career, in July 1910, at the age of 18, Tolkien sat and passed the Oxford and Cambridge Higher Certificate Examination (henceforth, HCE) “in five subjects: Latin, Greek, Elementary Mathematics, Scripture Knowledge (Greek text), and History” (Scull and Hammond 2006b: 269). These examinations were instituted in 1874 by the Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board for boys wishing to study at ‘Honour Colleges’, this advent being a reaction by the public schools against the possibility of government examination and inspection; almost all high-achieving English secondary schools offered the HCE on an annual basis (some schools on a biennial/triennial basis) (Matheson 1898: 265-266). The advantage of this loose alliance between the universities and the public schools was that many boys could be exempted from other compulsory university-based

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16 For a near-contemporary attack against the orthodoxy of Classical-based schooling and the corresponding neglect of English-language training, cf. Wells 1918.
17 On the different types of examination then required to formally enter Oxford, cf. Matheson 1898: 262-263.
examinations, such as the ‘Responsions’ at Oxford, based on their performance in the HCE. 18

For the HCE, there were both compulsory or pass papers and optional papers. For the Latin subject requirements, papers on unprepared or ‘unseen’ translation (a Latin text, previously not encountered in the syllabus, to be translated into English) and prose composition (English texts translated into Latin) were required for an examination pass; for Greek, an unseen translation was compulsory, while students could elect to write either prose composition or to be examined on a prepared ‘book’ for a pass (Matheson 1898: 272-274). However, while this was sufficient for a pass in the HCE, students who wished to attain an exemption from the university Responsions, as Tolkien later accomplished (Scull and Hammond 2006a: 29), had to “satisfy the examiners in a prepared book both in Greek and Latin” (Matheson 1898: 274).

The prepared books prescribed by the HCE Board were intended to occupy between one and two terms’ worth of work, and the chosen material was designed to “encourage the reading of the best authors” (Matheson 1898: 274); schools could, however, opt out of the prescribed books and select from a range of Greco-Roman classics (Matheson 1898: 274-275). It should be noted, furthermore, that the HCE Board regarded these prepared books as the bare minimum for serious-minded, academic schoolboys (Matheson 1898: 275). The HCE papers on the prepared books seem to have included several different forms of assessment: for example, translation of passages (‘prepared’ or ‘seen’ translations), grammatical and historical commentary or notes on the text, and other particular questions depending on the work studied – for example, questions on the plot of a story, questions on the character of syntax, or even questions requiring pupils to draw an accurate historical map (cf. Gross and Matheson 1911).

Apart from unseen translations, prepared books, and prose composition, optional papers were also available for “critical questions,” pertaining to “the scientific and historic aspects of language” (Matheson 1898: 276) and, perhaps, also to “knowledge of Greek and Roman life and literature” (Gross and Matheson 1911: 276). 18 On the exemption requirements, cf. Matheson 1898: 263-265.
Report Part 2, p. 6). Lastly, for his Scripture Knowledge, Ronald would have been examined in “Old and New Testament History and in the Greek text of special books of the New Testament” (Matheson 1898: 280).

Interestingly, Ronald seems to have written the HCE both in July 1910, to formalise the completion of his school studies (Scull and Hammond 2006b: 269), and again in July 1911, after he had already been accepted into the University of Oxford. The evidence for the latter is indicated by a report (dated 22 August 1911) from the HCE Board summarising and evaluating the performance of King Edward’s pupils in the recent HCE papers. Ronald seems to have excelled, in particular, at Greek prose composition. One of the examiners, Prof. Hebblethwaite, assessed the performance for ‘Greek Prose’ (that is, Greek prose composition) in Ronald’s group (‘Form i’) as follows (quotation copied in full):

(16 boys, av. mark 57). Five copies were very good, five good, four weak, two bad. The general work was very creditable as regards style, choice of words, and knowledge of idiom. Tolkien’s copy was excellent in all respects, those of Barrowclough, R.S. Payton, and W.H. Payton had a very fair run of Greek in them. The weaker candidates require careful drilling in the usages of the particles, and the principles of accentuation.

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Another examiner, Mr Brooke, assessed the performance for the ‘Ancient History’ paper in Ronald’s group as follows:

The work of Class i on Roman History reached a good average, without any remarkable brilliance. Most of the candidates seemed to understand how to answer a history question. They made good points, but were often satisfied merely to enlarge on one without making the answer complete. The best work was undoubtedly done by Gilson [i.e. Tolkien’s friend, Robert Quilter Gilson] in both papers […] Tolkien gave signs of a more acute and independent judgement than anyone else; his style also was more matured, but he seemed to have no control over it and sometimes became almost unintelligible; he was also very irrelevant, particularly on the Special Period, in which he only attempted four questions. In this paper, he with many others made the mistake of giving the details of all Caesar’s campaigns in Gaul, when the question only asked for one campaign. (cf. Gross and Matheson 1911: Report Part 2, p. 14).

19 Scull and Hammond do not explicitly state that Tolkien wrote the HCE examinations in 1911: “much of this term [the summer term of 1911] is taken up by examinations spread over six weeks” (2006a: 25).
In addition to passing the HCE (twice), in mid-December 1910 Tolkien had written the Oxford Entrance Examination, and he had clearly performed fairly well because he obtained an Open Classical Exhibition at Exeter College, Oxford (officially announced on 27 January 1911, although Tolkien seems to have known about his success already on 17 December 1910) (Garth 2014: 5; Scull and Hammond 2006a: 22; 2006b: 173). Tolkien had, incidentally, failed to obtain an Oxford scholarship in a previous visit to the town in December 1909 and, hence, left school at the relatively late age of 19 (Scull and Hammond 2006b: 449). The exhibition Tolkien obtained, to the value of £60 per annum, was not as substantial as he had hoped for: “a large part of my failure [to attain a substantial entrance scholarship to Oxford] was due simply to not working (at least not at classics) … because I was studying something else: Gothic and what not” (Letters no. 43, p. 52, 6-8 March 1941). His Open Classical Exhibition was, however, supplemented, by a bursary from King Edward’s in June 1911, namely, the Milward Exhibition (£50) (Scull and Hammond 2006a: 26).

