

REVIEW • RESENSIE

Williams, H. 2023. *J.R.R. Tolkien's Utopianism and the Classics*. Classical Receptions in Twentieth-Century Writing. London: Bloomsbury Academic. Pp. 224. ISBN 978-1-350-24145-9. \$35.95; £26.67; ZAR589.90 (South Africa).

Tolkien's debt to the Classical tradition attracted some interest during the initial phases of his critical reception,¹ but it is fair to say that research on this topic has truly flourished only in the past two decades, particularly with the publication of three recent volumes,² the most comprehensive of which was edited by Hamish Williams himself (2021). Alongside these, a growing body of articles has begun to explore the Classical ancestry of Tolkien's work in increasingly explicit and sustained terms.³ This is excellent news for both Tolkien Studies and Classical Reception.

For many years, Tolkien's medieval, Old English, and Norse sources received disproportionate attention in *Quellenforschung*. Yet his influences extended well beyond these areas, in both temporal directions. Scholars such as Martin Simonson have convincingly shown, for instance, that Tolkien was also deeply familiar with modern literature (ranging from Romantic poetry to the realistic novel) and that he often engaged with these sources in nuanced, covert, and perhaps even unconscious ways.⁴

While Tolkien was undoubtedly a medievalist and philologist, he was also a Romantic, a modernist, a symbolist, a novelist, and, indeed, a Classicist. The last epithet is especially fitting. Tolkien was a Classicist *stricto sensu*: his education at King Edward's School in Birmingham (one of the top grammar schools in the country) was more rigorous than that of most contemporary Classics undergraduates. At school, he eagerly participated in Greek play performances and excelled in Latin recital competitions. He initially applied to study Classics at Corpus Christi College, Oxford: though unsuccessful in the entrance examination, he eventually enrolled at Exeter College and

¹ Cf. e.g. Morse 1986; Greenman 1992; Obertino 1993.

² Arduini et al. 2019; Williams 2021; Paprocki and Matz 2022.

³ Cf. e.g. Ford 2005; Barella 2007; Librán-Moreno 2011; Bruce 2012; also, Pezzini 2025:253-4; Pezzini 2026, etc.

⁴ Simonson 2008; cf. also Hiley 2011.

passed the demanding Mods in *Literae Humaniores* – one of the most challenging Classics examinations in the world.

Even after his well-known ‘conversion’ to Germanic languages and literatures, Tolkien did not abandon his Classical background. As Hamish Williams notes in his introduction to his 2023 volume, Tolkien continued to reference it frequently and openly acknowledged, for instance, the “ before the siege of Minas Tirith (Tolkien 1986:22), the Atlantis-like fall of Númenor, and its decline from a ‘Homeric-state’ (Tolkien 2023:213n131) to a situation reminiscent of the Later Roman Empire (Hammond and Scull 2005:634, referring to Tolkien 2023:n294), eventually descending into the Byzantine-like state of Gondor (Tolkien 2023:226n131).

Though these Classical resonances are often blended with other traditions and dissolved into his secondary world (especially in the later works) they remain integral to Tolkien’s literary ‘soup’, to borrow his own metaphor.

In *J.R.R. Tolkien’s Utopianism and the Classics*, Williams continues his role as a leading (and prolific) scholar in this emerging field, focusing on a specific aspect of Classical reception in Tolkien, namely, literary utopianism, developing an interest he had already explored in an earlier volume (Williams and Clare 2023).

In his introduction, Williams offers a flexible working definition of utopianism. Rather than viewing it as a blueprint for a perfect society, he emphasises its heuristic and imaginative dimensions: utopianism, in his formulation, is ‘a form of thinking which defamiliarizes physical space for the sake of exploring and evaluating an ideal (2). While Tolkien never articulated a conventional Utopia, as Williams rightly notes, his world is nonetheless filled with *eu-topoi* and *ou-topoi* (and also *dys-topoi*), each marked by its own tensions, losses, or recoveries. Tolkien’s narratives, Williams argues, triangulate around three central components: spatial richness, imaginative estrangement (or ‘nowhereness’), and ethical idealism (or its loss) – all of which are shaped by, and intersect with, his reworking of Classical knowledge.

As is typical of his research approach, Williams’ goal is not merely to trace sources or compile references; rather, he makes a sustained case that Tolkien’s imaginative geographies (his idealised cities, fallen kingdoms, homely houses, and enchanted landscapes) function as spaces through which to articulate, in his unique mythopoeic register, what Williams describes as a form of literary *retrotopianism*: that is, ‘a rediscovery and rewriting of an older continent’ (paraphrasing a well-known remark by Tom Shippey). Tolkien reappropriates ancient models of idealised communities and associated narratives of decline, not to replicate them or engage in traditional utopian world-building, but to explore moral, spiritual, and

cultural values. As Williams neatly puts it (4): Tolkien's 'literary *eu-topianism*' is 'a form of critique, an exploration of ideas, rather than an attempt to promote an actual vision of absolute utopia'.

