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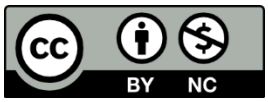

Hamish Williams. *J.R.R. Tolkien's Utopianism and the Classics*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. [ISBN: 9781350241459]

Reviewed by Beren-Dain Delbrooke-Jones

The explosion of popular interest in the work of J.R.R. Tolkien over the last two decades has not only made the late author and scholar's work a cultural and commercial phenomenon; it has inspired an ever-rising wave of academic interest and scholarship. While many of these studies have initially been responses to the now seminal work of Tom Shippey – *The Road to Middle-Earth* (1992) – and, as such, were primarily concerned with Tolkien's use of Germanic and Anglo-Saxon source material, classicists have been at increasing pains to show how Tolkien's work was no less influenced by Graeco-Roman antiquity, whether directly through his interaction with ancient texts, or indirectly, through his reception of the classical tradition.

J.R.R. Tolkien's Utopianism and the Classics, by Hamish Williams, published by Bloomsbury Academic, belongs to this scholarly trajectory, and indeed this monograph represents the culmination of Williams' own engagement in the field of Tolkien studies to some extent.[1] In it, Williams proposes a new and valuable lens through which we might understand Tolkien's engagement with antiquity: utopianism.

In the Introduction, Williams offers the following 'working definition' for utopianism: 'A form of thinking which defamiliarizes physical space for the sake of exploring and evaluating an ideal.'[2] From this starting point, he goes on to suggest that the "aesthetic tension" central to Tolkien's work, between that which is familiar and that which is strange, revolves precisely around the interaction of utopianism and classicism, and gives rise to 'a kind of retrotopianism, a rediscovery and rewriting of an older continent'.[3] Through this fusion of utopian and classical concepts, Tolkien is 'receiving and rewriting…*broader classical narratives* [author's italics], which develop around and explore certain common *topoi*.'[4] The stated aim of the monograph is to examine

[1] A full list of Williams' papers and edited volumes is provided in the "Acknowledgements" section., vi-vii.
[2] Williams 2023: 2.
[3] Williams 2023: 8. Cf. Shippey 2014: xvii-xviii.
[4] Williams 2023: 14.

‘Tolkien’s reception of such narrative constructs of space [*topoi*] and the exploration of ideals and ethics they imply,’[5] and it achieves this aim to an admirable extent. Each of the monograph’s three chapters provides an in-depth analysis of Tolkien’s work in response to a particular classical narrative – or narrative tradition – and the utopian issues they raise. As a result, the reader is offered three distinct, but interlinked arguments that together form a compelling case for revaluating Tolkien’s relationship both with utopianism and with classicism more generally.

In Chapter 1, ‘Lapsarian Narratives: The Decline and Fall of Utopian Communities in Middle-earth,’ Williams shows how concepts such as ‘The Fall,’ lost paradises, and the hope of restoration are prevalent in Tolkien’s writing.[6] Yet, Tolkien’s ‘Christian framing of history’ allows the author to engage with and, to some extent, rewrite literary modes – tragedy, fairy story and elegy, in particular – and lapsarian narratives as ‘a means of reflection on utopian communities.’[7] Williams shows how Tolkien’s created communities engage with the traditional spaces of utopian writing as well as their ideological underpinnings. Two case studies receive special attention in the chapter: ‘Númenor-Atlantis’ is examined as an ‘archetypal fall’ narrative,[8] emphasizing the paradisical nature of both island kingdoms, as well as their inevitable destructions as a function of the way they adhere to, then fall short of, Platonic ideals. ‘The fall and Augustan restoration of Roman Gondor,’[9] which shows how Tolkien utilised Rome’s historical vicissitudes as a model for his created kingdom of Gondor, with (his) Aragorn and (the historical) Augustus both ushering in ‘golden ages’ of physical and ideological renewal to their respective realms.[10]

Williams handles both case studies skilfully, drawing on a wide range of sources to establish the appropriateness of the classical analogies in Tolkien’s creations, before exploring the conceptual significance of their various correspondences. Williams’ explanation for Tolkien’s “re-chronicling” of various historical-legendary events – the escapes of Trojans and Numenoreans to establish new realms over the sea, or the Huns’ reconfiguration, as the Riders of Rohan, in saving a beleaguered city – are

[5] Williams 2023: 15.
[6] Williams 2023: 17
[7] Williams 2023: 20-1.
[8] Williams 2023: 27.
[9] Williams 2023: 39.
[10] Williams 2023: 48.

satisfying examples. Equally compelling is the explication of Gondor's aesthetic, cultural and geopolitical resemblances to a range of ancient cities and civilisations, such as Egypt, Troy, Thebes and Constantinople.

