



BOOK REVIEW:
J.R.R. Tolkien's Utopianism and the Classics

James Hamby

Williams, Hamish. *J.R.R. Tolkien's Utopianism and the Classics*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. ISBN 978–1350241466.

Studies of Tolkien's work often face two common criticisms: firstly, that critical theory is seldom applied, and secondly that his works are rarely placed in conversation with those of other major 20th-century writers, with the exception of his fellow Inklings.¹ The result, as the argument goes, is that Tolkien criticism is often self-contained and ignores broader movements in literature and theory. Hamish Williams's study, *J.R.R. Tolkien's Utopianism and the Classics*, however, defies these notions by utilizing theorists from Plato to Nietzsche to Derrida and by examining Tolkien's works alongside 20th-century writers such as Mary Renault, Henry Miller, and Nikos Kazantzakis, among others. Another common presupposition Williams's book refutes is that Tolkien's fiction relies almost exclusively on Germanic influences. To supplement this view, Williams demonstrates that Tolkien incorporated many Greek and Roman sources as well. Commenting on the importance of seventeen years of classical education on Tolkien's intellectual life, Williams argues that he "never really abandoned the classical world ... [nor] the pervasive cultural-historical sense that he, as a creative writer, was working in a Western literary tradition, in a long line of literary texts leading back to ancient Greece and Rome" (11). Following Tolkien's own metaphors of storytelling as a "cauldron of soup" or "a compost heat," Williams points out the extent to which Tolkien's legendarium combines many different sources, such as "Old English heroic epic, Celtic mythology [and] medieval romance" (138), into something new.

¹ The Inklings were an informal group of creative writers at Oxford University, most of whom shared an interest in Christianity and in building fantasy worlds through fiction. In addition to Tolkien, the group included C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, Owen Barfield, and others.

As the title suggests, this volume argues that Tolkien relied heavily on classical sources to create utopian societies within Middle-earth. Williams uses a wide backdrop of utopian thought, from Plato to Thomas Moore to the British Romantics to frame Tolkien's utopianism. Williams astutely addresses what could easily be dismissed as simplistic pining for "the good old days" by suggesting that Tolkien's utopianism provides "useful constructs for explorations of the perfect, of lost ideals in the past, which could even shape our contestations with the present" (23) and furthermore that the "ideals and values ... evident in better, relatively more perfect past communities ... are not restricted to a lost past" (26). In so claiming, Williams argues that Tolkien's legendarium speaks directly to the 20th century and provides a model for what values and ideals *could* still exist in our real world. However, it seems that Williams stretches his definition of "utopia" here, and it is difficult to see how Tolkien is not engaging in the nostalgia that Williams refutes.

The volume begins with an introduction that argues that Tolkien's learning in classical literature and philosophy provided him with the theoretical framework for his vision of an ideal society. Three further chapters make up most of the rest of the book. These chapters focus on, respectively, the patterns of civilizational fall, Odyssean ideals of home in *The Hobbit*, and notions of the classical sublime in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. The volume concludes with a brief epilogue that recaps the main points of the book and discusses how "Tolkien's narrative exploration of Middle-earth is really a kind of re-exploration, and indeed rewriting of places past, such that one might better call it a retrotopianism" (139). Williams's ideas about Tolkien's retrotopianism could have been developed more thoroughly, and contrasted to ideas that are truly utopian. Otherwise, though, Williams skillfully notes the ways classicism and utopian literature shape the world of Middle-earth.