Tolkien’s undergraduate career formally began on 17 October 1911 when the young academic “matriculated as a member of Oxford University” (Garth 2014: 5), and part of the inauguration ritual included speeches in Latin at the Sheldonian Theatre (Garth 2014: 5). Of Tolkien’s subsequent undergraduate syllabus and education, Scull and Hammond write:

He was required to read a considerable amount of classical literature, as well as learn about Greek and Roman history and culture. At Oxford his set texts for Honour Moderations included works by Virgil, Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. These studies contributed to the ‘leaf-mould of the mind’21 […] from which Tolkien’s creative writings grew, though their influence on his fiction and poetry was less than that of the literature of Northern Europe.

(2006b: 173-174)

Tolkien did indeed have a wide choice of set-work lectures to attend (Scull and Hammond 2006a: 28). Of these, “from 1911 to 1913 Tolkien almost certainly attended” (Scull and Hammond 2006b: 294) the lectures of Lewis Farnell, who was the Senior Tutor at Tolkien’s Exeter College. To be more specific, Farnell lectured on the following set works (in translation) during the aforementioned period: in the Michaelmas Term of 1911, Aeschylus’

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20 A failure due, perhaps, to his romance with Edith Bratt (Garth 2014: 6).
Agamemnon (Scull and Hammond 2006a: 28); in the Trinity Term of 1912, the Private Orations of Demosthenes and Tacitus’ Annals Book I and II (Scull and Hammond 2006a: 32-33); and in the Michaelmas Term of 1912, Homer’s Odyssey. During Michaelmas 1912, Gilbert Murray’s lectures on Aeschylus’ Agamemnon and Euripides’ Electra were probably also attended by Tolkien during this term (Scull and Hammond 2006a: 34), and perhaps his lectures on Euripides’ Bacchae in Hilary Term 1913 (Scull and Hammond 2006a: 36). Tolkien’s college tutor E.A. Barber gave lectures on Virgil at that time, which he may have attended as well (Scull and Hammond 2006a: 38). In addition to the lectures for Honour Moderations texts, in the Hilary and Trinity Term of 1912, Tolkien attended Joseph Wright’s lectures and (home-based) tutorials on comparative Greek grammar (Garth 2014: 8; Scull and Hammond 2006a: 31). From Michaelmas Term 1912, he most likely also attended Wright’s lectures on comparative Latin grammar – and certainly from the Hilary Term of 1913 (Scull and Hammond 2006a: 34, 38).

Part Two: A Decline in Classical Interests

“People couldn’t make out [...] why my essays on Greek drama were getting worse and worse” (quotation from Garth 2003: 30). There were signs that Tolkien’s performance in Classics was not as it should have been. In mid-1912, “college records show that he [Tolkien] was considered lazy, and that during the summer term he was warned that he might lose his exhibition, a warning that led him to improve” (Scull and Hammond 2006a: 33; cf. Garth 2014: 19). Perhaps part of his boredom was down to repetition of material: Tolkien had previously been exempted from writing the ‘Responsions’ (preliminary examinations) in November 1911 because these subjects had already been covered in his HCE (Scull and Hammond 2006a: 29). In any case, the turning point in his choice of academic disciplines arrived during his Honour Moderations, examinations for the first part of his degree. The subject matter and programme of the examinations have been most fully described by Scull and Hammond:

22 “Tolkien barely used Exeter College’s library, and he withdrew only one Classics-related book (Grote’s History of Greece [Vol. 5]) in his entire first year” (Garth 2003: 26; cf. 2014: 21).
Tolkien takes probably twelve written papers, each of three hours’ duration, one in the morning and one in the afternoon over a period of several days. He is required to translate passages from Homer and Demosthenes, and from Virgil and Cicero (the Orations); and to translate, without preparation, passages from Greek authors other than Homer and Demosthenes, and from Latin authors other than Virgil and Cicero. He is also examined on four Greek plays, Oedipus Tyrannus and Electra by Sophocles, Agamemnon by Aeschylus, and the Bacchae by Euripides, with special attention to Oedipus Tyrannus; on Plato, his choice of two of the Gorgias, Protagoras, and Phaedo; on Annals I-IV by Tacitus; and on Latin prose composition, on Greek prose composition, and on Greek and Latin verse composition. In addition he takes a general paper on Greek and Latin grammar, literary criticism, and antiquities, including questions on Homer, Virgil, Demosthenes, and Cicero; and a paper on a subject of his choice, the elements of Comparative Philology as applied to Greek and Latin, with a special knowledge of Greek philology. (2006a: 37)

The attempt to cram too much of four terms’ worth of Classics work into six weeks resulted in a Second Class for Tolkien – certainly not reflective of the young scholar’s academic potential. On his exam performance, he seems to have fared most poorly on prose and verse composition (writing into Latin and Greek from an English text); the lowest marks were garnered for his Virgillian translation, his paper on Tacitus, and Latin verse composition (Scull and Hammond 2006a: 38). These results suggest that Tolkien’s poor performance in the exams was largely the result of a lack of practice and neglect rather than a lack of knowledge of the Classical world. Most academics who have studied the Classics at some point would attest to the fact that Latin and Greek prose or verse composition and translation require regular and diligent practice to remain fluent. What was noticeable, however, was Tolkien’s excellent grade for his special subject, comparative philology (Carpenter 2002: 90). And so, with his passion for Old and Middle English, in particular, having been noted, Tolkien was steered along a different route: “at the beginning of the summer term of 1913 he abandoned Classics and began to read English” (Carpenter 2002: 90; cf. Garth 2003: 3-4, 30).

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23 1) For this particular six-week period, Garth has noted a sudden “flurry of library borrowings – Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannus and Electra and Aeschylus’s Eumenides, Agamemnon, and Choephoroe” (2014: 23). 2) A Third Class might have ensued, had it not been for an excellent paper on Greek philology (Garth 2003: 30). Tolkien clearly regarded Greek philology as his strong point in Classics since he referred to it in his job application for the Rawlinson and Bosworth Professorship of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford (Letters no. 7, p. 12, 27 June 1925).

