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## J.R.R. Tolkien's Utopianism and the Classics (2023) by Hamish Williams

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*J.R.R. Tolkien's Utopianism and the Classics*, by Hamish Williams. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. xiv, 206 pp. \$100.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9781350241459. Also available in ebook format.

For anyone interested in well-trodden scholarly paths, source studies are like a comfortable pair of boots—cozy and familiar, to be sure, but, in context, useful. And if I may mix my metaphors badly, source studies are *also* a well that never runs dry. For Tolkien's work this holds especially true. Yet whereas source hunters have long taken their eagle-eyes and detective glasses in search of Tolkien's medieval inheritances, combing various medieval texts for the phrases, themes, narrative styles, and unexplained scholarly conundrums that grant Tolkien's fiction its unique flavor, the *classical* inheritances within his work have rarely received similar treatment. Yet recent years have seen several edited collections begin reversing this neglect, one of which, *Tolkien and the Classical World* (2021), was edited by Hamish Williams himself. Now Williams is coming out with his first monograph, *J.R.R. Tolkien's Utopianism and the Classics*, which examines not only what Tolkien has borrowed from classical literature but also how he utilizes “broader narratives” from within the Greco-Roman tradition. Through this study of sources, Williams argues, readers can discern an “overarching utopianism” across Tolkien's work (139), how his texts create a diverse range of idealized *topoi* through such locales as Minas Tirith, Númenor, the Old Forest, various “home” locations, and more.

To this core argument Williams adds a few important and well-taken caveats. For one thing, Tolkien doesn't write “utopian fiction” per se but more simply just “defamiliarises physical space for the sake of exploring and evaluating an idea” (6). In other words, Tolkien's idealized *topoi* explore ideas rather than the allegedly perfect societies more familiar to us from traditional Utopian literature—a claim that, for my money, seems safe enough. Likewise, Williams acknowledges Tolkien's many non-classical debts as well. Depending on one's background, for example, most scholars and readers will naturally detect only those literary traditions with which they are familiar; the list can include Old English heroic epics, late medieval romances, Celtic mythology, and Old Norse literature (138). Given our collective decline in classical knowledge, though, Williams seeks to reveal Tolkien's previously obscure classical resonances. These resonances include subjects as varied as Platonic moderation, Augustan restoration, Homeric xenophilia (“love of strangers”), and the Ovidian material sublime. In Chapter 1, Williams examines several “lapsarian” utopian communities—Doriath, Nargothrond, Gondolin, Númenor the Shire, Rivendell, Moria, Lothlórien, Minas Tirith—that contrast positively with their surrounding post-lapsarian worlds (21). Williams specifically links Gondor to ancient Rome; Aragorn's reign parallels the reign of Augustus after the civil wars. Next, in Chapter 2, Williams takes a more

domestic turn as he focuses on “ethical guest” narratives, *The Odyssey*, and the many guest-host relationships within *The Hobbit*. Williams’s final chapter then unpacks how the Ovidian material sublime suffuses Tolkien’s representation of the Old Forest before, additionally, reading Tom Bombadil as an Orphic figure.

Altogether, Williams handles his material well, and I consistently found his observations to be useful and plausible. At the same time, his main limitation is that, despite the book’s concern for the “broad” classical narratives that inform Tolkien’s fiction, at day’s end *J.R.R. Tolkien’s Utopianism and the Classics* remains a relatively straightforward source study. Almost exclusively, Williams concentrates on reading Tolkien through a classical lens. By itself, of course, this is fine, but Williams also regularly bypasses the more interesting critical questions an in-depth source analysis might otherwise invite. Readers will search in vain, for instance, for any substantive discussion of the one *non*-classical subfield uniquely applicable to Williams’s core thesis: Utopian Studies. Indeed, beyond one glancing reference to this area as a whole—namely that its scholars often perceive golden-age myths as “nostalgic, conservative, even primitive ways of thinking” (23)—Williams avoids citing theorists like Lyman Tower Sargent, Ruth Levitas, Krishan Kumar, or Peter Fitting.<sup>1</sup> Even more notably, Williams finds no space (despite sixty pages of citations and references) to handle the one scholarly monograph *by a Tolkienist* most deeply relevant to his subject: Mark Doyle’s *Utopian and Dystopian Themes in Tolkien’s Legendarium* (2020). This is a shame because, while both scholars agree on the status of utopian “themes” within Tolkien, the classicism of Williams offers a nice counter-balance to the Victorianism of Doyle—even if the latter’s book shares *with* Williams his odd neglect of Utopian Studies (for more on Doyle, see McLain, 2021).