Yet, as satisfying and convincing as these may be, they do highlight a central difficulty in any attempt to unpick Tolkien's influences. Williams himself argues against seeing direct historical correspondences in Tolkien's work, an approach that Tolkien himself disapproved of in his own studies and with regards to his creative output.[11] Yet, by having to focus so steadily on resemblances and resonances, this is precisely what Williams' study appears to do; indeed, what it perhaps must do. To his credit, however, Williams remains conscious of the difficulty throughout the book and seems to offer some way out of the bind by appealing not to the detail alone, where the issues of allegorical readings might be found, but to the patterns – Tolkien-approved 'applicability'[12] – that these details demonstrate, such as 'the overarching narrative …[of]… interminable decline.'[13]

Indeed, the resemblances between the two pairs of examples – Númenor-Atlantis and 'Roman Gondor' – are shown never to be merely superficial but revolve around this idea of applicability. Williams convincingly demonstrates how Tolkien's reimagining of the classical narratives are 'utopian thought exercises,' nuanced both in their understanding of the past as well as in their 'utopian visions for the present and future.'[14] What emerges, Williams argues, is a 'panoply of different concerns at play in Tolkien's writings'[15] that show Tolkien as an author not merely constructing a fantasy world, but engaging profoundly with the concerns of his own life and times.

Chapter 2, 'Hospitality narratives: The Ideal of the Home in an Odyssean *Hobbit*,' explores utopian concepts in 'more mundane, low-key terms.'[16] The centrality of the 'home' as a utopian space or *topos* in Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, and the attendant concern with hospitality and guest-host relationships, is put forward persuasively. Williams

[11] See Carpenter (ed.) (1981) *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien,* no. 297. *Letters* will be used for short in proceeding references.
[12] *Letters*, no. 203 (especially) and no. 215, for Tolkien's comments on allegory and applicability.
[13] Williams 2023: 39.
[14] Williams 2023: 48.
[15] Williams 2023: 58.
[16] Williams 2023: 59.

proposes an ethical narratological function of space[17] in which questions such as, 'What makes a good home?' and 'What makes a good host?' are at the heart of *The Hobbit* and can be explored and understood through interactions between guests and hosts in classical narratives. To achieve this, he employs a folklore-comparativist approach to indicate the way *The Hobbit* responds to the 'seminal, paradigmatic hospitality narrative in Western literature, the Homeric *Odyssey*.'[18] Odyssean examples of (in)hospitability – Calypso, the Cyclops, Aeolus, Circe, the Phaeacians etc. – are set alongside Bilbo and Gandalf's first meeting, the encounter with the trolls, the goblins, Beorn, the Lake-towners and Rivendell. Each of these constitutes a space, a *topos*, in which homes and hospitality can be explored.

The result is that concepts at the heart of the classical narrative, *xenia* (guest-host friendship) and *themis* (divine law),[19] are shown to be equally important to how one might interpret the values embedded in Tolkien's fairy tale narrative. The utopian vision of the home becomes the basis for understanding the interactions between the guest and the host. Williams shows how the threat of being eaten, or of interminable delay, and the degree to which such a threat is allayed, determines how fully that utopian vision is fulfilled. Williams' demonstration of 'divine' power as a means of vouchsafing correct observances of hospitality in both *The Odyssey* and *The Hobbit* is especially satisfying.

Likewise, the conclusion to the chapter, 'Xenophillic writing,' proposes an intriguing ideological understanding of Tolkien's conception of home and ideal hospitality. Here, Williams moves away from classical texts *per se*, but rather draws on other literary receptions of classical 'paradigms,'[20] as well as theoretical works on hospitality.[21] Williams observes that Tolkien's writing expresses not just xenophilia and an extolling of the virtue of hospitality and reciprocity, but a particular manifestation of these that emphasises individual freedom, religious devotion and 'ethical allegiance to the universal good.'[22] Hospitality and the way that it is enacted becomes, in Tolkien's writings, a way of expressing an 'anti-modern desire for autonomy over a home space'

[17] Cf. de Jong 2012: 1-2.
[18] Williams 2023: 62.
[19] Williams 2023: 66. Cf. Ferguson 1989.
[20] Henry Miller's *The Colossus of Maroussi* (1941) and Lawrence Durrell's *The Greek Islands* (1978) are two of the examples used. Cf. Williams 2023: 91.
[21] Jacques Derrida's *On Hospitality* (1998) receives special attention. Cf. Williams 2023: 91.
[22] Williams 2023: 94.

in which proper guest-host friendship can be established, not through state authority, but as a kind of religious observance.[23] It is a compelling observation that will undoubtedly enrich the understanding of even long-time scholars of Tolkien, or at the very least should spark further debate.

In the final chapter, 'Sublime Narratives: Classical Transcendence in Nature and beyond in *The Fellowship of the Ring*,'[24] attention turns away from utopian visions of cities and the home to Tolkien's representations of the natural world. Williams briefly outlines four categories into which previous interpretations of Tolkien's natural world might be sorted,[25] before proposing a fifth: spaces where 'transformative, transcendental *sublime* [author's italics] narrative experiences' can occur.[26] Tolkien's *Fellowship* is convincingly shown to belong to the long literary and philosophical tradition which explores and represents the sublime, especially in depictions of forests and forest experiences. Williams terms the experience of these dark, dense environments as 'the sylvan sublime': awe-inspiring or threatening spaces in which characters undergo emotional, physical, or perspectival change.