Chapter One explores what Williams terms 'lapsarian narratives' (stories of decline and fall) and compares them to ancient Classical precedents. Númenor, unsurprisingly, takes centre stage. Williams draws out the Platonic (and biblical) elements of the story, reading it as a moral parable about *hybris*, imperial overreach, and spiritual corruption. Like Atlantis in Plato, Númenor begins as a virtuous, self-contained society, only to collapse into excess, pride, and eventual destruction. Yet Williams goes further, suggesting that Tolkien's moral architecture of decline (and renewal) is also influenced by Augustan Rome and its ideological narratives of restoration. This connection leads naturally to a discussion of Gondor. Williams argues that Aragorn's renewal of the kingdom parallels (albeit to a certain extent) the *pax Augusta*, with its ideals of peace through order, cultural restoration, and ethical moderation. The comparisons are always cautious and never forced into a strict framework of derivation or intertextuality; instead, Williams presents these Classical motifs as deep structures that Tolkien reshapes through his own mythic imagination. The chapter concludes with a compelling argument that Tolkien's lapsarian narratives are not merely nostalgic but, in a sense, forward-looking. They are utopian in that they seek (and explore) ethical renewal through memory, myth, and spiritual imagination. Williams situates this point within the wider context of 20th- and 21st-century Classical receptions in film (*Quo Vadis*, *Spartacus*, *Gladiator*) and literature (*The Palace of Minos*, *The King Must Die*), ultimately characterising Tolkien's anti-modern(ist) utopianism as distinctively pre-modern (or perhaps, one might suggest, postmodern) yet still resonant within modern ethical discourse.

Chapter Two shifts the focus from states and civilisations to domesticity and the ethics of home and hospitality. Through a detailed reading of *The Hobbit* (interpreted as a 'hospitality narrative'), Williams explores hospitality as a central ethical theme, grounded in the Classical motif of *xenia*, as exemplified in Homer's *Odyssey*. The chapter traces Bilbo's journey as a movement through various 'homes', each representing a kind of ethical test of host-guest relations. From Bag End and Rivendell to Beorn's house and Thranduil's halls, the encounters are paralleled with Odyssean episodes, such as those involving Calypso, Circe, or the Phaeacians. One particularly illuminating example is Williams' comparison between Aeolus and Elrond, whose homes are described as 'distinctly temporary, ephemeral abode[s]', representing 'a level of quasi-divine existence which transcends the normal experiences and sufferings of mortals' (76–77). Williams is especially insightful in framing *The Hobbit* as an 'ethical quest' rather than a heroic or

geopolitical one. As he concludes (89): ‘Tolkien’s form of *eu-topianism* in *The Hobbit*, directed towards the topos of the home, leads to a broader ideal of xenophilia: love not only thy guest-neighbour but also thy complete foreigner’. The chapter ends with a fascinating (if brief) engagement with Derrida’s *On Hospitality*, contrasting Tolkien’s advocacy of ‘a conditional, reciprocal model of hospitality’ with Derrida’s concept of absolute hospitality (94).

Chapter Three takes a more aesthetic and speculative turn, focusing on the sublime in Tolkien’s representations of nature. Here, Williams draws on Classical aesthetics (Longinus), Romantic philosophy (Burke), and especially literary motifs from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, setting them against four burgeoning approaches in Tolkien studies: ecocriticism, symbolic interpretation, theological readings, and primary-belief readings – approaches that Williams applies, interrogates, and sometimes critiques. The forest emerges as a central topos in this chapter: dense, enchanted, ancient, and often perilous. The Old Forest in *The Fellowship of the Ring* is interpreted as a sublime space (‘Ovidian’ and ‘Orphic’) simultaneously terrifying and transcendent, charged with ‘retrotopian’ resonances. Nature in Tolkien, Williams argues, can indeed become “‘utopian” – sublime – because of the transformative experience it can offer to the individual subject’ (104). The main Classical analogue here is Ovid, whose work provides a key model for the “sublime” tension of the sylvan, grove landscape – as both a dangerous, perilous, deceptive, lethal place for mortals (...) and also as a site where the natural world can be witnessed by intruding mortals as thriving in immeasurable profundity, diversity, immaculateness, and, certainly, sheer beauty’. Following this discussion, the chapter focuses on Tom Bombadil, read as a kind of Orphic figure (musical, pacific, and otherworldly) who embodies a somewhat Christianised version of Classical nature myth. Finally, Williams introduces the concept of the ‘Númenórean sublime’ to describe the affective experience of encountering ruins in Tolkien’s work. Just as Romantic travellers responded with awe to the vestiges of antiquity, so too do Tolkien’s protagonists when confronted with the relics of lost civilisations, affirming his optimistic view that ‘there is always the chance for transcendence above the ordinary experience’ (135). While the connection between these ‘sublime’ moments and the book’s central theme of utopianism remains somewhat underarticulated, Williams’ main argument (that the Tolkienian sublime offers opportunities for transcendence or ethical transformation) is persuasive and engaging.

The book concludes with a brief epilogue comparing Tolkien’s subtle use of Classical material with the more overt allusions found, for instance, in C.S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia*. Williams stresses the ‘partial’ and often ‘opaque’ nature of Tolkien’s Classical reception: it is integrated, embedded, and

sublimated into the broader mythic whole. His central metaphor (identifying individual ‘trees’ of Classical ancestry within Tolkien’s ‘forest’ of influences) also informs his broader methodology of source criticism, which is consistently rigorous. He carefully distinguishes between explicit references, plausible analogies, and conjectural resonances, always with the refreshing awareness that ‘the study of one leaf of Tolkien’s compost does not preclude that of others, nor does it imply a singular dominance’ (105).

This is an important book which, in addition to an engaging read and rigorous scholarship, provides both Classicists and Tolkien scholars with an exploration of uncharted territory and opens up new vistas.

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