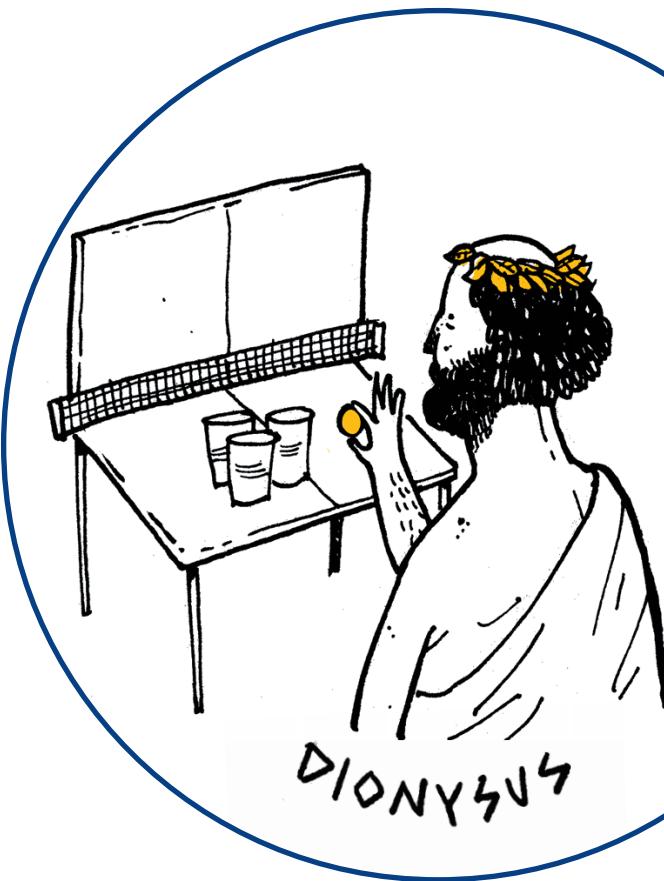


JOURNAL FOR TRANSCULTURAL PRESENCES &  
DIACHRONIC IDENTITIES FROM ANTIQUITY TO DATE

# thersites

18/2024



## **Imprint**

### **Universität Potsdam 2024**

Historisches Institut, Professur Geschichte des Altertums  
Am Neuen Palais 10, 14469 Potsdam (Germany)  
<https://www.thersites-journal.de/>

### **Editors**

Apl. Prof. Dr. Annemarie Ambühl (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz)  
Prof. Dr. Filippo Carlà-Uhink (Universität Potsdam)  
PD Dr. Christian Rollinger (Universität Trier)  
Prof. Dr. Christine Walde (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz)

### **ISSN 2364-7612**

### **Contact**

#### **Principal Contact**

Prof. Dr. Filippo Carlà-Uhink  
Email: [thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de](mailto:thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de)

#### **Support Contact**

PD Dr. Christian Rollinger  
Email: [thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de](mailto:thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de)

### **Layout and Typesetting**

text plus form, Dresden

Cover pictures:

Left – „The Minotaur“. Used by permission of Jonathan Muroya

Right – „Dionysus“. Used by permission of Jonathan Muroya

### **Published online at:**

<https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol18>

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons License:

Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0).

This does not apply to quoted content from other authors.

To view a copy of this license visit

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

ALICIA MATZ

(Boston University)

## Review of Hamish Williams: *J. R. R. Tolkien's Utopianism and the Classics*

Bloomsbury Academic (London 2023) (= Classical Receptions in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Writing), 206 pp.  
ISBN: 978-1-350-24145-9, \$100.00/£75.00 (hardback;  
alternative formats available)

Williams' *J. R. R. Tolkien's Utopianism and the Classics* presents an interesting thesis: that the utopic elements of Tolkien's worldbuilding have roots in the ancient Greco-Roman world. Given the growing interest in classical reception in Tolkien's works, this volume comes at an apt time. Overall, Williams presents a very interesting thesis and makes some new discoveries about how Tolkien engaged with the ancient world.

