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Utopian and Dystopian Themes in Tolkien's Legendarium (2020), by Mark Doyle

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Utopian and Dystopian Themes in Tolkien's Legendarium, by Mark Doyle. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2020. viii, 195 pp. \$90.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9781498598675. Also available in ebook format.

This book provides a look into various societies, both good and evil, within Tolkien's legendarium. Doyle argues that Tolkien's societies are not utopias and dystopias in the classic sense but instead incorporate utopian and dystopian elements, often within the same work, thus providing both "utopian possibilities and dystopian warnings" (15). Noting how "the most dystopian of modern governments [came] from utopian projects" (16), Doyle draws attention by contrast to Tolkien's variety of light governance—agrarian (Shire), sylvan (Lorien), urban (Gondolin)—as well as a slight vagueness on Tolkien's part as to how these systems work. His observation that "the elf kingdoms especially resemble the stateless communist paradise Marx describes" (17) would, I suspect, have startled Tolkien himself. Perhaps Doyle's most striking comment is that admirers of More's *Utopia* and Plato's *The Republic* express little desire to actually live in those supposedly desirable societies, while many have expressed a desire to "come to Middle-earth" (2).

Doyle stresses the impermanence of Tolkien's dystopias: unlike the "absolute and unshakable control" exercised by the dystopias in *1984* and *Brave New World*, which show no prospect of falling from power, Morgoth's and Sauron's (and Saruman's) domains can be overthrown. Although Doyle himself does not make the point, one might extend his argument so far as to observe that evil realms in Middle-earth are in fact subject to sudden collapse. Yet Doyle also stresses the transitoriness of good realms, such as the elven kingdoms—though here I must say that to criticize the latter for "lack of long-term stability" (34) after having endured for more than three thousand years seems to me to hold them to an impossible standard. Similarly he asserts that the more modern a society, the more evil (61), only to have to concede a page later that the Shire conspicuously violates this rule.

Once he has established his ground, Doyle explores various permutations of his theme, beginning with Tolkien's interactions with medieval thought, Victorian medievalism, and Modernism. And here the book's Christian subtext begins to emerge—as for example with a passage praising medieval Christianity for its tolerance of pagan belief and practice.¹ Not surprisingly the result is a rather diffuse chapter touching on Romanticism, the Oxford Movement, "chateau generals," pre-Raphaelites, et al. The most interesting part of all this is his discussion of Mabel Tolkien's conversion. Doyle's account, though filled with errors, rightly emphasizes how Mabel Tolkien's conversion to Catholicism took courage and that her willingness to "prioritiz[e] her convictions over her comfort" tells us much about her independence of thought (52–53). Yet this insightful

passage is marred by misstatements: that Mabel was a Baptist before her conversion (it was the Tolkiens, not the Suffields, who had Baptist antecedents) or that Mabel “lived her entire short life in the Victorian era” (52) when in fact Mabel (1870–1904) outlived the old queen (reigned 1837–1901) by three years. More significant is the misstatement that Tolkien was born a Roman Catholic (54). Coming as it does only a page or two after the discussion of his mother’s conversion, I can only assume Doyle believes Mabel converted before her son’s birth, which of course is not the case.

With the next chapter, the focus shifts to the environment. Following the lead of Matthew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans,² Doyle believes that “Central to Tolkien’s utopianism is an environmental vision mediated through his Catholic faith” (102). While “the forces of evil in Middle-earth are always antagonistic” to the natural world (81), Doyle suggests Tolkien stands out from the modern environmental movement—for example, in his concern with depopulation—because he belongs to an older tradition: “Tolkien’s concern is not with the ‘environment’ . . . but with ‘Creation’ ” (103) and the responsibility to be a good steward thereof.

Doyle turns next to a discussion of Tolkien’s ideas about Myth, building upon the Mythology for England and the story-as-soup metaphor of “On Fairy-Stories.” This section is notable for its critique of the deep divide between Tolkien and Joseph Campbell. There have been a number of studies over the years applying Campbell’s ideas to Tolkien’s work, but these by and large overlook the antipathy Tolkien felt towards Campbell’s approach.³ Doyle highlights how antithetical the two men’s interests were, with Tolkien’s focus always on the particular, the specific, the detail and Campbell’s on the synthesized, the genericized, the universal. Doyle develops this into an attack on Campbell (whom he sees as explicitly anti-Catholic), and this in turn segues into a scathing critique of “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,” which might be described as feel-good a la carte religion (116–117, 120–121). By contrast, he sees Tolkien’s detail-centric approach as contributing greatly to his works’ widespread appeal. Even though “myths can place demands on the people who profess them,” Doyle concludes that “they are utopian in demanding not just a new way of living, but a new way of imagining the world” (133).