He may have ‘abandoned’ Classics as a pure discipline, but a sustained knowledge and ability in Classical and medieval Latin remained a practical professional necessity in his philological work on Medieval English language and literature, both in lecturing and in scholarship (Gilli 2019: 71, 120; Librán-Moreno 2007: 344; Scull and Hammond 2006b: 470). Thus, in Michaelmas Term 1948, Tolkien gave lectures on ‘The Influence of Latin upon English’ (Scull and Hammond 2006a: 341). Moreover, in terms of his other professional capacities, Latin would have undoubtedly proven useful to Tolkien during his stint at the *Oxford English Dictionary* after the war (Swain 2007: 346), and, years later, Tolkien did occasionally moderate Greek and Latin exams (Scull and Hammond 2006a: 153).

In 1913, though, several factors can be attributed to Tolkien’s declining interests and performance in Classics: over-familiarity, uninspiring tutoring, social life, defined literary tastes, wide-ranging philological tastes, and an ever-growing ‘Northern turn’. Thus, most likely, Tolkien had acquired an over-familiarity with these texts during his school years and had become “bored” (Carpenter 2002: 80) with them (Garth 2014: 21). In combination with this, the lack of a specialist tutor for the subject at Exeter College may have demotivated him; the post, even when filled, apparently did not find an especially inspiring instructor in the person of E.A. Barber (Carpenter 2002: 80). In contrast to the drudgery of a repetitive, uninspiring education, Tolkien enjoyed an active social life at the college (a not inexpensive hobby) (Carpenter 2002: 77-80), was a member of many societies and clubs (Garth 2003: 31; 2014: 9, 12-18, 26-27), took part in raucous ‘ragging’ about town in ‘defiance of the law’ (Carpenter 2002: 77-80; Garth 2014: 19-20), and played some rugby and tennis (Garth 2014: 18). All of these factors might have left a young man feeling less well disposed to the pragmatic hassle of work, which was, in Tolkien’s case, Classics.

From an intellectual perspective, the overall wide-ranging subject matter of a Classical education broached many genres, such as dour forensic speeches of Cicero and Demosthenes (cf. Carpenter 2002: 80), in which Tolkien simply

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25 The early appeal of Greek for Tolkien lay in its remoteness (*MC* 191). Regarding this general proclivity in his philological tastes, Tolkien wrote: “I have always best enjoyed things in a foreign language, or one so remote as to feel like it (such as Anglo-Saxon)” (*Letters* no. 142, p. 172, 2 December 1953).
had no interest since his passion was consumed, at least in terms of subject matter, by epic and mythic tales of saga and adventure (Garth 2014: 21). The early Germanic texts, such as in Old Norse and Old English, thus provided a proportionally greater focus on subject matter which was far closer to Tolkien’s interests than what was covered in Classics (beyond Homer, Virgil, and other texts which alluded to the mythic cycles). On the other hand, while Tolkien’s literary appetite for certain types of stories and genres may have been quite specific, his philological enthusiasm was far more general, and the young scholar may have felt repressed by the limitations imposed by a strict focus on Greek and Latin linguistics.

Perhaps the greatest factor easing Tolkien away from Classics was a growing ‘Northern turn’ during his later school and undergraduate days. Tolkien often commented on the intention for his creative work to become a mythology of the North-West, specifically of England:

> [My legend] should possess the tone and quality that I desired, somewhat cool and clear, be redolent of our ‘air’ (the clime and soil of the North West, meaning Britain and the hither parts of Europe; not Italy or the Aegean, still less the East), and, while possessing (if I could achieve it) the fair elusive beauty that some call Celtic. (Letters no. 131, p. 144, ~1951)

Similar statements on this North-Western geographical, cultural, historical, and mythical propensity can be found through Tolkien’s Letters (cf. Letters no. 163, pp. 212-213, 7 June 1955), which might push the critic away from studying the influence of those regions which are deemed Classical upon his writings and thoughts. Some objections might be made, however, against this prescription. Such statements by Tolkien, idealisations of national, regional, or linguistic contexts, can be viewed, at least partially, as poetic romanticisms. On other occasions, there is ample evidence, as we shall see, revealing that the Classical world maintained an occasional pull on Tolkien in later life. Accordingly, in

26 Cicero and Demosthenes, in particular, seem to have left a ten-year wound that hindered Tolkien from reading and enjoying Classical literature (Garth 2014: 21).
27 “[Tolkien] had begun to feel a little superior to his fellow-classicists, with his wide-ranging knowledge of linguistics” (Carpenter 2002: 82).
28 For his interest in Germanic philology and myth as a reaction to the Classics, cf. Letters no. 45, p. 55, 9 June 1941.
at least one passage in his published epistles, Tolkien explicitly denies a north-centred world-building:

The action of the story takes place in the North-west of ‘Middle-earth’, equivalent in latitude to the coastlands of Europe and the north shores of the Mediterranean. But this is not a purely ‘Nordic’ area in any sense. If Hobbiton and Rivendell are taken (as intended) to be at about the latitude of Oxford, then Minas Tirith, 600 miles south, is at about the latitude of Florence. The Mouths of Anduin and the ancient city of Pelargir are at about the latitude of ancient Troy.

Auden has asserted that for me ‘the North is a sacred direction’. That is not true. The North-west of Europe, where I (and most of my ancestors) have lived, has my affection, as a man’s home should. I love its atmosphere, and know more of its histories and languages than I do of other parts; but it is not ‘sacred’, nor does it exhaust my affections. I have, for instance, a particular love for the Latin language, and among its descendants for Spanish. That it is untrue [i.e. that the North is, in exact religious terms, sacred] for my story, a mere reading of the synopses should show. The North was the seat of the fortresses of the Devil. The progress of the tale ends in what is far more like the re-establishment of an effective Holy Roman Empire with its seat in Rome than anything that would be devised by a ‘Nordic’.

(Letters no. 294, p. 376, 8 February 1967)

In any case, there is a certain false dichotomy in this form of enquiry between the Northern and the Mediterranean. To assert that the ‘North’ mattered most to Tolkien (which this paper does not disagree with) does not imply that the ‘South’ mattered least. Classics certainly would have still ranked higher above other ‘spurious’ modern studies in Tolkien’s personal aesthetic rubric.31 The preclusion of the study of Classical influences on Tolkien because of the superiority of the Northern endorses a forced polarisation (cf. Librán-Moreno 2005: 15; Spirito 2009: 186).