The book begins with an introduction, which not only provides a good background to the definition of 'utopianism' being used in the book but also presents a very thorough examination of

Tolkien's classical education. Williams then delves into his first chapter, 'Lapsarian Narratives: The Decline and Fall of Utopian Communities in Middle-earth.' In this chapter, Williams argues that "Tolkien employs ancient lapsarian narratives as a basis for meditating on the loss of the ideals (political, social, moral, religious, etc.) which a community represented – what made it utopian" (22). After an exhaustive review of other contemporary rewritings of lapsarian narratives, which helps to situate Tolkien in the literary milieu of the time, Williams gives two examples of Tolkien's lapsarian narratives that seem

to have classical influences: Númenor and Gondor. Númenor is compared to Plato's Atlantis, while Gondor is compared to the real-life decline of the Roman empire. Overall, Williams did a better job supporting his argument with textual support in the Gondor half of the chapter, though the links he made between Númenor and Plato's Atlantis are still largely convincing. However, in the Gondor half of the chapter, Williams uses the work of the historian Suetonius to compare Aragorn and Augustus as rulers who usher in golden ages for their respective realms. While I thought this was an excellent point of comparison, I question the unquestioning acceptance of the historian's narratives on the reign of Augustus – these narratives paint Augustus in such a positive light that they ignore the realities of his rule. The very positive depiction of Augustus in Suetonius makes him a good parallel to Aragorn in Gondor, but the unspoken negatives of Augustan rule linger in the background, making this comparison a bit darker than it should be.

In chapter 2, 'Hospitality Narratives: The Ideal of the Home in an Odyssean *Hobbit*', Williams explores yet another parallel between *The Hobbit* and the *Odyssey*. Given that much scholarship comparing *The Hobbit* and the *Odyssey* already exists,<sup>1</sup> I was wary that this

<sup>1</sup> Reckford (1988) 5–9; Markos (2009) 25–27; Spirito (2009) 182–200; Stevens (2017) 21–44; Williams (2017) 174–197; Larini (2019) 3–12.

chapter would seem repetitive. However, Williams presents an interesting and new lens through which to view both of these texts. He begins with an excellent discussion of the importance of the concept of 'home' to the Hobbits. He then explains that throughout *The Hobbit*, Bilbo is confronted with many situations in which he is the guest, and these instances are comparable to many stories of hospitality in the *Odyssey*. Throughout this examination, Williams shows that the idea of a 'good home' aligns with the Odyssean idea of hospitality: a good home is one in which there is culturally appropriate hospitality and a harmonious relationship between the host and the guest. To tie this back to the overall thesis of the book, Williams argues that a good home is a utopic concept.

The final chapter, 'Sublime Narratives: Classical Transcendence in Nature and Beyond in *The Fellowship of the Ring*', argues that the depiction of the sublime in *The Fellowship of the Ring* is based on the tradition of depicting ancient sites as sublime. For Tolkien, the sublime is located in the natural world, and Williams acknowledges this by giving a very thorough overview of the scholarship of nature in Tolkien at the beginning of the chapter. He then describes the narrative tradition of the sublime and argues that "[i]n Tolkien's narratives of the sylvan sublime, transcendental, transformative awakening experiences are provided to the indi-

vidual subject; these experience help move the subject beyond his or her immediate, familiar, mundane, essentially ‘known’ world towards an understanding of some abstract idea or even towards experiencing the supra-human divine in itself (the immaterial sublime) as well as, somewhat tautologically, towards a greater understanding of the splendour of the material world itself in all its infinitude, profusion and fecundity (the material sublime)” (104). In this, Williams argues that Tolkien’s sublime narratives are retrotopian, in that they receive and rewrite similar narrative encounters in pre-modern texts. Thus, nature is utopian in Tolkien because it offers a transformative experience. The majority of this argument is based on comparison of description of nature in Tolkien to descriptions of nature in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, specifically the *locus amoenus*, and of Tom Bombadil as an Orpheus figure. Finally, in the conclusion, titled ‘Ancient Trees in Tolkien’s Forest,’ Williams discusses why the parallels he analyzes seem opaque, namely due to the profusion of influences on Tolkien’s work. Thus, the ancient world becomes just a few of the trees in the forest that represents Tolkien’s work.

My main critique of the book is that the organization and structure could have been more reader-friendly. Each chapter is incredibly long. – chapter one is 42 pages long, chapter 2 is 38 pages long, and chapter 3 is 40 pages long.

