

“The Rings of Power” Is True to Tolkien’s Mythmaking Spirit

The Amazon prequel to “The Lord of the Rings” keeps to the author’s romantic ideas about history.

By Jo Livingstone



In “The Rings of Power,” Morfydd Clark plays a young Galadriel, who’s on a quest to understand and root out the forces of darkness. Photograph by Matt Grace /

Courtesy Prime Video

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“The Rings of Power,” the new and outrageously expensive prequel to J. R. R. Tolkien’s “The Lord of the Rings” saga, opens slowly.

Amazon, perhaps the only corporation on earth that can throw this kind of money around with ease, committed to spending a billion dollars on the series, across five seasons, without any of the new plotting established in advance. The first three episodes dwell on texture and on story setup, delineating a world that is close—but not quite familiar—to the half-dozen films directed by Peter Jackson. As in the movies, they have slow-motion scenes of horses galloping in high resolution along beaches, sunlight glinting off idyllic fields, creatures with nasty teeth, and plenty of quality sword fights.

The show is set in Arda, the world Tolkien invented, during its Second Age, several thousand years before the action of “The Lord of the Rings.” But Tolkien’s elves live for millennia, and he fitted Arda out with a nine-thousand-year history, so familiar characters (the elves Galadriel and Elrond) and places (Middle-earth, the dwarves’ mountain capital of Khazad-dûm) abound. Galadriel, who was played by Cate Blanchett in the movies, is brought to younger life by Morfydd Clark with the same ferocity that Clark delivered in her breakout role as a demented nurse in the startling horror movie “Saint Maud.” She is, thus far, the ambivalent hero of the series. It’s an interesting choice; similar to Jackson’s movies, the show imagines Tolkien’s elves as emotionally intense and mannered in their movements, which leads to some stiff staging, as when a group of elves travel by boat together, standing motionless in perfect formation, like pieces on a chess board.