Finally, it is interesting to note that even in the very period when Tolkien was distancing himself most from Classics, during his transition in 1913-1914 to English philology, a ‘distilled version’ of the Classics was still of interest to the young scholar. Thus, when Tolkien won the Skeat Prize for English in the spring of 1914, when he had become happily entrenched in his new discipline, the prize money (five pounds) was spent, in part, in buying two works of Classical

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reception by William Morris, *The Life and Death of Jason* and *The House of the Wolfings* (Scull and Hammond 2006a: 51). If Tolkien turned his back on Classics for the study of English, the latter was still infused with the former for this scholar and writer.

The end of the undergraduate stage of Tolkien’s life coincided with the violent transition into late modernity marked out by the First World War (1914-1918). In this period, there is little if anything to say about Classical influences in the young scholar’s life. John Garth (2003: 42-43) has remarked about the disparity between Tolkien’s heroic models and those of his contemporaries as they made the transition into soldiers: while many young Englishmen carried a copy of Homer’s *Iliad* and cherished the heroic virtues of Achilles, Hector, and company as they headed to war, Tolkien was concerned with less-known Northern Germanic heroes such as Beowulf and Beorhnoth.

Such a decision is interesting in light of the conflict between England and Germany. Tolkien steadfastly held onto his love of the ‘Northern spirit’ (of which Hitler’s Nazism was a later perversion) (cf. *Letters* no. 45, pp. 55-56, 9 June 1941), which had been realised through his love of comparative philology, history, and myth. In academic terms, furthermore, Germany had also been at the heart of the philological awakening in the nineteenth century, for which tradition Tolkien and other English philologists had great respect (Garth 2003: 41-42). His decision to ignore the Classical heroic paradigms at this time may have simply been a result of his growing interest in Northern mythic cycles. For Garth, the Classics became connoted or “romantically entangled with Victorian romanticism” (Garth 2003: 42), while the Germanic myths held a darker, cynical, “greyer” (Garth 2003: 43), or pessimistic view of humans, life, and, indeed, war than the Greek epics (Garth 2003: 43).32

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32 It seems likely that Tolkien appreciated both epic traditions for different reasons and at different stages of his life: “according to the *King Edward’s School Chronicle*, he [Tolkien] considers the *Volsunga Saga* one of the best of the sagas, and though it is inferior to Homer in most respects, in some it excels” (Scull and Hammond 2006a: 23).
Part Three: Thinking Classics

In his professional years as an academic and in his later life, Tolkien’s aversion to the orthodoxy of his Classical education seems to have waned. Tolkien himself, in a letter dated June 1955, provides a warning to biographers who track linear progressions and dominant tastes in his linguistic proclivities.

Linguistic taste changes like everything else, as time goes on; or oscillates between poles. Latin and the British type of Celtic have it now, with the beautifully co-ordinated and patterned (if simply patterned) Anglo-Saxon near at hand and further off the Old Norse with the neighbouring but alien Finnish. (Letters no. 163, p. 214, 7 June 1955)

Fluctuations in linguistic and, thus, literary taste (the second was always dependent on the first for Tolkien; cf. Letters no. 163, p. 214; no. 165, pp. 219-220, 30 June 1955) seem a feature of the writer’s life.

In this final part of this paper, I analyse Tolkien’s Letters, with occasional recourse to the extant manuscripts, in order to measure how the Classical world, broadly defined, formed a component of Tolkien’s intellectual, self-reflective realm. In short, I explore five ways of Tolkien ‘thinking Classics’: (i) explanations, where Tolkien clarifies a specific Classical concept; (ii) artistic legacy, where Tolkien conceives of his own literary pedigree in terms of ancient predecessors; (iii) intertextuality, where Tolkien directly and specifically relates his own creative endeavours to Classical paradigms; (iv) analogy, where Tolkien makes sense of a confusing modern political landscape with reference to the Classical world; and (v) recreational reading, where historical fiction set in the Greco-Roman world is of deepest interest to him.

(i) Explanations. At the end of Letters no. 94, written to his son Christopher on 28 December 1944, Tolkien drifts from a meandering discussion of the weather to English politics (a common point of irritation at the time for the writer); in particular, the Oxford professor is annoyed by a certain Anthony Eden, a speaker in the House of Commons (Letters p. 440), who lamented the “occurrences in Greece ‘the home of democracy’” (Letters no. 94, p. 107). Presumably, given the date of Tolkien’s letter and the reference to violations of democracy, Eden

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33 Tolkien seemed to lean more towards Latin than Greek in later life (Letters no. 338, p. 419, ~6 June 1972), although in his earlier career he performed better academically in Greek (Scull and Hammond 2006b: 468).
was referring to the massacre of leftist and republican protestors in Syntagma Square, Athens, on 3 December 1944, at the hands of the Greek police and the British army (cf. Vulliamy and Smith 2014). Tolkien's response to the Western idealisation of Ancient Greece, ‘the home of democracy’, is as follows:

Is he [Eden] ignorant, or insincere? δημοκρατία [dēmokratia] was not in Greek a word of approval but was nearly equivalent to ‘mob-rule’; and he neglected to note that Greek Philosophers – and far more is Greece the home of philosophy [than democracy] – did not approve of it. And the great Greek states, esp. Athens at the time of its high art and power, were rather dictatorships, if they were not military monarchies like Sparta! And modern Greece has as little connexion with ancient Hellas as we have with Britain before Julius Agricola. (Letters no. 94, p. 107)

Tolkien’s annoyance here can be interpreted variously. From a modern perspective, he had serious misgivings about democracy as an institutionalised political goal, and he was, moreover, concerned as a Catholic about rising communist movements across Europe. From the perspective of the Classics, however, Tolkien is taking aim at the British (and Western) idealisation, simplification, and appropriation of certain heralded virtues of Classical culture and history, as exemplified by the Anglo-American reception of democracy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. “Athenian democracy was transformed in the political imagination. From a regime that turned a mob into a tyrant, it became the glorious vision of nobility, freedom, and equality to which politicians, theorists, and journalists could turn” (Saxonhouse 1993: 488). Against such a contemporary romanticisation of Greek democracy, Tolkien’s argument addresses a number of problematic misconceptions: namely, that no democratic ‘nation-state’ called Greece existed in the Classical period; that most of the Greek city-states, such as those in the Peloponnesian, were autocratic (monarchic, oligarchic, tyrannical) in government for most of their history (Lewis 2006: 2-3); that even Athens could only claim to be democratic during a defined segment of her greater history (Finley 1973: 14), outside of which she was ruled by dictators; and that Athenian philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, did not believe the ideal state to be necessarily democratic (Finley 1973: 8-9; Finley 1973: 4-5, 8-9, 13).

