



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 41
Number 1

Article 16

October 2022

Tolkien, Race, and Racism in Middle-earth by Robert Stuart

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Recommended Citation

Tally, Robert T. Jr. (2022) "*Tolkien, Race, and Racism in Middle-earth* by Robert Stuart," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 41: No. 1, Article 16.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol41/iss1/16>

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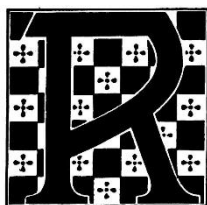
Tolkien, Race, and Racism in Middle-earth by Robert Stuart

Abstract

n/a

Additional Keywords

race, racism, modern history, fantasy



REVIEWS

TOLKIEN, RACE, AND RACISM IN MIDDLE-EARTH. Robert Stuart. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. viii + 357 pages. ISBN: 978-3-030-97474-9. \$109 (hardcover).

TOWARD THE END OF *TOLKIEN, RACE, AND RACISM IN MIDDLE-EARTH*, Robert Stuart succinctly summarizes what he calls “[t]he point of this study,” which is

to demonstrate that Tolkien’s racist moments, however prominent they are in his literary legacy and however challenging they may be to our battered sensibilities, in no way implicate the great author in the British fascism and imperialism of his time, and that they certainly do *not* indicate any affinity with today’s neo-Nazis or White Supremacists, no matter what those racists may think. Those revelling racists are making merry with misreadings. Tolkien’s dichotomies between white and black, between light and darkness, for instance, do indeed correlate with antitheses of divine good and Satanic evil, often disturbingly embodied, for evil, in “Swarthy Men” and, for good, in their fair antagonists. But on closer consideration, the legendarium’s colour-coding is clearly spiritual rather than racial. “Whites” are not vaunted; “Blacks” are not denigrated. *LOTR* has no place in the library of the Ku Klux Klan. (341)

Stuart’s concern over whose library ought or ought not contain *The Lord of the Rings* and other works by Tolkien indicates the most powerful, but also problematic, polemical thread running through this well-researched and fascinating volume. Stuart meticulously delineates the profoundly racist ideas, attitudes, images, and perspectives to be found in Tolkien’s life and work, but notwithstanding all the evidence he presents, he resolutely insists that Tolkien should not be valued by white supremacists, fascists, neo-Nazis, and their sympathizers. The problem, of course, is that these fine distinctions between Tolkien’s specific types of racist beliefs and those of the neo-Nazis are not likely to be made by readers interested in claiming Tolkien for their own political purposes. They will have no compunction whatsoever about keeping copies of

The Lord of the Rings in their own libraries, while perhaps attempting to deny that others be allowed to enjoy the novel on different grounds.

Stuart's study is in many respects a superb overview of the questions of race and racism in Tolkien's work. These issues have become the source of great controversy in recent years, particularly as white supremacist groups have become increasingly aggressive in their embrace of Tolkien as one of their own, and this has caused a great deal of trouble for Tolkien Studies, not to mention medieval studies. Critics of racism in Tolkien's work have been threatened and bullied, and efforts to ameliorate or modernize the tales—such as the decision to use a multi-racial cast in the Amazon Prime series *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings or Power*—have drawn the ire of right-wingers who would insist on an all-white racial vision for Middle-earth. (Except, of course, for “enemies,” who in Tolkien's work tend to be figured as “black,” “swarthy,” “slant-eyed,” and so on.) These circumstances partly explain why Stuart has made it “[t]he point of this study” to rescue Tolkien from the clutches of these fascists and their sympathizers, even as he demonstrates in detail the degree to which Tolkien “was a man of his time [...] and that time was flooded with racialist thinking and racist values” (342). Still, for all its thoroughness, the conclusion that “Yes, Tolkien was a racist but at least he wasn't *that kind* of racist” is a bit odd.

Tolkien, Race, and Racism in Middle-earth is divided into eight chapters, including the introduction and a brief conclusion. In his introductory chapter, Stuart allows himself to indulge in a bit of autobiography, detailing his own personal interests in Tolkien, beginning in his own youth and extending into his professional career as a historian and teacher. Stuart's academic background is in intellectual history, especially of twentieth-century French Marxism, and so a book on Tolkien was something of a departure for him. He explains how he came to work on this project, initially titled “The Politics of Middle-earth,” over a fifteen-year period, and the entire book bears evidence of Stuart's deep dives into Tolkien Studies during that time. He concedes that, in his research, the question of race loomed so large as to require a book-length treatment in its own right.

The subsequent chapters each address a particular problem or set of problems related to race and racism in Tolkien's life and work. Chapter 2 surveys the controversy itself, looking at how racialism and racism in Middle-earth have been addressed by fans and critics, and arguing for historical contextualization of Tolkien's views, which were both fairly typical of an Englishman of his race, religion, class, and background, but which also changed over the course of the century (as did racial views themselves, of course). This leads Stuart to note five ways in which Tolkien's views are sometimes associated with fascist racial ideology, each of which are then addressed in the following five chapters respectively, and which he briefly recapitulates as stark

interrogatives: “White Supremacy? Genocide? Blood-and-soil philology? Anti-Semitism? [and] A racism of blue blood?” (70).

