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**Matthew Dickerson. *Following Gandalf. Epic Battles and Moral Victory in The Lord of the Rings*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press. 2003. Pp. 234. \$14.99 (Paper).**

[1] Dickerson has written a perspicacious book with a convincing argument for the thesis that J. R. R. Tolkien's works set in Middle Earth were built up of Germanic myth, philological play, and other substance upon an armature of Christian values. He summons to the task of argument not only the primary texts of Tolkien's great works (*The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit* and *The Silmarillion*) but also key excerpts from Tolkien's letters and, here and there, passages from the voluminous and often fragmentary or unfinished "noncanonical" works collected and published posthumously by Tolkien's son.

[2] *The Lord of the Rings* rightly receives central attention because it is by far the best known and most admired of Tolkien's works, particularly now in the midst of the two-year release cycle of Peter Jackson's cinematic version. Dickerson clearly shows that central Christian tenets permeate Tolkien's writings, such as: the possibility of moral victory despite physical defeat; the importance of hope, personal responsibility, and free will; and the "hand of the Authority" in history (in Tolkien, the presence, explicitly or implicitly, of Ilúvatar's - i.e., the supreme being's - hand in Middle-Earth history). Dickerson's argumentation depends upon his close, sensitive reading of the texts and reveals that he knows Tolkien's texts thoroughly and has a substantial knowledge of the philological and mythological background of the Middle Earth stories.

[3] The work is structurally simple. In the first chapter, Dickerson combats an argument that Tolkien glorified war, characterizing this as a common misconception among readers of the Trilogy who only see the presence of conflict but do not fully consider the attitudes of the characters involved in those conflicts and other subtle but important data. (Clearly he needs to get this out of the way before he can start his main thesis.) The central portion of the book is an examination of the text of the Trilogy (and *The Hobbit* and *The Silmarillion*), featuring passages illustrating the presence of the Christian tenets partially listed above in Tolkien's thought. The game is made more interesting because Tolkien himself asserted that he systematically stripped the Trilogy of explicitly Christian elements, forbearing to include

"religion" even in an adapted Middle-Earth guise. Dickerson finds decisive support in a passage from Tolkien's correspondence (217-18): "*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so, at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like "religion," to cults and practices in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism." One reason Tolkien did this was to thwart those unimaginative souls who would have gone through his work mechanically pursuing the allegorical meaning - he had an instinctive bias against allegory (218). But in addition, Dickerson is probably right (218) when he suggests that Tolkien sought to make his work appealing to as ecumenical an audience as possible by not loading it up with heavy-handed Christian symbolism or plot lines. The central chapters of the book, therefore, which are most dependent upon the slender evidence from the Trilogy, are of necessity closely and carefully reasoned.

[4] Those familiar with Tolkien's work will probably want to know how Dickerson explains the co-existence of a Christian core in a mythos clothed in the old pagan Germanic elements to which Tolkien was obviously devoted. The answer is that Dickerson circumspectly limits his claims. He is quick to admit (28-33) the very clear dependence of passages in the Trilogy on *Beowulf*, the obvious love of philology in itself that drove Tolkien to create his works in the first place, and Tolkien's desire otherwise to create a good story that would by turns divert and move readers. Christianity may well lie at the roots of Middle Earth and profoundly influence the story, but Tolkien was too good an intellectual to bonk the reader over the head with what he, at least, thought was already obvious in his work. Though I am willing to alter my own view of Tolkien on the basis of Dickerson's arguments, there is still plenty of intellectual room for different views of the balance between Christian and nonchristian elements. For example, I still see Tolkien's views as being filtered through an aesthetic lens which owes much to the Pre-Raphaelites and William Morris. Through this lens Tolkien focuses with distaste upon progress and technology; with love upon the simple craftsman's life on the land (as exemplified, perhaps, by the better sort of Hobbit and thrown into relief by what Saruman has done to ruin the Shire at the Trilogy's end), and with absolute regret upon the loss of anything venerable or traditional. Jackson's *The Two Towers* makes the technological connection quite clear when it focuses on Isengard, taking Tolkien's evident revulsion to the destruction of the Entwood to extremes, splashing the screen with cinematically lurid sap and splinters in a gratifying show of political correctness.

[5] However much the central values expressed by Tolkien's characters and narrative voice map onto Christian ones, that in itself does not mean that they must be Christian or inspired by Christianity: Tolkien might have mined other moral systems for these positive values. In the final chapters, therefore, Dickerson takes the gloves off and reveals several smoking guns among Tolkien's letters, essays, and noncanonical works revealing that what is suggested by a close reading of the Trilogy was in fact quite consciously intended by Tolkien, thus eliminating doubts about the paternity of the values in question. With one caveat to be registered below, the evidence is solid and convincing: in addition to the letter already quoted in part above (218), there is Tolkien's specific statement (219) that what was really significant to know about himself in order to understand his works better was that "I am a Christian (which can be deduced from my stories), and in fact a Roman Catholic," and again,

a passage from the "noncanonical" *Athrabeth Finrod Ab Andreth* which is too long to quote here (224). In that passage, the prominent elf Finrod expresses a thinly-veiled messianic expectation that Eru (=Ilúvatar) will enter into the world to heal the hurt caused by Morgoth, the chief fallen entity in Tolkien's mythos. Dickerson cites other evidence as well, but these three pieces are characteristic and seem to me hard to refute. Though the *Athrabeth* is noncanonical, Dickerson argues reasonably that it was in fact in a finished state at Tolkien's death and therefore probably reflects the author's mature mythos of Middle Earth.