35 On Anglo-American romanticisations of Athenian democracy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, cf. Saxonhouse 1993: 487-490. Tolkien may have been familiar with such romanticisations from pro-war propaganda during WWI (cf. Saxonhouse 1993: 488).
36 On the negative reception of Athenian democracy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in England (closer to Tolkien’s view), cf. Finley 1973: 9-10; Saxonhouse 1993: 486-488.
Artistic Legacy. In Letters no. 156, Tolkien makes some remarks that suggest that comparison between his own works and those of the ancient world, particularly the epics of Homer and Virgil, is justified. Thus, in November 1954, shortly after the publication of The Fellowship of the Ring, Tolkien suggests that defects in The Lord of the Rings are inevitable, just as “in any large-scale work of art; and especially in those of literary form that are founded on an earlier matter which is put to new uses – like Homer, or Beowulf, or Virgil, or Greek or Shakespearean tragedy! In which class, as a class not as a competitor, The Lord of the Rings really falls” (Letters no. 156, p. 201, 4 November 1954). Although Tolkien is conscious of, and apologetic for, the self-flattery in this remark, and although the comparison to Shakespeare is not necessarily positive for Tolkien (though he appreciated it in its staged form, not as ‘literature’), this statement does reveal a consciousness of how his work could be seen as a continuation in the tradition of those great Classical epics and tragedies which drew on lost tales.

Intertextuality. In several letters, Tolkien cites the possible influence of Classical texts or stories on his own creations. Thus, for the First Age, Tolkien suggests that the tragedy of Túrin Turambar may have drawn inspiration from the myth of Oedipus (Letters no. 131, p. 150, ~1951). For the Second Age, the more primitive kin of Númenor who dwelt in Middle-earth are described by the writer as being in a “simple Homeric state” (Letters no. 131, p. 154). The subsequent fall of Númenor itself is, in various places, compared to the myth of Atlantis (cf. Letters no. 154, pp. 197-198, 25 September 1954; no. 257, p. 347, 16 July 1964; no. 294, p. 378, 8 February 1967), which owes its origin to Plato in the Western tradition. Furthermore, “the history of Númenorean kingdoms in exile […] resembles that of the late Roman empire” (Scull and Hammond 2006b: 371), wherein the collapse of Tolkien’s Arnor is analogous to the fall of the Western Roman Empire, while the slow decay and endur-

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57 On Tolkien’s ambiguous stance on drama and, more particularly, Shakespeare, cf. Scull and Hammond 2006b: 222-226.

ance of Minas Tirith and Gondor are reminiscent of the Eastern Roman Empire and Byzantium; such a comparison is implied by Tolkien when he refers to Gondor as “a kind of proud, venerable, but increasingly impotent Byzantium” (Letters no. 131, p. 157, -1951). Finally, for the Third Age, Tolkien presumably refers to the Rohirrim, more primitive in contrast to Gondorians (“the Kings of Men”, Letters no. 131, p. 159), as “heroic Homeric horsemen” (Letters no. 131, p. 159).

On the subject of The Lord of the Rings, according to Tolkien, the landscape of the Dead Marshes owes “more to William Morris and his Huns and Romans [than to post-Somme Northern France], as in The House of the Wolfings or The Roots of the Mountains” (Letters no. 226, p. 303, 31 December 1960). This influence entails, of course, reception of a work that is itself one of Classical reception. Tolkien’s ‘reception of Classical reception’ may also have been realised through knowledge of the various medieval myths and texts which were inspired by Greco-Roman models: for example, the continuation of the story of Troy in medieval ‘state-building’ legends (cf. Spirito 2009: 187-192, 194).39

Classical references occur in the surviving manuscripts as well. When Tolkien was sketching ahead the plot of The Lord of the Rings after he had composed the Fangorn narrative (what Christopher Tolkien has referred to as ‘The Story Foreseen from Fangorn’), he provided the first outline for what later became The Return of the King, including the heroes’ entry into Minas Tirith (which later was restricted to Gandalf and Pippin), the siege of the city, the Battle of Pelennor Fields, the gradual approach towards Mordor, Sauron’s embassy, and the final defeat (WR 229-230). Tellingly, at the top of this outline page, Tolkien wrote in a different-coloured ink: “Homeric catalogue. Forlong the Fat. The Folk of Lebennin” (WR 229).

This is, of course, the first imaginative reference – or at least the first on paper – for what became an important sequence in the opening chapter of The Return of the King, ‘Minas Tirith’. Pippin, taken to the gates of Minas Tirith by Beregond’s son Bergil, witnesses a procession of clans from the surrounding towns and communities of Gondor arriving at the capital city in order to provide succour to

39 The fall of Troy is mentioned at the start of Tolkien’s translation of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Spirito 2009: 192).
the soon-to-be-besieged residents. It is intriguing that Tolkien’s imagination was stimulated at this point in the creative process through a reference to a typical element of Homeric storytelling, the so-called ‘Homeric catalogue’. Scull and Hammond (2006b: 174) have suggested a deliberate acknowledgement of the Catalogue of Ships (a great list of the numbers and the leaders of the different Greek clans) in *Iliad* Book 2. The extent of the Homeric inspiration in the subsequent narratives centred on Minas Tirith, both battle preparation and the battle itself, is of course up to the comparative scholar to postulate (an exercise which exceeds the scope of this essay).