Thus, Chapter 3 deals with the seemingly Manichean split between white and black, light and dark, in Tolkien’s world, as well as the strict *Apartheid* of the races and cultures of Middle-earth. (Bree, we recall, is the only place in Tolkien’s world in which hobbits and men, not to mention the occasional dwarf and other travelers, cohabit, and Tolkien himself writes in *The Lord of the Rings* that “Nowhere else in the world was this particular (and excellent) arrangement to be found” [I.9.150].) Chapter 4 deals with Orcs, the “evil” race that is depicted with some of the most overtly racist language and imagery, and who are subject to annihilation (genocide) by the “good people” of Middle-earth with little to no compunction whatsoever. Even Tolkien himself was troubled by the theological implications, as I have discussed in “Let Us Now Praise Famous Orcs,” for example. Chapter 5 looks at the pervasive “blood-and-soil” theme that connects Tolkien’s philological passions with his broader mythology. Rooting language itself in bloodlines and in the homeland as a site of “racial memory,” Tolkien’s themes resonate all too well with some of the most vile types of modern racist discourse in his own time and today. In Chapter 6, Stuart takes up the issue of anti-Semitism, particularly with respect to the depiction of the dwarves, whom Tolkien had said resemble “the Jews.” There Stuart also examines the oft-quoted letter Tolkien wrote objecting to an inquiry from a German publisher in 1938 about Tolkien’s own (racial) ancestry in which Tolkien praises “that gifted people” (*Letters* 37, #30); although it’s frequently cited by fans as evidence that Tolkien couldn’t have been racist at all, Stuart observes that, technically, “philo-Semitism is just as racist as anti-Semitism, in that it ranks races hierarchically” (237).

Then, in Chapter 7, Stuart analyzes how Tolkien’s texts are “suffused with an ancient aristocratic racism sharply at variance with the popular race-ideology typical of Nazism and White Supremacists” (70). Startlingly, Stuart argues that this older, still horribly odious and racist worldview “would have immunized the author against the populist vulgarity of the British [Fascists] [...] and certainly insulates Tolkien’s ideas and ideals from the crudities of Hitler’s racial ranting” (70). Stuart thus identifies and gets the measure of Tolkien’s actual racism while attempting to distance it from that of Nazis (or neo-Nazis) and other “modern” white supremacists. Finally, Stuart’s brief Conclusion summarizes his findings and suggest that their insights “repudiate the extremes of Tolkien criticism” (342), insofar as they categorically prove false the claims of those who would deny Tolkien held any racist views, while also rescuing Tolkien from those who would depict him as an advocate of fascist white supremacy.

Stuart is a historian, not a literary critic, and this book reflects his exhaustive historical and documentary research. The strongest parts of the book are those in which Tolkien's ideas and writings are situated within their historical, social, cultural, and intellectual contexts, and Stuart demonstrates a mastery of the racial and racist thought permeating English and European societies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Such detail is especially useful in debunking the many attempts, some undoubtedly well-meaning and others likely feckless, to deny Tolkien's racism entirely, and Stuart rightly insists that "Tolkien's legendarium is suffused with racist imagery and, at times, imbued with racist values" (339). But Stuart also maintains that the embrace of Tolkien's work by white supremacists and others today is based on their own delusions, for Tolkien himself would not have welcomed their support. As to whether Tolkien's work is immune from the advances of white supremacy, that's less certain, and Stuart sometimes seems overconfident in his argument that Middle-earth has no room for those with neo-Nazi or fascist beliefs.

Indeed, for all its accomplishments, *Tolkien, Race, and Racism in Middle-earth* ultimately offers a somewhat dubious argument about Tolkien's own personal racism and, more importantly, about the uses to which Tolkien's work may be put by white supremacists and their ilk. Part of this may be wishful thinking, conscious or otherwise, on the part of the author, who—even after raising the issue as a potential obstacle in his own research, given that he is a "White academic myself potentially liable to [...] 'colour-blind racism'" (12)—attests to a certain native inability "to see race" that apparently owes to Stuart's having spent some of his childhood in a multicultural, multiracial Hawaii. As he puts it in an unfortunate, and frankly incredible, line, "If I'd bumped into the little brown kid who would one day be President, I wouldn't have noticed his colour" (13). This sort of rhetorical stance, something on the order of "I know, you might think I too harbor racist beliefs, but I assure you, that's impossible!" is not very helpful, even were it believable. I certainly do not think Stuart is a bigot, but the protest to the contrary is just weird, especially since he then goes on to point out that the fictionality of biological "race" ("the only *real* race, surely, is 'the human race'" [13]) is largely irrelevant given the massive historical and ongoing effects of the *facts* of race and of racism in the world. As he concludes that section, "In exploring Tolkien's richly imagined 'secondary world,' as here in our mundane primary one, no one should ever be 'colour-blind' to race" (13).