To demonstrate Tolkien's deployment of 'the sylvan sublime,' Williams situates the forest experiences of Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin at the start of *Fellowship* within Christian, Ovidian and Orphic notions of the 'material' and 'immaterial sublime'. While the first of these experiences, in the *Fellowship* chapter, 'Three is Company,' represents an epiphanic, Christian-inspired sublime, Williams demonstrates comprehensively how the ominous, 'primitive' and bewildering aspects of Ovid's forest settings in the *Metamorphoses* are reconstituted in Tolkien's depiction of the Old Forest, a space that represents the 'sublime tension' of threat and natural wonder. The danger and the transcendent potential of that space is embodied in its two 'god-like' characters: Old Man Willow, from whom the hobbits must be rescued, and their rescuer, the Orphic figure, Tom Bombadil.[27] The latter, like Orpheus, is a 'lover, musician and nature pacifier,'[28] who ultimately provides the hobbits with 'a microcosm

[23] Williams 2023: 95.
[24] Williams 2023: 97. '*Fellowship'* will be used, for short.
[25] These are ecocritical; symbolic; theological; and 'primary-belief' readings. Williams 2023: 97, and expanded upon on pp. 99-103.
[26] Williams 2023: 103.
[27] Williams 2023: 119.
[28] Williams 2023: 120. Cf. Sundt 2021: 167.

of Tolkien's constructed universe, where divine creativity and order ultimately conquer destruction and chaos.'[29]

Williams concludes the chapter by reflecting on the way that 'the ancient world *itself* [author's italics]*'* might be thought of as a sublime object in Tolkien's writings. Middle-earth sites such as Amon Sûl, Moria, the Argonath, and Amon Hen, constitute a 'Númenorean sublime' that, in its effects on Tolkien's characters, is comparable to the reception of Graeco-Roman antiquity by such groups as the Romantic poets.

Williams brings the monograph to a close with an Epilogue that reads as an *apologia*. In it, he engages with what are often the central objections and issues to Tolkien scholarship. The degree to which source-based study is viable, considering Tolkien's own apprehensions of such an approach, is one such objection.[30] To this, Williams responds that 'This study of classical reception has been largely concerned with examining "ancient trees" for the express purpose of appreciating and understanding Tolkien's "forest."'[31] A second issue which Williams mentions in the Epilogue is the 'problematic' nature of Tolkien's utopian vision which, to 'modern thinkers' will be 'disappointingly retrogressive or conservative.'[32] Conceding that one person's utopia is another's dystopia, Williams nevertheless mounts a strong, final case for Tolkien's writing as making an important contribution towards how utopianism is thought of and understood in literary studies.

Ultimately, the monograph stands as a testament to both 'apologies': Williams' analysis is enriching and stimulating. It may not necessarily resolve the question of source-based analysis in any finalised way, but then it does not purport to. Likewise, Williams wisely avoids overstating the exclusive importance of classical sources in Tolkien's writing, offering instead a sensible, and to this reviewer, justifiable middle-ground.

That said, the difficulty of carrying out such a study of Tolkien's work and not veering into allegorical interpretations persists and, despite best efforts, Williams himself is unable to prevent himself from doing so on occasion, if indeed he is attempting to. While Williams suggests that allegory is a simple one-to-one correspondence, one

[29] Williams 2023: 124.
[30] *Letters*, no. 297, for Tolkien's comments on this approach to his work.
[31] Williams 2023: 138-9.
[32] Williams 2023: 140-1.

may detect in such references as '(divine, Christian) West' and '(Catholic) piety,'[33] a subtle suggestion by Williams of allegory in the author's writing, or an example of the surgical precision required to avoid such a pitfall, if indeed a pitfall it is.

Other minor criticisms might include the occasional use of direct quotations that lend no additional support to the argument being made,[34] and could simply have been paraphrased. There are also slight inconsistencies at times in tone, style, and the presentation of terminology.[35] The reasons for these may be various – material produced at different stages of research or for different purposes; editorial or publishing decisions or restrictions, etc. – but none hampers the overall cogency or effectiveness of the monograph's various (or central) argument.

These small and largely superficial objections aside, this monograph is a highly effective synthesis of an extensive and diverse range of sources dealing with classical texts, utopianism, and all aspects of Tolkien studies. The overall quality of exposition and the depth of insight into the works of Tolkien is especially well-conceived. Finally, *Tolkien's Utopianism* makes a significant original contribution to the fields of study with which it is concerned, and will, this reviewer believes, provide an essential starting point for future scholars setting out on their own roads to Middle-earth.

[33] Williams 2023: 54.
[34] The direct quote taken from Carpenter on pg. 10 is one of the first, but not the last, example of this.
[35] For example, the reader finds references to pop culture memes on p. 11, but is as likely to encounter highly technical terminology, such as the explanation of the natural world's function in Tolkien on p. 102.

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