The first chapter, "Lapsarian Narratives: The Decline and Fall of Utopian Communities in Middle-earth," juxtaposes Tolkien's representations of disgraced societies with how he imagined their utopian origins, in order to argue that the narratives of civilizational decline, and especially the symbolic significance of falling cities, play a pivotal role in Tolkien's utopian vision. Williams begins the chapter by citing Tolkien's belief that all stories contain some type of fall (17), and he identifies the many classical inspirations that inform Tolkien's notions of civilizational collapse, including the books of The Old Testament, Hesiod's *Works and Days*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and Plato's descriptions of Atlantis in *Timaeus* and *Critias*. Williams argues that Tolkien used these sources to create the story of Númenórean decay in his legendarium. Though the grim stories about Númenor's and Gondor's declines may seem pessimistic or dystopian, Williams argues that "Tolkien's narratives of decline are not simple nostalgic exercises but are quite explicit in their recognition of problems which need to be rectified and restored—they are utopian thought exercises" (48). Again, Williams's assertion that these narratives of decay are utopian in nature seems a stretch, and his discussion would have benefitted more by considering how these stories are dystopian.

After broader civilizational degeneration, Williams pivots to focus on the symbolic significance of the besieged and falling city, specifically Minas Tirith, and discusses its literary and historical antecedents, most notably Troy and Rome, arguing that a city's fall is an integral part of its renewal into a utopia. In the conclusion to the chapter, entitled "The ancient city *must* fall" (29, emphasis

original), Williams explores how “every generation has reworked this motif [of the fall of Rome] in new ways to fit its own historical contexts and utopian desires” (49). He then compares Tolkien’s writing to three 20th-century movies, *Quo Vadis* (1951), *Spartacus* (1960), and *Gladiator* (2000), and explains that in each of these films Rome experiences some form of moral decay that necessitates its fall. Likewise, in Tolkien’s writing, Númenor slowly becomes wicked and is destroyed, leading to the renewal of society in the founding of Gondor. Thousands of years later, Minas Tirith experiences the same sort of spiritual decay, as represented by Denethor’s decline into despair (54). Williams concludes the chapter by noting how the story of Minoan civilization and its collapse affected Tolkien’s imagination, pointing out that Sir Arthur Evans’s four-volume work, *The Palace of Minos* (1921, 1928, 1930, 1935) “provides some interesting parallels with Tolkien’s legendary Númenor” in the way it describes civilizational collapse (55). In all, Williams concludes that Tolkien’s narratives of declining ancient communities “[reveal] a panoply of different modern concerns at play in Tolkien’s writings: religious conservatism, anti-modernism, anti-technological thought, anti-imperialism and liberalism” (58). These various backward-looking beliefs form the core of what Tolkien envisioned as an ideal society.

The next chapter, “Hospitality Narratives: The Ideal of the Home in an Odyssean *Hobbit*,” argues that hospitality in *The Hobbit* mirrors that found in *The Odyssey*. As many critics have observed, hospitality is a key component of *The Odyssey*, and the behaviors of guests and hosts are prescribed and enforced by the gods. Guests and hosts behaving poorly (i.e. Penelope’s suitors or Polyphemus) or appropriately (i.e. Odysseus in Phaeacia) often reveals their character. In this chapter, Williams suggests that *The Hobbit* can be interpreted as a hospitality tale that endorses positive relationships between guests and hosts (62). Williams points out several scenes with varying levels of hospitality in *The Hobbit*: Bilbo hosting Gandalf and the dwarves in Bag End, the trolls planning to eat Bilbo and the dwarves outside their cave, Elrond’s otherworldly home, the underground dwelling of the goblins, Beorn’s mead hall, the home of the king of Mirkwood, the great hall of Lake-town, and the Lonely Mountain of the dwarves, usurped by Smaug (59). Williams asserts that “place can contribute to the meaning of a work” (60) and that utopianism can be represented by “the restricted, relatively small-scale mundane *topos* of the home” (61). The contrasts between, for instance, Elrond’s home in Rivendell where outsiders and wanderers are cared for and the cave of the Polyphemus-like trolls who desire to eat Bilbo and the dwarves emphasizes notions of good and evil, of utopian and dystopian impulses, in the text. One of the most important functions of hospitality in *The Hobbit* is to highlight Bilbo’s character arc from xenophobia to xenophilia. When Gandalf first appears at Bilbo’s door, Bilbo says and does things appropriate for a host, but his actions lack true warmth and consideration (92). Bilbo is protective of his comfortable life and does not wish to be intruded upon, yet he is tested even more by the rowdy behavior of the dwarves. By the end of the book, however, Bilbo earnestly invites the dwarves back to his home at any time (93) and, as is seen in *The Lord of the Rings*, Bag End becomes so frequently visited by outsiders that his relationship with his home community becomes strained (92). Bilbo’s journey and hardships have caused him to grow into a xenophilial host who welcomes outsiders.