Nevertheless, after examining in admirable depth the racist (and racist) views held by Tolkien and others of his era, after providing readings of Tolkien's texts in which such views are on display, and after citing numerous critics who have analyzed these matters in Tolkien's work, in the fantasy genre,

and in literary studies more generally, Stuart ultimately insists that the troublesome views about race in Tolkien's work are *relatively* innocuous, and thereby seems to write off the controversy. Nearly every chapter ends with a defense of Tolkien or his views against those of "real" racists, such as imperialists, fascists, and neo-Nazis, even though Tolkien's own racist ideas or sympathies had been the subject of the chapter in question. Stuart even winds up repeating a view he elsewhere criticizes in suggesting that, because Tolkien was not a Nazi or Nazi-sympathizer, his bigotry with respect to non-white (and non-English) "races" is not as disturbing as many people find it. Ironically, in some cases, Tolkien's racist views—along with those of other "conservative Catholics and reactionary ruralists" of his day (258)—are actually to the socio-political right of the fascists, as when Stuart suggests that the Nazis were far too populist and demotic for the more elitist, "aristocratic racism" of Tolkien (321). At times, Stuart defends Tolkien from the charge of white supremacism by pointing out his potentially even more bigoted "traditionalist" beliefs!

In the book's final paragraph, for instance, Stuart effectively absolves Tolkien and his world of one nasty type of racism on the grounds that Tolkien harbored a different kind of racism, one that the author apparently believes would be more acceptable. As Stuart writes,

Tolkien's fertile creativity has fed a hunger for heritage and ancestry, for lineage and blood-belonging, for embeddedness in place and people. [...] The majestic Númenorean rulers of Middle-earth, the near-divine Sindarin and Noldorin aristocracies of the Elven realms, the adventurous Fallohidish breed in its Shire *Heimat*—all speak to us from a humane Traditionalism utterly at variance with the odious mass politics and crackbrained 'scientific' racism once practiced and promoted by twentieth-century imperialists, fascists, and Nazis, and today resurgent among twenty-first-century Neo-Nazis and White Supremacists. Whatever their delusions, they will find no welcome in Tolkien's Shire. (343–344)

I am not sure that careful readers of *The Lord of the Rings* would agree.

While hobbits may not be particularly interested in "scientific" views about race, their well-nigh insuperable xenophobia, itself underwritten by a rustic, blood-and-soil ideology, is quite pernicious, even if the hobbits do not become neo-Nazis. At the end of the novel, King Elessar's edict barring men from entering the Shire, effectively outlawing immigration *tout court* and possibly even travel or commerce across the border, makes the Brexit movement look rather cosmopolitan and multiculturalist by contrast. And who can miss the irony that, after the War of the Ring's successful end and the Shire "scoured" of its impurities, "All the children born or begotten" in the "marvellous year" of

1420 were “fair to see and strong, and most of them had a rich golden hair that had before been very rare among hobbits” (*LotR* VI.9.1023), which Stuart notes is “a sign of [blonde] Galadriel-gifted blessedness” (101). Such examples are plentiful and easy to find throughout Tolkien’s writings, and it is hardly a stretch to imagine that white supremacists might see themselves at home in the Shire.

Tolkien, Race, and Racism in Middle-earth is still an extremely valuable contribution to Tolkien Studies, and it represents perhaps the most thorough treatment thus far of these matters. The desire to absolve Tolkien and his fandom is understandable, but it is important to recognize and to emphasize the truth lest the threats posed by white supremacists and like-minded readers be too easily dismissed or underestimated. In the attempt to save Tolkien and his work from those who would exploit it for their racist purposes, wishful thinking is harmful, and it would be far better to acknowledge and to analyze the racism to be found in these and other writings. Stuart’s book provides important research for such acknowledgement and analysis, and is therefore a worthy addition to the Tolkien scholar’s library.

—Robert T. Tally, Jr.

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QUEERING FAITH IN FANTASY LITERATURE: FANTASTIC INCARNATIONS AND THE DECONSTRUCTION OF THEOLOGY. Taylor Driggers. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. 248 pp. ISBN 9781350231733. \$115.

AS THE FIRST BOOK IN BLOOMSBURY’S MUCH LAUDED “Perspectives on Fantasy” series, Taylor Driggers’s *Queering Faith in Fantasy Literature* offers a fascinating methodology in utilising the literature under consideration as a tool to push the boundaries of critical theory. The result is a densely packed theoretical investigation. Through fantasy fiction, Driggers argues, readers and critics are able to deconstruct Christianity as a heteronormative structure which is thought to exclude women and LGBTQIA+ people. While Driggers’s case studies approach focuses less on the books or genre under discussion and more