A second example of Classics intruding into Tolkien’s creative process can be glimpsed in an early manuscript on ‘The Fall of Gondolin’. On the sacking of the Elven city, Tolkien’s narrator writes: “Nor Bablon, nor Ninwi, nor the towers of Trui, nor all the many takings of Rûm that is greatest among Men, saw such terror as fell that day upon Amon Gwareth in the kindred of the Gnomes” (*BLT2* 196-197). Christopher Tolkien has remarked that in the original text of this section, Tolkien had written “Bablon, Nineveh, Troy, and (probably) Rome” (*BLT2* 203).

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40 Other catalogues occur in archaic Greek poetry: for example, the catalogue of women in the Underworld (*Odyssey* Book 11).

41 A) I provide here some brief speculations on Iliadic connections in Tolkien’s Gondor. Regarding Tolkien’s catalogue of soldiers, Forlong the Fat and his ‘primitive’ mountain men of Lostarnach might be visualised as ‘Homeric’ in some respect. Tolkien seems often enough to have associated the Homeric with the primitive. From a spatial level, Minas Tirith and the Pelennor Fields may be reminiscent of Troy and the Trojan plain. For example, a river is obviously an important threshold in both narratives in dividing opposing forces and staying the violence (the Anduin versus the Scamander). Lastly, there could be similarities in the ensuing battles. For example, Faramir and Paris, being noble princes of a realm, archer heroes, and figures of romantic interest, are removed from the battlefield and taken to places of healing or recovery. B) Several scholars have engaged with the Homeric heritage of Tolkien, to varying degrees. In chronological order, Greenman (1992: 7-9) compares the homecoming of Odysseus with that of the four hobbits to the Shire in *The Return of the King*; Fenwick (1996: 17-23) argues that the conflict between female rulers and female monsters in Tolkien (Galadriel versus Shelob) draws on the *Odyssey* as a source text (Circe/Calypso versus the Sirens/Sisylla/Charybdis); Reckford (2003: 8-9, 15) briefly explores heroic parallels between Odysseus’ journey and Bilbo’s; Librán-Moreno (2005: 15-52) considers the father-sons trio of Telamon-Ajax-Teucer in the *Iliad* (and later Greek tragedy) as a source text for the familial trio of Denethor-Boromir-Faramir in *The Lord of the Rings*; Lewis and Currie (2005) explore the pervasiveness of the Trojan myth in later medieval literature which Tolkien studied and the relevance of this reception to his writings; Spirito (2009: 195-196) posits a number of suggestive Homeric plot, character, and material details throughout Tolkien’s writings; Vink (2012: 89) shows a parallel between claims of everlasting fame in the *Silmarillion* and the *Iliad*, and I have read *The Hobbit* as a hospitality story reminiscent of the *Odyssey* (Williams 2017: 174-197), and, more specifically, I have compared the Polyphemus episode to that of Tolkien’s three trolls in ‘Roast Mutton’ (Williams 2019: 117-122). This list is by no means exhaustive and omits some more recent works focused on ancient epic, more broadly, and Tolkien.
The question does arise whether there are more Classical sources embedded within Tolkien’s creations than those which the writer directly cited or suggested in his Letters. Rarely did Tolkien provide such direct intertextual remarks for his creative sources, whether Classical, ‘Northern’, ‘modern’, or other.\[42\] This scarcity is probably attributable to Tolkien’s belief that knowledge of the ox bones (or ingredients) of the soup do not help to improve the palatable satisfaction of the final concoction (TOFS 20). In literary terms, for Tolkien, source-hunting could not alone help to explain the unified aesthetic enjoyment which the reader could garner from the subcreated fantasy world. Pure source-hunting could, in fact, destroy the soup (cf. Scull and Hammond 2006b: 372).\[43\]

Given this attitude, it seems likely that in his creative processes Tolkien drew on Classical material without being conscious, or without even wanting to be conscious, of this borrowing. One should, thus, not limit investigations of Classical influences simply to a few direct intertextualities, which Tolkien, in any case, chose not to elaborate on greatly (cf. Librán-Moreno 2005: 28). Tolkien, as has been shown in the first part of this paper, had a substantial Classical repertoire to draw from. Nor, moreover, should we be surprised to see the Classical sources mixed with several other domains within which Tolkien had expert knowledge or even with personal experiences, aside from his scholarly expertise. The soup was a mixture of different kinds of bones. Tolkien’s Númenor may have been based on the Classical story of Atlantis (from Plato’s Timaeus and Critias), but the story of his own created island was also tinged by his personal experiences, a dream of a great wave collapsing over and threatening to drown him (Scull and Hammond 2006b: 174).

(iv) Analogy. From two epistles Tolkien wrote, it is clear that Greco-Roman antiquity provided powerful paradigms for him to express certain strongly held sentiments or beliefs. On 29 November 1943, Tolkien wrote a letter to his son Christopher, who had by then been conscripted into the Royal Air Force; Tolkien, then clearly under the sway of a dark period in British and collective European history, aims his wrath at current political affairs, politi-

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cians, and, more philosophically, man as a political creature (Letters no. 52, pp. 63-64). His thoughts are not structured in an easily accessible, and thus discernible, manner, but the epistle touches on various beliefs regarding power in the contemporary world: that individual anarchy, even of the violent kind (those who bomb factories), is the appropriate response to a society which is becoming increasingly state-controlled; that only those who unwillingly accept power (such as bishops) can exercise it without succumbing to the worst effects of corruption; and that the growing industrialisation and technocratic nature of the world (chemists, for instance) have led to the possibility of a homogeneity and consolidation of power.

All these reflections about power are concretised in The Lord of the Rings: the libertarian, unordered, quarrelsome Hobbits can be contrasted to the ‘order’ which Saruman (Sharkey) and his cronies impose upon the Shire, a pollution which can only be wiped clean through a collective act of violent anarchy when the Hobbits set the Shire free once more. The theme of the reluctant leader is embodied in Aragorn avoiding his inheritance and in Frodo unwillingly accepting the burden of the Ring, while those individuals who seek to rule in Tolkien (such as Saruman or Denethor) are rarely benevolent characters. And the industrialised, mechanised modernity of Saruman and Sauron threatens to consume the world in a monolithic oneness.

