

## TOLKIEN AND CLASSICS

WILLIAMS (H.) *J.R.R. Tolkien's Utopianism and the Classics*. Pp. xiv + 206. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. Cased, £75, US\$100. ISBN: 978-1-350-24145-9.

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The reliance on classical sources by J.R.R. Tolkien has been extensively debated by scholars in the last few years. One of the latest outputs of these studies is W.'s book, focusing on how Tolkien's knowledge of classical literature contributed to creating utopian worlds. W. has previously edited a collected volume on the subject (*Tolkien and the Classical World* [2021]). This new book consists of three chapters, preceded by an introduction and followed by an epilogue. Each chapter analyses a different kind of utopia in Tolkien's works, namely the decline and fall of utopian communities (Chapter 1), the ideal of the home and hospitality (Chapter 2) and classical transcendence in nature (Chapter 3).

In the introduction W. sets the scene by defining the concepts of utopianism and classicism within Tolkien's corpus. The etymological roots of the word *utopia* are traced back in order to point out that 'utopianism is a form of thinking which defamiliarizes physical space for the sake of exploring and evaluating an ideal' (p. 2). W. qualifies Tolkien as belonging to 'utopian literature' due to 'the spatial richness in narrative, of imaginative defamiliarization (nowhereness) and of (im)perfectionism or idealism' (p. 6). In this vein W. dwells on the influence of classical culture throughout Tolkien's life and works. By using the typical methodology of reception studies, W. shows that Tolkien's narrative has plenty of references to classical authors and *topoi*. However, W. goes beyond the search for evidence of reuse of classical sources in Tolkien's works and questions the reason why Tolkien resorted to them, in order to understand better his concepts and ideas. Consequently, W. argues that Tolkien's utopianism should be better called *retrotopianism* (p. 8).

The first chapter addressing the *topos* of the 'fall' relies on an extensive assessment of Tolkien's personal correspondence. Notably, W. traces the theme of the lost golden age in the fall of Númenor and the decay of Gondor in the Third Age: the former is modelled on the Platonic myth of Atlantis, while the latter has been compared to the decline of the Roman Empire. The parallel between Gondor and Rome during the last centuries before its collapse is far from new in scholarly literature: like Rome, Gondor flourished again with Aragorn, embodying a new post-classical king in the vein of king Arthur or Charlemagne. According to W., the theme of the decline and restoration of Rome can also be found between the end of the republican age and the beginning of the imperial one (p. 42). This thesis is supported by the similarity between Aragorn and Aeneas, as Virgil's *Aeneid* is seen as being commissioned by Augustus to create the myth of the restoration of Rome's golden age. Conclusively, W. inscribes the motif of the decline of the ancient city into the broader context of the historical time Tolkien was living in: this may have had a role in reshaping the narrative of the fall of Rome according to his own ideological needs.

The second chapter investigates the element of utopia in *The Hobbit*, focusing on the relationship between hosts and guests. The house is seen as an *eutopos-outopos* by W., who describes different forms of hospitality and draws comparisons between *The Hobbit* and Homer's *Odyssey*. At the beginning of *The Hobbit* Bilbo is depicted as an unsuitable host, due to his reaction to the arrival of Gandalf and the dwarves, altering the comfort of Bag End. Similarly, Calypso in the *Odyssey*, albeit offering the pleasures

of a *locus amoenus* to her guest Odysseus, breaches the rules of hospitality by impeding his leave. On the other hand, the dwarves' behaviour resembles that of Penelope's suitors, who are described as abusive guests threatening their host's authority. The basic lesson Bilbo has to learn is that hospitality 'means a reciprocity between the separate desires of guest and host' (p. 70).

After leaving the Shire, the Company experiences several forms of hospitality: some malevolent (e.g. the trolls and the goblins), some benevolent (Elrond at Rivendell) and some ambiguous (i.e. partly hospitable and partly hostile, such as the werebear Beorn and the elves of Mirkwood). At this point, a deeper analysis of Gollum's episode would have been appreciated, rather than a brief mention (p. 78). In the *Odyssey* it is possible to spot comparable models, such as the malevolent Polyphemus, the benevolent Aeolus and the ambiguous Circe. Relying on some scholarly views, W. also attributes this ambiguity to the Phaeacians and compares them to Beorn: however, the *communis opinio* by which the Phaeacians are regarded as ideal hosts is far more conceivable.

At the end of the chapter W. notices that the paradigm of reciprocity is not adopted by Thorin, who refuses to welcome the people from Lake-town notwithstanding their previous help. The true hero of the novel is Bilbo, who undergoes a moral progression learning the value of reciprocity in the relation between hosts and guests, becoming 'xenophilic'.

The last chapter is devoted to the sublime narrative, paying special attention to the experience that some characters have when they enter a natural place, especially in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Persuasively, W. is unwilling to consider Tolkien as a sort of 'environmentalist *ante litteram*'. W. retraces the effects of sublime in the sense of awe or terror, a constructive or destructive experience, inside (but also outside) the natural world (p. 104), but more space could have been given to the definition of 'sublime' in the first instance.

W. draws parallels between Tolkien's sublime narratives and those in classical literature. A link between 'natural' sublime and utopia is found, based on the transformative experience that nature can offer to the individual subject. W. argues that the sublime woodland motifs in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* influenced the journey of the hobbits into the Old Forest. The two episodes have some features in common, i.e. the antiquity and the 'looming danger' (p. 113) derived by the presence of hostile ancient deities, as much as the disorientation of the senses. The experience of the sublime in the Old Forest episode is defined by W. as 'material sublime', based on the ambiguity between the beauty of nature and its deceptive traits. W. also compares the Ovidian gods – often violent and responsible for tragic ends for those humans who accidentally see them – to the Old Man Willow. However, he could have further investigated how this sublime experience causes a transformation in the hobbits and what this consists of. In this sense, the next section is more persuasive, because W. associates Tom Bombadil with the Ovidian Orpheus and argues that the encounter with him produces a deep understanding of the mechanisms of nature in the hobbits and, through his restorative music, an enhancement of the beauty of creation (p. 129).

Although some parts could have been examined in more depth, W.'s monograph proves to be compelling and methodologically precise, providing new perspectives for the study of the influence of Classics in Tolkien's works.

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