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## Tolkien, Race, and Racism in Middle-earth (2022) by Robert Stuart

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*Tolkien, Race, and Racism in Middle-earth*, by Robert Stuart. Gewerbestrasse, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. viii, 357 pp. \$139.99 (hardcover) ISBN 9783030974749. Also available in ebook format.

The scholarship on Tolkien, race, and racism has been immense and has substantially increased during the last decade. When I submitted the manuscript of my monograph in 2007, *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History* (2008), there were only around twenty articles and chapters in edited collections on this topic, from a variety of perspectives. By the time Robin Ann Reid published her bibliographic essay in 2017 on “Race in Tolkien Studies” in *Tolkien and Alterity* (ed. by Christopher Vaccaro and Yvette Kisor) this number had multiplied by several times, and many more studies have followed in the last five years. A new research monograph on Tolkien, race, and racism, therefore, has to meet high expectations of critical engagement with the field so far, as well as offering new, original perspectives or approaches to this much-debated topic. Robert Stuart’s succeeds partially in meeting the first expectation, but unfortunately does not really meet the second.

The book begins with a rather untraditional introduction (Chapter 1). Stuart takes us through a journey of his own engagement with Tolkien studies, surveying the topics that interested him in the field, the reading he did, and the approaches he contemplated. He explains that his original intention (and one he hasn’t apparently abandoned) was to write a book about “the ideological dimension of Tolkien’s fantasy” (p. 3), situating Tolkien’s work in its historical and cultural context (an approach many Tolkien scholars have adopted in the last few decades, including myself). He then goes on to list, in passing, works he read, ideological movements he followed, and Tolkien studies approaches he kept track of, while working on this ambitious project. A first attempt at a chapter on Tolkien and race showed him that he had the material for an entire book, hence the resultant monograph.

I don’t mind untraditional introductions – they can be very refreshing and can really increase the impact of a scholarly work – but I am not sure this one works. It reads more like an unrealized book proposal, and at the same time an attempt to flaunt all the serious critical reading which has happened in the background of this study, in order to establish the writer’s authority (this is the first time Stuart has published on Tolkien). It’s only at the very end of this chapter that Stuart goes on to offer what one would expect in a solid introduction: a sense of his approach and the structure of his monograph, showing briefly how each chapter fits into a larger thesis. And that’s where my qualms started: Stuart’s stated aim is to examine Tolkien’s oeuvre “for its conceptions of race, whether racist or anti-racist . . . searching out the good readings that Tolkien’s works empower, even if they were not Tolkien’s own, and discrediting the bad readings that have been inflicted on him” (p. 13). This is, therefore, right from its beginning, a self-proclaimed “defence” of Tolkien, aiming to privilege “good” readings, and reject “bad” ones. What does “good” and “bad” mean in this case, and who decides upon their definition?

Stuart continues by saying that his book is attempting to answer “vital questions” about not just Tolkien’s work, but Tolkien himself as an individual. Stuart lists his central questions as: “Was Tolkien a racist? Does the most popular author of our times really empower the neo-Nazis and White Supremacists who claim him?” (p. 14) From these questions it is also evident that the focus and scope of this book are too narrow. Demonstrating that Tolkien wasn’t *self-consciously* racist, that he did not set up to *deliberately* write a racist mythology, that he wasn’t a Nazi sympathiser, nor did he directly and specifically endorse the ideology of other contemporary fascist groups, in Britain and beyond, is pretty easy. Anyone who can read his fiction and non-fiction can see that. What is at stake, and is taken up as a challenge in much contemporary Tolkien scholarship, is more complex than this. On the one hand, to critically engage with how the legendarium (and Tolkien’s other writings) reproduces some of the racial concepts and prejudices of the “primary” world Tolkien grew up and lived in (and this includes his own political choices). And, on the other hand, to simultaneously reveal how the same texts (sometimes in the very same paragraphs) also question, challenge, and transform some of these prejudices and stereotypes, making aspects of his work still contemporary, versatile, and relatable. Stuart’s book initially seems to take up that task. In Chapter 2, which serves as a second introduction (a more traditional introductory chapter, anyway), after mapping out previous research on Tolkien and race (though this is not exhaustive), he notes (as Flieger and others have done before) that Tolkien was not a systematic thinker. He also makes a distinction between racialism (the idea that human beings can be sub-divided into categories with fixed physical characteristics) and racism (the idea that those categories should be ranked in a hierarchical way, in which some or better than others) (see pp. 27-8). But, though he acknowledges that it is rare, he is quick to point out that “it’s not inevitable that racialism must cross over into racism”, using Herder as an example (p. 28). Racialism, therefore, becomes in this book something that makes Tolkien a “man of his time” (a position Reid has rightly critiqued), and its harmful legacy is not assessed as at the same level as racism, despite racialism’s equally harmful consequences in previous times and today (in, for example, manifestations of unconscious bias), and despite scientific consensus that racialism (or “scientific racism”, as it was often called) is a myth, and has no biological basis (this consensus was already being reached in Tolkien’s time, as, for example, in Haddon and Huxley’s work, Huxley being an Oxford academic Tolkien knew – see Fimi 2008, 136-9). Despite setting up a historical context and distinctions, therefore, Stuart’s book doesn’t quite take up the task of a nuancing Tolkien’s response to his complex historical context. By the end of Chapter 2, his focus is still, quite strictly, to clarify the relationship between Tolkien and “his fascist and imperialist contemporaries and to twenty-first-century neo-Nazis and White Supremacists” (p. 68). He goes on to map out five broad fields of race and racism studies already established in Tolkien scholarship, and, in the following five chapters, offers a synthesis of previous research on each (not always fairly or evenly presented) only to launch into a