In Letters no. 52, however, Tolkien best illustrates all of these political beliefs, which are seminal to the anti-modernity of his thought (cf. Curry 1998: 20-26), by means of Classical exempla. The triumph of anarchic individuals against a powerful, homogenising foe is represented through the “quarrelsome, conceited Greeks [who] managed to pull it off against Xerxes” (Letters no. 52, p. 63). Tolkien employs quarrelsome as a distinct compliment to the Greeks; the word reflects a certain anarchic tension (or diversity, in the sense of free-acting individuals) within a resisting group in response to the complete centralisation of power in the enemy. The Greeks were quarrelsome, in fact, because they were not really Greeks in the modern national sense at that time (480 BC) but

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a collection of various young city-states (*poleis*) fighting against the singular might of Xerxes’ Persian Empire.

The Greeks’ lack of planning and their quarrels among themselves meant that Athens had not been assisted by Sparta in the Battle of Marathon, against Darius in the previous Persian king’s invasion (490 BC), nor had the Spartans been able to count on much allied Hellenic help from beyond the Peloponnese at the Battle of Thermopylae against Xerxes (480 BC). Yet despite the squabbling, these city-states subdued and warded off a great singular power from the east because, back then in Classical times, the world still functioned in its “inefficient human way” (*Letters* no. 52, p. 63), and squabbling individuals (Hobbits or Hellenes) could defeat a greater power. In the current world, Tolkien writes, we have placed too much power into “Xerxes’ hands” (*Letters* no. 52, p. 63), which is a result of the instruments which industrialisation and technologisation have bestowed upon the ‘Xerxeses’ of the modern world. For Tolkien, in short, the early Greeks represented an anarchic, diverse, inefficient, and quarrelsome form of human virtue which can resist power without succumbing to it.

This topic then leads Tolkien onto another narrative trope of the Classical world, the story of the declining empire, and he homes in on Alexander the Great to reflect further on the Greeks and the effects of power. Tolkien writes that “we [i.e. moderns] are all trying to do the Alexander-touch” (*Letters* no. 52, pp. 63-64). The reference is a little oblique in the exact context of the epistle, but Tolkien seems to be simply expressing the sense that we are trying to become too powerful, too expansive – as reflected both in our usage of technology and in our centralisation and consolidation of universal, homogeneous power (the two are related for Tolkien) – such that we, like Alexander, might delude ourselves into thinking we are god-like: “the poor boob […] fancied he was the son of Dionysus” (*Letters* no. 52, p. 64). The result in the Hellenic world, as Tolkien reflects was twofold: on an individual level, death by alcoholism for Alexander; on a cultural level, the decline of Greece in the Hellenistic, post-Alexander period, becoming a token, nostalgic, lesser version of its earlier self. There, therefore, seems to be a designed contrast between the noble, anarchic early Greeks who resisted Xerxes and the later, decadent Greeks who regarded themselves as a “Fighting Hellas (which did not
fight)" (Letters no. 52, p. 64). Finally, Tolkien ends the analogy on a sombre note, reasserting that one cannot run away from the growing consolidation of power in the modern world, unlike the ancient.

In Letters no. 77, written to Christopher Tolkien on 28 July 1944, not long after D-Day, Tolkien again interlaces a number of different political sentiments into quite a short epistle. Amidst the fervent collective excitement at the prospect of an Allied victory during this period, Tolkien provides a more subdued sentiment reflecting how the real losers in the war will be the “ordinary people” (Letters no. 77, p. 89), regardless of whatever side they are on; in contrast, the “Big Folk” (Letters no. 77, p. 89) are childless and run the war from their luxury cars. Tolkien, somewhat prophetically, then drifts onto another thought as to the ultimate effect of the war in the cultural-political turn towards globalisation. This is realised culturally through popular dance forms such as “jiving” (Letters no. 77, p. 89); however, the effects of globalisation are also indicated politically through the suppression of smaller neutral states between the growing superpowers. The growing political tension between America and Russia is not made explicitly in the epistle, but the contrast is made in cultural terms between the two, and it seems implied. Tolkien’s rendering of the political landscape makes again use of a Classical form:

However, it’s always been going on in different terms, and you and I belong to the ever-defeated never altogether subdued side. I should have hated the Roman Empire in its day (as I do), and remained a patriotic Roman citizen, while preferring a free Gaul and seeing good in Carthaginians. *Delenda est Carthago* ['Carthage must be destroyed']. We hear a lot of that nowadays. I was actually taught at school that that was a fine saying. I ‘reacted’ (as they say, in this case with less than the usual misapplication) at once. (Letters no. 77, p. 89)

Tolkien employs the Classical analogy to reinforce a number of his political *sententiae*. Firstly, Tolkien’s earlier contrast between the ordinary person, who loses out during wars, and the Big Folk, who conduct the affairs of state, is matched by his imagined reference to his being a patriotic Roman citizen (the ordinary person) while simultaneously detesting the Roman Empire (the state). The strange dichotomy of this sentiment also captures well Tolkien’s own brand of nationalism, where he shows belief in the shared cultural and

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45 A once popular view which is no longer so strongly held by ancient historians, cf. Shipley 2000.
linguistic identities which these imagined communities bestow while detesting the elements of state control and ordering which have accompanied these movements. Thus, for Tolkien patriotism does not relate, at all, to imperialist nationalism (hence, the Roman empire), but he imagines himself as integrating into a Roman cultural, linguistic, and historical identity, and, thus, becoming a ‘patriot’. The fact that Tolkien would hate the Roman Empire while seeing the best in Carthage (Rome's historical greatest enemy, defeated in the Punic Wars) demonstrates, again, his suspicion that wars do not achieve victories over enemies (whether Germans or Carthaginians) so much as over the common people on all sides.

