

2017

Review of High Towers and Strong Places: A Political History of Middle- earth

Dominic J. Nardi
University of Michigan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cslewisjournal>



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Nardi, Dominic J. (2017) "Review of High Towers and Strong Places: A Political History of Middle- earth," *Sehnsucht: The C. S. Lewis Journal*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 16.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55221/1940-5537.1392>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cslewisjournal/vol11/iss1/16>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Sehnsucht: The C. S. Lewis Journal* by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

Timothy R. Furnish, *High Towers and Strong Places: A Political History of Middle-earth* (Toronto: Oloris Publishing, 2016). 166 pages. \$35.00. ISBN 9781940992518.

It seems that in every election season, politicians and pundits search J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* for political insights and insults. Yet, these political bromides often betray a superficial understanding of Tolkien's story. Part of the problem is that scholars have dedicated surprisingly little attention to the depiction of politics in Tolkien's legendarium. In *High Towers and Strong Places*, Timothy R. Furnish offers at least a partial remedy. It is one of very few academic books to focus exclusively on the politics in Middle-earth. Furnish divides his monograph into three sections: a comprehensive overview of rulers and realms in Tolkien's works, attempts to fit these realms into a typology of political regimes, and the cultural and economic aspects of warfare in Middle-earth. The book explores *The Silmarillion* and *The Hobbit* as well as *The Lord of the Rings*.

In Furnish's text, Middle-earth is approached the same way as a historian might study Ancient Greece or the Italian Renaissance. He treats "this Secondary World . . . as one amenable to Primary World military historical analysis" (chap. 1) while largely overlooking any questions of "realism." One benefit of this approach is that it allows Furnish to use his understanding of real-world history to explain political phenomena in Middle-earth. This is especially useful as a means of filling in the gaps because Tolkien himself spent relatively little time in his books describing political institutions or military strategy.

On the other hand, Middle-earth is not Greece or France, and the analytical tools a modern historian uses do not always fit Middle-earth. Furnish spends the second section of *High Towers and Strong Places* sorting the realms of Middle-earth into different regime types such as totalitarian, monarchical, and primitive-democratic (chap. 3). This typology risks imposing a modern preoccupation with democracy onto Tolkien's subcreation, along with the norms and values modern scholars ascribe to democracy. For example, Furnish compares the Thain of the Shire to the "Speaker of the Shire 'parliament'" (chap. 3), even though the Shire has no institution resembling a parliament, or even a modern legislature. Likewise, he describes Mordor as "anti-democratic, anti-rule of law" (chap. 3), even though none of the realms of Middle-earth adheres to modern notions of democracy or the rule of law.

Furnish attempts to reconcile a tension between modern political values, which view liberal democracy as the ideal form of government, and the absence of those values in Tolkien's works. Indeed, Furnish claims that Tolkien viewed democracy askance, quoting a letter in which Tolkien seems to equate democracy with "mob-rule" (chap. 3). Using regime types as the primary frame of analysis for understanding politics in Middle-earth only exacerbates this tension, leading Furnish—as well as other scholars—to struggle with distinguishing between the highly centralized, undemocratic regimes of Mordor and Rivendell.

A more productive approach would have been to focus on the institutionalization of politics in Middle-earth. The realms of Middle-earth differ significantly in the extent to which they establish and maintain political relationships between rulers and subjects.⁴ Mordor creates many levels of bureaucracy between Sauron and his Orcs, whereas the Shire allows ordinary citizens to participate in governance and even hold elective office. Rohan has a relatively decentralized structure in which the king must rely upon vassals for military support, whereas Gondor has a more centralized chain of command.

This focus on institutionalization also helps us better understand Tolkien's own political views. Contrary to what Furnish claims, Tolkien did not disapprove of democracy per se, but rather opposed certain types of democracy.⁵ In a 1956 letter, Tolkien explained, "I am not a 'democrat' only because 'humility' and equality are spiritual principles corrupted by the attempt to mechanize and formalize them."⁶ In other words, he worried that the formal establishment of political relationships inevitably corrupts them (recall that postwar England was undergoing an enormous expansion in the role and size of the bureaucratic state).

The final section of *High Towers and Strong Places* is undoubtedly

⁴ Dominic J. Nardi, Jr., "Political Institutions in J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth: or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying About the Lack of Democracy," *Mythlore* 33.1 (Fall/Winter 2014), 101-23.

⁵ To be fair, many other scholars make this mistake. See William Blackburn, "'Dangerous as a Guide to Deeds': Politics in the Fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien" *Mythlore* 15.1 (1988), 62-66.

⁶ J.R.R. Tolkien, "Letter 186: From a Letter to Joanna de Bortadano (drafts) [Not dated; April 1956]," *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. by Christopher Tolkien and Humphrey Carpenter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 246-47.

the strongest as it focuses on warfare in Middle-earth, taking advantage of Furnish's expertise in the field (Furnish previously worked for the U.S. Armed Forces and his research focuses on counterterrorism). Furnish carefully examines how differences between Middle-earth and the real world would affect military strategy. For example, he argues that Elven immortality should make Elves more likely to rely on individual "heroes" in battle rather than on mass formations (chap. 4). With a lifespan of millennia, older Elven warriors possess considerable fighting skills, and yet remain as physically fit as their younger counterparts. By contrast, humans have to rely upon close-order drills and battle formations to prepare younger, inexperienced men to engage in combat. This is a plausible explanation for why Tolkien focuses on the heroics of individual Elves when writing about battles in *The Silmarillion* rather than on tactics or armies.

One final issue with *High Towers and Strong Places* is that it does not engage with much of the existing literature on politics in Middle-earth. Furnish provides an extensive bibliography, but there are some notable absences, such as Patrick Curry's *Defending Middle-Earth: Tolkien: Myth and Modernity*, which has a whole chapter dedicated to unraveling the relationship between Tolkien's political views and his fiction.⁷

Overall, *High Towers and Strong Places* is a welcome, if occasionally uneven, entry into the small but growing literature on politics in Tolkien's legendarium. Its summary of political history in Middle-earth provides a useful starting point for future research, even if the book does not completely succeed in its typology of Middle-earth politics. The section on warfare is recommended to any readers interested in military history in fantasy settings.

DOMINIC J. NARDI, JR.
University of Michigan

⁷ Patrick Curry, *Defending Middle-Earth: Tolkien: Myth and Modernity* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004).