strong defence of Tolkien in the last section of each chapter, based on the narrow criteria he's set in the first part of the book.

In Chapter 3, the first out of the five main chapters, Stuart deals with “Manichean racism”, by exploring Tolkien’s concept of black and white, dark and light, as well as characters with lighter or darker skin. Here he addresses Tolkien’s own responses to people of colour in his contemporary reality (not always citing reliable evidence – see, for example, his use of Ready in p. 96, only to admit the unreliability of this source in p. 97). He also devotes a large part of this chapter to racial separatism in Middle-earth, often using the language of Apartheid to describe the tendency of the legendarium to favour the non-intermingling of ethnically distinct communities. But the examples get rather extreme: is King Elessar’s decision to protect the Shire after the War of the Ring (the indictment that “none of the Big People shall pass its borders”, while the hobbits can travel anywhere in Middle-earth) really a representation of Apartheid-like segregation? Or, rather, a recognition that a physically weaker, and therefore more vulnerable, portion of the new kingdom’s population should be shielded, especially in recognition of their role in saving the world? It seems to me that the first three parts of the chapter ratchet up the rhetoric only to make Stuart’s refutation of Tolkien’s racism even stronger in the last part, in which he argues that, surely, Tolkien’s white/black and light/dark dichotomies are spiritual and theological. His claim is mostly based on well-rehearsed Christian readings of Tolkien, which lead him to conclude that “Tolkien’s spiritualised colour-coding of his mythology may play into the hands of racists, but not intentionally. Tolkien was no White Supremacist” (p. 113). Once more, that is a pretty easy argument to make. The further question is how the “spiritual” understanding of Tolkien’s colour dichotomies are *also* entangled with racialised and racist stereotypes, whether conscious or not. Here Stuart also ignores an important piece of evidence in Tolkien’s “Essay on Phonetic Symbolism” in the extended edition of *A Secret Vice*, in which Tolkien associates preference for colour, including white/black, to a person’s ethnicity (see p. 65). As Stuart himself acknowledges (though only half-heartedly): “The worst that can be said is that Tolkien unthinkingly privileged ‘normative whiteness’”, which he sees a part of a “religious tradition” (p. 109) – as if religious traditions are immune to critique, or uncritically accepted by all their followers.

Chapter 4 focuses on the much-debated matter of the origins and nature of the Orcs, examining Tolkien’s changing views on whether the Orcs are intrinsically evil and irredeemable, or creatures without free will and agency at all, just automata, controlled by greater evil than them. Once more, the chapter uses very emotive language to summarise previous scholarship on how the Orcs are treated, such as “genocide” and “ethnic cleansing”. For me, Stuart also misses opportunities to discuss Tolkien’s own contradictions when the Orcs become characters, with names and dialogue (as in *The Lord of the Rings*) rather than impersonal hoards in mythological texts (as in *The Silmarillion*). For example, Stuart brings up the famous exchange between the Orc officers

