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Wagner and Tolkien: Mythmakers

Renée Vink

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"Both Rings were round and there the resemblance ceases", wrote J.R.R. Tolkien about the rings in his epic The Lord of the Rings and Richard Wagner's opera cycle The Ring of the Nibelung. Or did he? The answer is not as straightforward as many Tolkien fans believe, whether they agree with the statement or consider it misguided. Nor is the statement itself as transparently defensive as some Wagner buffs suggest. Much has been said and written about Wagner and Tolkien, a subject that tends to generate a certain amount of heat, mostly due to the former's controversial status as Hitler's favourite composer. But until now the various, often contradictory opinions and the facts and perceptions on which they are based were rarely discussed at length or analysed in depth. The publication in 2009 of Tolkien's The Legend and Sigurd and Gudrún with its partly Wagnerian content reinforced the need for a systematic treatment of the subject. This book offers one. There is more to both Rings than their common roundness, and the resemblance between Tolkien and Wagner goes beyond a Ring of Power and some narrative elements: they shared a number of preoccupations and interests - nature, nation, the North, death and immortality, language and above all, myth. This is a book about the two great mythmakers of their times, and about what they have in common despite everything that separates them.

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