Rather than long chapters, sections with smaller chapters would have made the different aspects of each chapter’s argument clearer, especially in the lapsarian narratives chapter, where the reader jumps from Númenor and Plato to Gondor and Rome. In addition, all but the essential quotations are put into endnotes, meaning that there are over 350 endnotes per chapter. While this makes the book easy to read, there were times that I wanted to see Tolkien’s words or the ancient evidence without having to flip back to the endnotes. The volume could have also benefitted from a glossary, especially of Tolkien terms, as a reader unfamiliar with the non-mainstream Tolkien works discussed may get lost in all of the names and mythology presented. Finally, there seems to be an imbalance in the bibliography: despite the recent proliferation of scholarship on classical reception in Tolkien, only 45 of the 110 pieces of scholarship on the ancient world were published after 2000. I commend Williams on his tenacity in hunting down even the earliest of works on some of the ancient concepts he discusses, but there is more recent scholarship on these same subjects that could have profitably been introduced as well.<sup>2</sup>

Williams is a prolific scholar on the subject of Tolkien and the ancient world and a sensitive reader of his works. This

<sup>2</sup> Nieto Hernández (2000) 345–366; Tracy (2014) 1–16; Robb (2019) 17–53.

book makes me excited to see what he has coming next.

## Works Cited

- Larini (2019). – Gloria Larini, The Trolls in *The Hobbit* and Polyphemus in the *Odyssey*, in: R. Arduini, G. Canzonieri and C. A. Testi (eds.), *Tolkien and the Classics* (Zurich, Jena: Walking Tree Publishers) 3–12.
- Markos (2009). – Louis Markos, The realm of Faërie, and the shadow of Homer in Narnia and Middle-Earth, *Mallorn* 47 (2009) 25–27.
- Nieto Hernández (2000). – Pura Nieto Hernández, Back in the cave of the Cyclops, *American Journal of Philology* 121.3 (2000) 345–366.
- Reckford (1988). – Kenneth J. Reckford, ‘There and Back Again’ ~ Odysseus and Bilbo Baggins, *Mythlore* 14.3 (1988) 5–9.
- Robb (2019). – Kevin Robb, *Xenia, hiketeia*, and the Homeric language of morals, in William Wians (ed.), *Logoi and muthoi: further essays in Greek philosophy and literature* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press) 17–53.
- Spirito (2009). – G. Spirito, The Legends of the Trojan War in J. R. R. Tolkien, *Hither Shore* 6 (2009) 182–200.
- Stevens (2017). – Benjamen Eldon Stevens, Ancient Underworlds in J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*, in Brett M. Rogers and Benjamen Eldon Stevens (eds.), *Classical Traditions in Modern Fantasy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 21–44.
- Tracy (2014). – Catherine Tracy, The host’s dilemma: game theory and Homeric hospitality, *Illinois Classical Studies* 39 (2014) 1–16.
- Williams (2017) – Hamish Williams, ‘Home is Behind, the World Ahead’: Reading Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* as a Story of *Xenia* or Homeric Hospitality, in Lisa Maurice (ed.), *Rewriting the Ancient World: Greeks, Romans, Jews and Christians in Modern Popular Fiction* (Leiden: Brill) 174–197.

## Contents

- Acknowledgements – vi
- List of abbreviations – viii
- Series’ Editor Preface – x
- Introduction: Utopianism and Classicism: Tolkien’s New-Old Continent – 1
- Lapsarian Narratives: The Decline and Fall of Utopian Communities in Middle Earth – 17
- Hospitality Narratives: The Ideal of the Home in an Odyssean *Hobbit* – 59

Sublime Narratives: Classical  
Transcendence in Nature and beyond  
in *The Fellowship of the Ring* – 97

Epilogue: Ancient Trees in Tolkien's  
Forest – 137

Notes – 143

References – 181

Index – 199

Hardcover link: <https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/jrr-tolkiens-utopianism-and-the-classics-9781350241459/>

Ebook link: <https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/jrr-tolkiens-utopianism-and-the-classics-9781350241473/>

---

Alicia Matz

Department of Classical Studies, Boston University  
amatz@bu.edu

**Suggested citation**

Matz, Alicia: Review of Hamish Williams: J. R. R. Tolkien's Utopianism and the Classics. In: *thersites* 18 (2024), pp. 146–150.  
<https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol18.272>