Gorbag and Shagrat in Mordor, in which they most clearly grumble with as much disdain for their evil, Orwellian overlord (the “big boss”) as for the Elves and Men they are called to battle with. But Stuart only highlights that Orcs are aware that they will be exterminated if Sauron falls (p. 131). Once more, the chapter ends up with what Stuart here plainly calls “Counsel for the defence” (p. 150), in which he proposes a religious/theological reading of the Orcs which absolves Tolkien of any problematic representations. He claims that, ultimately, Tolkien’s work represents “an allegorical conflict: a ‘psychomachia’ or soul war” (p. 151), in which Orcs “represent the sin and death that afflict us all” (p. 152). Stuart mostly bases this reading on Tolkien’s own use of Orcs as analogies when witnessing natural destruction, or war atrocities in the primary world. What Stuart fails to do here, is to differentiate between an author’s urge to communicate with his contemporaries via his own (very successful) imaginative creations, and the inner logic of his invented secondary world, in which the Orcs aren’t (only, in some cases) symbols, but actual characters with agency that drive elements of plot and dialogue.

The focus of Chapter 5 is on “blood and soil” racialism, the idea (common to many thinkers over many centuries) that there is an intrinsic connection between people who have lived in the same landscape over generations and share the same language. Stuart here brings in Tolkien’s own sense of rootedness in the West Midlands, as well as previous scholarship on the idea of belongingness and home that permeate the legendarium. He also discusses the entanglements between philology (Tolkien’s own field of research) and racialism, and Tolkien’s eccentric idea of a “native language”, or, one’s “inherent linguistic predilections”, linking it with racial memory. None of these ideas are new – I discussed many of them in my book, and, more importantly, Verlyn Flieger has also discussed extensively the idea of racially transmitted memory in Tolkien’s work, not least as one of the possible frameworks for the mythology he was considering (see Flieger 2004 – though this work is only referenced once by Stuart in the entire chapter). Stuart extends this discussion, bringing in thinkers Tolkien may have known/read (though he doesn’t provide concrete evidence) such as Rolf Gardiner, Dom David Knowles, and William Sanderson. This time, the chapter does not conclude with a theologically-inspired defence, but with the pronouncement that not everyone who believed in the ties of blood, soil, and language was necessarily a racist, so – for Stuart – “guilt by association fails” (p. 214).

Chapter 6 is the shortest one, and rehearses the much-discussed question of antisemitism in the legendarium, focusing on the Dwarves as Jewish-coded, heavily relying on previous scholarship (e.g. Brackmann and Vink). Stuart here surveys the evidence of Tolkien’s own stated support for Jews in his much-quoted draft letter to his potential German publishers. He also goes through textual evidence in the legendarium to determine whether the Dwarves encode antisemitic stereotypes, focusing more than previous scholars on the earliest iteration of the Dwarves in *The Book of Lost Tales*. This, however, may be too early, as the “semitic” language of the Dwarves didn’t start getting developed

by Tolkien until the 1930s. Predictably, Stuart concludes that the portrayal of the Dwarves is more complex than warranting a straightforward yes or no to the antisemitism question. Where Stuart finds his clinching (to him) evidence to absolve Tolkien from antisemitism, though, is in the historical context: he mentions Britain's turn towards philo-Semitic and anti-Nazi attitudes leading up to WWII, which, naturally, Stuart claims, denies any possibility of linking Tolkien with "Mosley's pro-Nazis" (p. 258). We come back again to the fallacy of a very narrow definition of racism.

Chapter 7 is by far the longest of the book, at sixty pages, and goes some way towards offering some original ideas on Tolkien's work. Here Stuart considers Tolkien's own politics and the legendarium in terms of the "aristocratic racism" of Gobineau, whose *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* (1855) put forward "scientific" Aryanism not based on populism (as later fascism) but on the superiority of the aristocracy. Here Stuart traces multiple examples of intrinsic nobility in certain peoples of Middle-earth, which makes them automatically superior and fit to rule (e.g. the Noldor Elves over Silvan Elves, see pp. 310-11), while also highlights instances of what – I think – may be better described as class prejudice in Tolkien's mythology. Once more, however, there are some hyperbolic proclamations, slight misunderstandings, and some unsupported statements. For example, Stuart provides no evidence of how "Gobineau featured prominently" in "Oxford's philological tradition" (p. 280) – some reference to particular texts we know Tolkien read and which betray an influence of Gobineau's thinking would have helped. Faramir's marriage to Éowyn is justified as following Gobineau's logic by stressing the kinship between the Númenóreans and the Edain, from which the Rohirrim directly descend (see pp. 300-301). What is missed here is that the Rohirrim are, in the internal logic of the legendarium, racially inferior to the Gondorians, but at the same time they conform to the more "primitive" and virile "noble savage" idea, and so Faramir and Éowyn's union – contrary to Gobineau – is one that can reinvigorate the declining "blood" of Gondor's Stewarts (see Fimi 2008, 148-50). Stuart also mentions in passing that "the major protagonists encountered in Gondor" are both "aristocratic Dúnadans" (p. 320), but, of course, this ignores the amount of dialogue and plot given to common men and women in Gondor, such as Beregon and his son Bergil, Iorlas, Targon, and Ioreth. Perhaps the most startling moment in this chapter is Stuart's statement that "Tolkien's antiquated aristocratic racism has its virtues" because it "shields" Tolkien from Nazi associations (and their populist logic). I really can't see how any racism has any virtues, and I do hope this is just a case of unfortunate phrasing that escaped editing.