[6] The biggest problem I see with Dickerson's handling of the evidence is that he pulls out statements from Tolkien's correspondence as though they were trump cards. I am a Classicist and admittedly do not have the specialized knowledge of a Tolkien scholar; but still, I am unwilling to take anything in a letter at face value before I know who the respondent was (I mean more than just a name), what the current state of the epistolary conversation with the respondent was, and some amount of historical context surrounding the letter(s) in question. Dickerson gives references to the published correspondence, but his introduction to quotations can be too perfunctory (217: "to understand this, we should begin with Tolkien's own words, once again taken from a letter written in 1953"). The trouble is that it is not hard to imagine scenarios in which a correspondent might choose to dissemble, and some argument, however brief, that Tolkien's letters in question are to be taken at face value seems necessary in Dickerson's treatment.

[7] Dickerson disappointed me seriously in one area other area. Having written a fine piece of literary criticism, he regrettably shakes the reader's faith in his judgment by prominently but needlessly importing some dire deterministic/mechanistic/behaviorist statements of Bertrand Russell, B.F. Skinner, and one or two lesser intellectuals into the book to act as a foil for Tolkien's humanist views, especially of free will (e.g., 14-16, 83-84, 117-18). Even if the passages he quotes are fair representations of those men's thought, no one who is scientifically literate believes in determinism or a mechanistic cosmos or Skinner's extreme form of behaviorism anymore. The last comfort to determinists is the "correspondence principle" of quantum mechanics, a generalization from the mathematical descriptions stating that when you look at gross things (roughly, at a scale apprehensible to human beings) their behavior closely approximates what Newtonian mechanics predicts. But this is small comfort: if one thing is clear, it is that there are irreducible uncertainties built into nature. Your computer would not work if Russell were correct! And we might add that a description of the brain (and its putative product, free will), or almost any complex system is far beyond anything but a pretty rough computerized approximation at present. In a hundred or a thousand years we may have the technology to tell if the brain acts mechanistically (that is, predictably given certain initial conditions and sufficient knowledge of the brain in question). I'm willing to wait and see.

[8] And so one must wonder why Dickerson has even trotted Russell and the others out, especially since their views are not representative of current thought and thus do not serve as a suitable foil. Perhaps Dickerson intends his work to be a history of ideas, in this case examining conflicting views of mid-twentieth century thinkers. But if so, Russell and the others need far more space and fairer representation, and some evidence of an actual dialogue between Tolkien and the others would also be helpful. But if I understand Dickerson, Tolkien wrote for his own pleasure and affirmed a view of the world he

preferred - he did not write a polemic. Moreover, Dickerson has in fact written literary criticism, not a contribution to the history of ideas, as the library of Congress cataloging information inside the front cover (4) recognizes in its description of the book as "history and criticism" of English epic and fantasy fiction. I think Dickerson wants somehow to use Tolkien as an accessible moral authority to combat a subset of current views of the world which are not easily reconcilable with strict Christian (or Catholic) thought, but in that case it is wrong to reduce Russell and Skinner to the status of straw men by highlighting extreme forms of outdated portions of their ideas. But it's not just dry history: Dickerson wants to argue Tolkien's relevance *now*, and he sets his sights as firmly on postmodernism as on Russell's and Skinner's modernism (14: ". . . Tolkien's basic philosophical beliefs were also in contradiction to the prevailing materialist presuppositions of modernism as well as the relativism of postmodernism . . ."). Postmodernism may indeed be on the wane now, but it was only in its infancy at Tolkien's death in 1973, and it is unlikely that Tolkien had any cognizance or interest in it.

[9] I therefore think that the unfortunate underlying theme of Dickerson's book is that Tolkien's works may offer a sort of escapism or affirming comfort in the face of unpleasant ideas. But surely they can be no more: whatever the current scientific (or cultural) worldview, however wrongheaded we may think it is, surely opposing Tolkien to it or its spokesmen serves no purpose, for Tolkien's works are *fiction*, and an author of fiction can eat his cake and have it. In Tolkien's universe, free will (and all those Christian values Dickerson has found) can be valid but Tolkien's work does nothing either to confirm Christian values (which must stand or fall on their own merits here in the real universe) or to deny a deterministic cosmos (regardless of the current status of determinism). I might as easily adduce the seminal "Lensman" space operas of E. E. "Doc" Smith in support of a deterministic universe. Smith's Mentor of Arisia is as impressive as Ilúvatar and expresses his power in history mostly through lesser proxies who combat the evil that has entered the world through the Eddorians. He (and the Arisians) are good because they have arrived at the realization that good is the better way through pure rationality, and his intellect is so sufficiently developed above ours that he contemplates a "vision of the Cosmic All": he and his people seek enough information about the universe to constitute an initial condition from which all future and past states can be calculated. I have no expectation that anyone is going to buy into materialistic determinism on the strength of Doc Smith's ideas today, but the point, I trust, is not lost: in Doc Smith's universe, as in Tolkien's, things function the way the author wants them to, and these works have no power to support or attack views of our "real" universe, which includes both Christianity and materialism. Tolkien was wise enough and confident enough to know that his fundamentally Christian ideas were there in *The Lord of the Rings* for those with the wit and interest to find them. Dickerson might have taken a page from Tolkien and realized that what he has beautifully and effectively done within the limits of a work of literary criticism has only been marred by making it as obvious as an Ent lumbering through the wood.

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