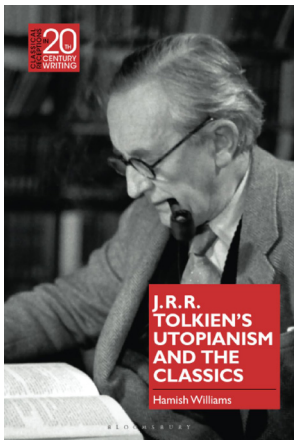
JRR Tolkien's Utopianism and the Classics, by Hamish Williams

Mariana Rios Maldonado

Hamish Williams. *J.R.R. Tolkien's Utopianism and The Classics*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. Classical Receptions in Twentieth-Century Writing. eBook. 210 pg. $90.00. ISBN 9781350241473.



At first glance, the concept of "utopia" and the Graeco-Roman world may not seem to hold any obvious connections to J.R.R. Tolkien or his Middle-earth narratives beyond Tolkien's education in the Classics. However, in his monograph *J.R.R. Tolkien's Utopianism and The Classics*, Hamish Williams showcases how potentiating a conversation between Classical antiquity and Tolkien's literary production can lead to insightful and exciting scholarly avenues in Tolkien studies. Indeed, Williams had already driven this point home in his edited collection *Tolkien and the Classical World* (2021). As for this study, Williams declares that Tolkien's "utopianism" lies in his defamiliarization of "physical space for the sake of exploring and evaluating an ideal" (6). The author's purpose is therefore to examine "forms of 'utopias' in Tolkien's writing" by placing the focus "on a diverse range of idealised *topoi*: sociopolitical communities, the individual, mundane home and vistas of the natural world" (Williams 5-6).

Williams's monograph is divided into an introduction, three chapters, and an epilogue. In the first chapter, "Lapsarian Narratives: the Decline and Fall of Utopian Communities in Middle-earth," not only does Williams argue that "two important, interconnected human communities in Tolkien's world—Númenor and Gondor—closely receive and rewrite ancient lapsarian narratives" such as Atlantis and Rome, respectively, but he also explores how narrative traditions about utopian communities contribute to the restoration of ideals (21). The monograph's second chapter, "Hospitality Narratives: The Ideal of Home in an Odyssean *Hobbit*," analyses different forms of hospitality put forth by Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937) via the *Odyssey*, in order to reflect on the roles of host and guest, reciprocity, and what Williams calls ethical dimension that makes a home "good" or "bad" (61). His final chapter, "Sublime Narratives: Classical Transcendence in Nature and beyond in *The Fellowship of the Ring*," studies episodes in which experiences of the "transformative, transcendental sublime … are afforded when entering into and existing within certain natural places" depicted in in the first volume of *The Lord of the Rings* (Williams 103).

The scope of William's monograph is highly ambitious—so much so that the ideas he either covers or gestures to could easily provide material for further monographs, therefore constituting

an approach that will continue to be innovative in the field. The strongest sections of this work are three: first, the conclusions Williams draws from his analysis in the first chapter, in which the author establishes a conversation between Tolkien's literary production and modern lapsarian narratives, both in literature and in film; second, the network of connections Williams sketches between the Graeco-Roman worldview, Jacques Derrida's philosophy on hospitality, and Tolkien's literary production in the second chapter, which provide a very welcome addition to increasing scholarship on the relationship between the self and the Other in Tolkien studies, as exemplified by Jane Chance's *Tolkien, Self, and Other: This Queer Creature* (2016) and the edited collection *Tolkien and Alterity* (2017); and third, the intricate examination the author achieves on the concept of the sublime in the monograph's final chapter. Furthermore, Williams's extensive knowledge of Classical texts, of previous work undertaken to address Classical influences in Tolkien's literary production, and of comparative exercises that bridge the gap between Middle-earth and Classical antiquity, shines forth as unparalleled.

Where the monograph stumbles is in its occasional, unbalanced focus between the reading of Tolkien's texts through a Classical lens and a clear acknowledgement of the nuances of Tolkien's worldbuilding project. A detailed examination of how Williams applies this perspective reveals missed opportunities on a further elaboration for how Tolkien's literary production either departs or reinvents the "classical ideals and values" signalled by Williams, how specific characters *actively* embody and transform them, and the contextualisation of specific events in the wider history of Middle-earth (xi). Several examples can be provided to this effect: from not fully elaborating on the implications of the intradiegetic criticism Tolkien places on the idealisation of places like Númenor and the Shire; to the manifestation of evil not only as destruction, but as the pursuit to dominate the Other; or the complex ethical conflicts and aporias characters face individually and collectively—like the hobbits, dwarves, and even Old Man Willow, especially when placed into context with the help of the wider legendarium and which thus make them multidimensional figures. Perhaps adding to this impression is the absence in a comparative study of this magnitude of a much more direct engagement with primary and secondary sources on the level of the study's main corpus, as opposed to hundreds of references placed at the end of his analysis. At the same time, Williams's reiterated emphasis on well-known religious and Christian interpretations of Tolkien's Middle-earth narratives wrests attention away from his own original contributions rather than supporting his own findings. Williams's considerations of how the divine, magical, otherworldly, paradisiac, pious, religious, and supernatural are distinctly presented and perceived in Middle-earth, in Tolkien's life, and how Tolkien considered them to manifest in his own work require much more precise detailing, as these concepts hold individual, crucial implications for the reading and reception of Tolkien's fictional construct. Finally, the use of the concept of "orientalism" throughout this monograph could have greatly benefited from a much more profound consideration of other instances in which orientalism is potentially observed in Tolkien's Middle-earth narratives—especially in *The Lord of the Rings*, which Williams only mentions in passing—as well as scholarship dealing with the implications of orientalism and the representation of race in Tolkien's literary production, such as Roger Echo-Hawk's *Tolkien in Pawneeland* (2013).

There is no doubt that Williams's study successfully expands the breadth and depth of what Tolkien Studies is today and what it can look forward to in the future, as this work continues to pave to way for coming studies that connect the Classical world with Tolkien{s Middle-earth narratives. Despite its occasional weaknesses, this monograph is a worthy reinterpretation of Tolkien's oeuvre.

Mariana Rios Maldonado holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Glasgow. Her research focuses on philosophy and Otherness in Tolkien's literary production as well as Germanophonic fantastic literature between the 19th and 20th centuries. Her most recent chapter was published in the edited collection *The Romantic Spirit in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien* (2024). Mariana is the Officer for Equality and Diversity at Glasgow University's Centre for Fantasy and the Fantastic and part of the editorial team for *Mallorn*, the Tolkien Society's academic journal. She is the Research Impact Adviser for Glasgow's Research and Innovation Services.