Stuart's Conclusion chapter highlights once more the limited scope of his book. He reminds us again that the "point" of his study was "to demonstrate that Tolkien's racist moments . . . in no way implicate the great author in the British fascism and imperialism of his time, and that they certainly do *not* indicate any affinity with today's neo-Nazis or White Supremacists" (p. 341, emphasis in the original). So we're back again at the idea that racialism (and occasional racism)

are justifiable (historically, spiritually, theologically) as long as they don't associate Tolkien with the extremes of this ideology – fascism, Nazism, etc. But Tolkien's racialised secondary world has, of course, implications, not least in the structures it bequeathed to later fantasy (not only novels, but also across media such as film, games, etc.) which continued to reproduce similar racial prejudices and stereotypes well after scientific thought completely discredited them. Today's Neo-Nazis may be "making merry with misreadings" (p. 341), but the recent online abuse towards actors of colour portraying Middle-earth characters in the Amazon Rings of Power series are enabled by such unconscious bias instances in the legendarium itself – not all of them come from members of extremist factions.

For me, this limited view of race and racism in Tolkien's work is the main flaw of this book. Nevertheless, I do have a series of other shortcomings to note. At times Stuart makes the facile assumption that characters in the legendarium speak for Tolkien himself. Perhaps the most notable misstep in making this assumption is his claim that in "Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth", Finrod is "obviously speaking for Tolkien himself" (p. 50). I think this is erroneous to say the least: the "Athrabeth" is an ambivalent text that seems to take issue with both Andreth's bitterness and despair, and Finrod's patronising tone and lack of real empathy. Aren't we meant to see through both of their positions? There are also, at times, in the book instances of unfortunate phrasing that border on antisemitism. For example, mentioning the slaughter of the Egyptians' firstborn in *Exodus* as part of an argument about genocide and ethnic cleansing, Stuart decontextualises this act as punishment by God for enslaving the Israelites, and adds that "[o]ne suspects that Egyptian families . . . would have viewed Jehovah's mass child murder as an instance of racist 'Othering' (pp. 51-2). Coupled with the tactless references to a "final solution" (p. 129, 135) for the Orcs and "a Holocaust of exterminated Orcs" (p. 129), which are surely used here as part of the book's hyperbolic rhetoric, I would be worried that Jewish readers may well feel rather affronted. Last but not least, the book also uses hyperbole to claim originality: Stuart often proclaims that "few" scholars, or "rarely" have any scholars engaged with a particular elements of Tolkien's racialised or racist thinking, only to go on and reference many who have. The most pronounced such example is the below, from p. 314:

Yet the obvious has been ignored. All but a few readers of *LOTR* have failed to note this thoroughly Gobinist dimension of the Shire (but see Oberhelman 2007, 104; Burns 2006, 145; and Chance 2006, 161).

Clearly the obvious has *not* been ignored!

One last thing I should note is that Stuart has mostly done a good job with tracing most of the bibliography available on his topic – the bibliographic lists of each chapter are extensive, though not exhaustive (e.g. Dirk Wiemann's essay "Tolkien's Baits: Agonism, Essentialism and the Visible in *The Lord of the Rings*" is not cited, and could have supported Stuart's points about Tolkien's

late story “Tal-Elmar” in Chapters 2, 3 and 5). The impression given is that Stuart hasn’t left many stones unturned, but I still found that at times the groundbreaking work of previous scholars in opening up debates hasn’t been adequately credited (e.g. see my comment above about Flieger’s work).

Overall, this was rather a frustrating book to read and review. There is some useful synthesis of previous research, an attempt to provide an overview of all key sub-topics in the wider field of race and racism in Tolkien, but, ultimately, a line of argument with a limited scope, and a series of unfortunate choices.

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