In the final chapter, "Sublime Narratives: Classical Transcendence in Nature and Beyond in *The Fellowship of the Ring*," Williams asserts that Tolkien rewrote "certain classical motifs ... through the insertion of Christian, anti-modernist (anti-Nietzschean) ideas" to create "the sylvan sublime" (105). Williams identifies ways that different classical ideas about the sublime in nature heightens characters' awareness of themselves and the world. Firstly, Tolkien utilizes the Christian sublime in the chapter "Three is Company" to cast the hobbits' experiences in The Old Forest as spiritual transformations as they meet otherworldly beings like the elves and Tom Bombadil. Williams argues that "Tolkien's sublime is substantially Christian" because of the way he uses the word "joy" to express Sam's emotions when meeting the elves (108). Next, Williams identifies the influence of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* on landscapes in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, particularly on the scenes where the characters feel horror. Williams notes that in Greco-Roman thought, wild places such as forests and mountains "were generally associated with the danger of encountering primitive, even pre-Olympian or violent deities ... [and] beasts which haunted such landscapes" (113–14). Just as in *The Metamorphoses* when, for example, Actaeon is torn apart by his own hounds after watching Diana bathe in a forest spring, the hobbits encounter malevolent beings, such as Old Man Willow, deep in the ancient Old Forest (113). Saving the hobbits from this ordeal is Tom Bombadil, whom Williams interprets as an "Orphic guide to the sylvan sublime" (119). Like Orpheus, Bombadil has a supernatural ability to control the world around him, mainly through music. Williams asserts that "the Ovidian universe is essentially one of diversity, change, violence and confusion" (128), and so too are the wild places of Middle-earth. Moreover, the singing of Tom Bombadil recalls the primordial song of the Ainur in *The Silmarillion*, thus connecting the hobbits' experiences in The Old Forest with cosmic forces locked in an eternal battle between good and evil. Williams concludes the chapter by comparing the Gondorean ruins that litter Middle-earth's landscape to the ruins of Greece and Rome in the real world. Williams points out that these ruins fill the hobbits with a sense of the "Númenórean sublime" that provides them with "a sense of renewed national spirit and of pride at being awakened" and also gives them a "pervasive sense of hope in the face of grimness and defeat which underlies much of Tolkien's Christian-inspired philosophy" (135).

Throughout this volume, Williams aspires to demonstrate that much of Tolkien's work derives from classical literature. He acknowledges that Tolkien was influenced by other sources, such as medieval Germanic literature, but he argues that all of these sources blend together to create Middle-earth. Williams's book is an astute study of classical reception in Tolkien and it thoroughly demonstrates the way Tolkien used the past to comment on the present. Moreover, Williams's volume excels in placing Tolkien's work within multiple critical frameworks and within broader literary movements and social realities of the 20th century. Scholars of Tolkien, classical reception studies, and 20th-century literature will benefit from Williams's ability to piece together so many of Tolkien's different influences. All in all, Williams shows how Tolkien's rewriting of classical literature creates a utopian vision for a world that has lost a sense of certainty. Like a hobbit surveying the ancient ruins of Gondor, the classicism of Tolkien's creative vision inspires his readers with a sense of wonder and reassurance that all that is good and beautiful has not been lost.

Biography: James Hamby is the Interim Director of the Writing Center at Middle Tennessee State University, where he also teaches courses in composition and literature. He has been published in *Dickens Studies Annual* and *Dickens Quarterly*, he serves on the awards committee for the Mythopoeic Society, and he is the founding editor of *The Incredible Nineteenth Century: Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Fairy Tale*.