Finally, the last chapter focuses in on politics. This chapter is Doyle’s best, and I think the book would have been better if it had been placed at or near the start of the book, setting the ground for the somewhat diffuse discussion in the other chapters that would have followed. Doyle offers the best critique I’ve seen of Tolkien’s links with Distributism (he argues that Tolkien had sympathy for Distributism without himself having been a Distributist). He also casts light on what Tolkien probably meant by referring to himself once in a letter as an anarchist, expressing “hostility toward interference in people’s daily lives” yet

“accepting of the concept of legitimate authority” (137). This “Tory anarchism” (144) sets him apart from modern conservatism as espoused by Jonathan Witt and Jay W. Richards, despite the latter’s attempt to claim Tolkien as one of their own.⁴ As for Tolkien’s dystopias, Doyle, who teaches at a military academy, sees in Mordor “a chain of command in total disarray” (159). His exploration of the self-defeating paranoia endemic in orc culture establishes persuasively that orcs have agency (33, 158) and are not mindless cogs in a militaristic realm, despite the best efforts of Sauron and Morgoth to impose that condition.

Conclusion

This is a good idea for a book that has not quite come off: a detailed exploration of an interesting element in Tolkien’s work that has not gotten much attention heretofore, but with the connections and transitions within a given chapter a bit murky, leaving the reader in some doubt about how the various parts of the argument are meant to fit together. It’s actually better on a second reading, when the reader already knows where Doyle is heading and it becomes clearer why he chose the route he did to get there. Also it would have been nice to have at least passing recognition of real-life utopian experiments, given Tolkien’s influence thereon. Such shortfalls are partly offset by passages such as an insightful exploration of the moral calculus involved in Gandalf’s decision to abandon the defense of the Gates of Minas Tirith in order to attempt the rescue of Faramir, a belief in the “infinite worth” of each individual pre-empting any Benthamite calculations (166—167). Finally, it would benefit greatly from a substantial errata sheet to clear up the errors.⁵

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Notes:

1. See pages 48 and 170. In a footnote Doyle does conceded there were regrettable exceptions (72).

2. *Ents, Elves, and Eriador: The Environmental Vision of J. R. R. Tolkien* (2006). Evans himself provides a thoughtful blurb for Doyle’s book. Oddly enough, Doyle fails to so much as mention the first major book on Tolkien and environmentalism, Patrick Curry’s *Defending Middle-earth* (1997), though he does devote a paragraph to Liam Campbell’s more recent *The Ecological Augury in the Works of J. R. R. Tolkien* (2011).

3. Or, it would perhaps be more accurate to say, the approach Campbell typified; Tolkien directed his critique against an earlier generation of myth synthesizers of whom Campbell is the most influential modern representative.

4. See *The Hobbit Party* by Jonathan Witt and Jay W. Richards (2014).

5. No book is perfect, and such errors as Doyle's contains fortunately do not much affect his argument, although they suggest a certain lack of familiarity with Tolkien's work (e.g., spelling Beorn as "Boern"). Thus he states that The Undying Lands are "to the east of Middle-earth" (41) when actually they are to the West. He refers to "a conspiracy to deprive [Bilbo and Frodo] of Bag's-End [sic] in the end of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*" (20), which hardly seems in accord with the events as described in each respective book. More egregious is Doyle's assertion that unlike, say, the French Revolutionary calendar, "there are no Year Zeros" in Tolkien (18). But there are. In fact, Tolkien's legendarium is full of Year Zeros and Year Ones that restart the calendar to mark the beginning of a new era: the start dates of Years of the Sun, of the Second Age, of the Third Age, and the Fourth Age. We even have a parochial reckoning within a reckoning that is Shire Reckoning:

- *Annals of Valinor* Year 0 (HME.IV.263) and *Annals of Aman* Year 1 (X.51).
- *Annals of Beleriand* Year 1 (IV.295) and *The Grey Annals* YS I [Year of the Sun] (XI.30).
- *The Tale of Years* Second Age Year 1 (*LotR* 1120). Shire Reckoning Year One (*LotR* 16).]