Secondly, regarding the effects of globalisation on human culture and political structures, the contest between the superpowers in the modern world has, according to Tolkien, put certain neutral, smaller states between “the devil and the deep sea” (Letters no. 77, p. 89). Analogously, in his classical exemplum, the two superpowers of Rome and Carthage seem to engender the enslavement of a third smaller community, Gaul; Tolkien, accordingly, endorses his small-scale, federalist political proclivities when he imagines himself “preferring a free Gaul” (Letters no. 77, p. 89).

Thirdly, Tolkien draws on Cato’s famous dictum ‘Carthage must be destroyed’ as an ancient form of propaganda, which is heard on all sides in the current world, whether English, German, or Russian. Tolkien’s own claim that he would have seen “good in Carthaginians” is a reflection of moderate views amidst polarised political sentiments. Such polarised political sentiments towards Germans were of course apparent in wartime England, as Tolkien mentions (Letters no. 81, pp. 92-94, 23-25 September 1944); this type of thought, Tolkien further submits, will be more relevant in a post-war, globalised world, where there are “mass-produced notions and emotions”. Hence, Tolkien asks whether “ordinary people [will] have any freedoms left (or right)” (Letters no. 77, p. 89).

(v) Recreational Reading. Finally, in this discussion of Tolkien ‘thinking Classics’, Tolkien’s engagement with the Classical world can also be measured through his recreational taste in reading matter. While Tolkien is well known to not have been a voracious or enthusiastic reader of many contemporary works of
fiction (cf. Letters no. 294, p. 377, 8 February 1967), from the evidence of one epistle it is clear that he very much valued the historical fiction of the English and South-African novelist Mary Renault: “I was recently deeply engaged in the books of Mary Renault; especially, the two about Theseus, The King Must Die, and The Bull from the Sea. A few days ago I actually received a card of appreciation from her; perhaps the piece of ‘Fan-mail’ that gives me most pleasure” (Letters no. 294, p. 377).

This is certainly high praise from one novelist to another – the more so considering that Tolkien cannot be regarded as a critic who handed out encomia liberally; indeed, he was far less warm about some of the literary efforts of quite close friends such as C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and W.H. Auden. Furthermore, the fact that Tolkien wrote this letter in 1967, at the age of seventy-five, shows that the pull of Classical mythology, albeit through a ‘secondary’ or ‘modernised’ work of Classical reception or historical fiction, had not waned since his early youth.

A comparative study between Renault’s Bronze Age historicisation and creative refashioning of the Theseus myth in The King Must Die and The Bull from the Sea and Tolkien’s own literary subcreations across his oeuvre might illuminate many common story elements and themes between these two writers who were intent upon recreating lost historical and mythic pasts. It is possible that Tolkien’s reading of Renault’s historical fiction in the late sixties could have entailed a reimagination of many of the important aspects of his own mythic creation through a Classical lens. For example, from a mythic perspective, Tolkien may have perceived a similar reconstruction of his version of the Atlantis myth in Renault’s characterisation of the history, geography, and culture of the Cretans in The King Must Die [1958].

Renault’s Cretans are the dominant colonial naval empire of the story world. Their imperial centre is a sea-girt island in the middle of the Mediterranean, and they exact tribute from weaker Greek tribes in the mainland, such as the people of Theseus in Troizen (in the east of the Peloponnese), who are deemed more primitive and less cultured than the Cretans. So too, Tolkien’s seafaring Númenóreans, identified as the chief imperial power of the Second Age, live on an island situated between Middle-earth and Valinor, and they
hold sway over the people of the mainland, on the western shores of Middleearth, from whom they exact tribute (at least during the latter stages of Númenorean history).

Renault’s Cretans are represented as a people in a sort of late imperial moral decline; they are decadent, long-haired, profligate, vain, bored, and sexually depraved. A similar decline into earthly pleasures, petty materialism, and idleness can be tracked in Tolkien’s islanders. Importantly, as with Tolkien’s Númenoreans who, under Sauron’s sway, begin to worship Melkor and who disobey the navigational injunctions of the gods in their desire for immortality, the greatest token of Cretan degeneration in Renault’s The King Must Die is their disrespect for sacred tradition: Ariadne, their goddess incarnate, fakes divinely inspired oracles; the Cretan ladies have created sacrificial dolls to take the place of the real sacrifices which were demanded in their ancient earth-Mother religion; and Asterion, the adopted son of King Minos and a symbol of the mythic Minotaur, commits an act of blasphemy against Poseidon by drugging the sacred bull. The result of the blasphemy of this decaying society is, as in the case of Númenor, natural catastrophe: an earthquake shakes Minos’ palace to the ground and sends Crete into social-political chaos.

Conclusion

Tolkien’s philological and literary interests were not inflexible loves. In a study of his life, one of the constants is his restlessness and boredom with the homogeneity of defined topics and intellectual realms; perhaps in modern academia this would have rendered him quite unsuccessful, where overspecialisation has become the norm. The sphere of Classics certainly oscillated between various passions within the man: from an early phonaesthetic love of Latin and Greek to a boredom with Classical education in his war years and early professional life to a return to Classics-based novels as favoured leisure reading late in life. The strings of a strong Classical education thus tightened and slackened at various stages in the course of Tolkien’s life.

Nevertheless, when the Classics did have a pull on the man, I have suggested in this paper that they informed his thoughts in several respects: for example,
being useful for making sense of the political scenery of his life and as markers of comparison for his own creative endeavours. As the current volume attests, the interest in the Classical provenance of Tolkien's works is on the rise and will, in all likelihood, continue to rise for some time so long as Classical philology, literature, history, and philosophy can provide new pastures of meaning to be discovered in the writings of J.R.R. Tolkien.

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List of Abbreviations

BLT2: see Tolkien 1984
Letters: see Tolkien 2006a
MC: see Tolkien 2006b
TOFS: see Tolkien 2001
WR: see Tolkien 2000

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46 The examination board report consists of two separate reports, each of which is titled identically. The first report (called ‘Report Part 1’ in this essay) summarises in four pages the overall performance of the King Edward’s pupils; the second report, of seventeen pages in length (called ‘Report Part 2’ in this essay), provides individual comments from examiners about the performance of specific pupils as well as more detailed, subject-specific feedback. My thanks to John Garth, Alison Wheatley, and the King Edward’s School Foundation for allowing me to access this important information.