In other words, *J.R.R. Tolkien’s Utopianism and the Classics* suffers from a heady case of disciplinarian blinkers. This doesn’t diminish the inherent interest of the echoes Williams detects, but one consequence of parenthesizing any literary tradition beyond the classical (not to mention Utopian Studies itself) is that Williams has no room to offer a good account of the complex, multiple ways Tolkien encountered—and thus transforms—certain types of narratives and content. For example, let’s take the Orpheus legend. Although Williams knows that

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<sup>1</sup> To be fair, two glancing citations to Tom Moylan and Darko Suvin appear in Williams’s text, but a brief comment on international citation practices might now be appropriate. For Anglo-American scholars, Williams’s more European approach to handling secondary material might be frustrating. Normally, Anglo-American scholars include items within their Works Cited if some actual idea, phrase, or discussion has been borrowed from that source. This generally leads, in practice, to about two or three citations per printed page. In contrast, Williams offers over 1,200 citations in a monograph whose real content spans only 140 pages, and many are nothing more than a page number and the bibliographic information. Although the sources I double-checked *are* generally relevant (and so justified in that sense), readers without the leisure or resources to track down the original source will find the citations of little practical value.

Tolkien studied the medieval lay *Sir Orfeo* closely, he focuses instead (when reading Tom Bombadil as an Orphic figure) on Virgil's *Georgics* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Williams thereby adds pieces to the puzzle, but he makes no general effort to assemble a larger picture. Moreover, I'm struck by the continued applicability of a reviewer's remark about Williams's edited volume, *Tolkien and the Classical World*. The reviewer suggests that more "work probably needs to be done on what sorts of secondary books on the Classical world Tolkien is likely to have read before this approach becomes fruitful" (Parker 206). A properly historicist approach to source studies, needless to say, requires this kind of labor, but its continuing absence from *J.R.R. Tolkien's Utopianism and the Classics* is telling. Keeping with my Bombadil-as-Orpheus theme, the closest Williams comes is raising Nietzsche's well-known distinction between the Apollonian and the Dionysian: Tom Bombadil, he claims, represents a triumphant musical ordering against destructive Dionysian forces (129). Yet never is a direct connection drawn between Tolkien and Nietzsche. Although Williams states that "it is difficult *not* to see the influence of ... Nietzsche" on Tolkien (125, emphasis added), this appears to be mere guessing; Nietzsche's name never appears in either Tolkien's letters or in Oronzo Cilli's *Tolkien's Library*. The approach taken by Williams thus cannot rule out mediating influences from Tolkien's other academic contemporaries.

These disciplinary blinkers result in further untapped possibilities as well, a particularly interesting one being Williams's chance to have addressed a vexing question about Tolkien and diversity. The moment occurs in his chapter on hospitality narratives. After mentioning Jacques Derrida's book *Of Hospitality* (1998), Williams briefly notes that Derrida is arguing against hosts who unethically "de-Otherize" their guests by pressuring them to comply with the culture of the host—Derrida lobbies instead for an "absolute" or "unconditional hospitality" (qtd. in 92). While Williams doubts that Tolkien would have sympathized with such radical xenophilia, he nevertheless observes that, much like Homer, Tolkien greatly approves of guest-host reciprocity. Williams then notes that the Greek word *xenos* implies the trait of foreignness in a way uncaptured by its Modern English counterpart, "guest" (93). The incompleteness of this translation, though, gets at an important question: the issue of social exclusion. In an earlier article, I once observed that although "Bilbo spends many decades in Rivendell as Elrond's honored guest ... he never becomes a true citizen of Rivendell" (Wise 154). At the time, I took this perpetual exclusion as evidence of Tolkien's anti-cosmopolitan leanings, his core instinct that the truly open society rests on fragile bonds; after all, the Fellowship of the Ring—a cosmopolitan society in miniature—disintegrates quickly after Gandalf's fall in Moria. This reading still seems likely to me, but the distinction Williams raises between *xenoi* and guests paves the way for another possibility. Might not the Elves of Rivendell respect Bilbo's Otherness to such an extent that they, on ethical grounds, refuse to force his assimilation, no matter how

permanent his stay within their homeland? What does this imply for a multicultural Middle-earth? Sadly, this possibility and others remain untapped by Williams, but perhaps we can hope, someday, for more ambitious applications of source studies to Tolkien.

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