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Widdicombe, Toby. *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. 194 pp.

Toby Widdicombe's *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Guide for the Perplexed* (2019) is framed by its author as an attempt to answer "the particular questions puzzled or curious readers will likely have" when encountering the complexity of Tolkien's oeuvre (4). Coincidentally, albeit from a different perspective, the choice of the word "perplexed" for the title of Widdicombe's book is a fitting one, insofar this text is also bound to leave any Tolkien scholar perplexed by the end of its reading. Throughout six chapters, an afterword, and three appendixes, Widdicombe seeks to explore the interconnectedness between the different pieces of Tolkien's legendarium and the rest of his literary and academic endeavours, the relationship between the texts published by Tolkien and those published after his death, as well as the themes present in the author's works.

The first chapter of the *Guide* surveys Tolkien's literary production through the lens of his life, thus seeking to close what Widdicombe considers an important gap between the author and his texts. Widdicombe openly criticises the work of Tolkien biographers Humphrey Carpenter and Michael White for its reductive description of Tolkien as an Oxford don who led an "ordinary or uninteresting or dull" life (6). Widdicombe then proceeds to counter their depiction of Tolkien by discussing the important elements and outstanding episodes of the author's life – his orphanhood, his Catholic faith, his experiences in both World Wars, his marriage to Edith Bratt, his Oxford professorship, and so on – while relating them to several features of his legendarium. Although it is not Widdicombe's objective to prove the biographical origins of the legendarium, the interlacement that Widdicombe tries to establish between fact and fiction leaves a unsatisfactory impression, as his interpretations fail to offer in-depth, in-text substantiation, especially from scholars who have cared to follow this research angle such as John Garth. Coincidentally, less than fifteen pages into the text, the first piece of misinformation about Tolkien's fictional world is to be found: Widdicombe falsely claims that "there are Galadriel and Celeborn without offspring; there is Elrond without a wife and only a daughter with whom his relationship is contentious" (12). In fact, Celebrián, Elrond's partner, was the product of Galadriel's and Celeborn's union, not to mention that she bore three children: Arwen, Elladan, and Elrohir.¹ Such a misrepresentation of one of Tolkien's most important storylines so early in the *Guide* is likely to shake the perception of veracity of Widdicombe's later claims and interpretations, thus feeding into the impression that his retellings and readings of Tolkien's work are also possibly inaccurate.

It is also in this first chapter that Widdicombe begins to address several contentious issues within Tolkien's literary production. A point in Widdicombe's favour is his willingness to engage with these complicated subjects (as opposed to dismissing or ignoring them), even though he mostly repeats well-known positions within Tolkien studies rather than articulate in detail his own stance. Amongst these is the apparently "puzzling relationship" between Sam and Frodo: "[t]o some, the relationship reeks of class privilege and homoeroticism, but when read correctly it represents Tolkien's tribute to the relation between batman (Sam) and commissioned officer (Frodo)" (18). This particular assertion stands out for two specific reasons: on the one hand, Widdicombe's choice of the word "reek" is problematic because it potentially implies that interpretations linked to class and sexuality as objectionable while conflicting with his call for more Tolkien scholarship based on critical theory located at the end of his book. On the other, Widdicombe also implies, even if indirectly, that there is 'a' correct way of reading the hobbits' relationship. One can only wonder if Widdicombe would consequently apply the same criterium to the rest of Tolkien's works, thus contravening this author's own wishes as expressed in his prologue to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955), where he argues in favour of applicability, of multiple interpretations of his text. Concurrently, Widdicombe reiterates Tolkien's authorial intent as that of creating a mythology for England, a notion that has been questioned and re-examined for well over a decade by Tolkien scholars such as Michael D. C. Drout, Verlyn Flieger, and Tom Shippey.

In the second chapter, Widdicombe sets out to cover the origins and history of Tolkien's legendarium. After listing Tolkien's literary and academic works, including the rewriting or continuation of mythical and medieval sources, Widdicombe does an excellent job in detailing briefly the texts that comprise the legendarium while chronologically glossing the dates and events surrounding their production as well as the visual art – maps and illustrations – that Tolkien created to accompany them. This is perhaps the strongest chapter in Widdicombe's guide, for it lucidly describes the elaborate development of the monumental fictional world known as Middle-earth. Special attention is placed on Tolkien's three major works – *The Hobbit* (1937), *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion* (1977) – in relation to three aspects: the creative process behind their conception, their structure, and the distinct evolution each one of these texts underwent to either fit the plot of the One Ring or to gain a sense, even if remote, of completeness.

Following a short exploration of Tolkien's writing habits, Widdicombe discusses a crucial element in the reception of Tolkien's literary production, to which he returns on several occasions throughout the guide: Christopher Tolkien's role as his father's posthumous editor. By stating that Christopher's "work as editor has been essential but in some respects unhelpful" and that "[s]uch an assessment extends to the work of the Tolkien family through the Tolkien Trust," Widdicombe showcases a necessary discussion within Tolkien studies regarding, first, the limited access to invaluable materials such as Tolkien's diaries and, second, the posthumous edition and publication of Tolkien's writings, which is more timely than ever given Christopher Tolkien's recent passing (42).² Further on, Widdicombe also proposes an interesting debate by asking if the meaning of a text not intended for publication or written for a specific audience changes when fashioned for mass-publishing, as in the case of Tolkien's essays, *The Silmarillion*, and *The History of Middle-earth* (1983-1996).

The third chapter in Widdicombe's guide focuses on the importance of languages in Tolkien's legendarium. Widdicombe approaches this subject by soundly covering a variety of angles: from discussing the episodes and appendixes in Tolkien's texts where language takes centre stage and explaining their compositional development – both from an authorial perspective as well as according to the internal history of Tolkien's fictional world – to the importance of the acoustic and visual aesthetics of these languages. Widdicombe also makes a point at mentioning theoretical and practical considerations to the subject as well as valuable scholarly sources such as the *Mythlore* and *Tolkien Studies* journals. Although Quenya and Sindarin understandably constitute the cynosure of Widdicombe's chapter insofar that they are the most well-known of Tolkien's invented languages, this section would have benefitted from an ampler exploration of other languages such as Rohirric, which is only mentioned briefly until the fifth chapter. The same could be said of Widdicombe's compact appraisal of Tolkien's essays on language, "A Secret Vice" (1931; 1983), "English and Welsh" (1955; 1983), and "Valedictory Address" (1959; 1983).

The last three chapters of Widdicombe's *Guide* give the impression of a chiaroscuro, for they present a mixed composition of brilliant reflections on important themes and subjects within Tolkien's legendarium as well as disconcerting assertions that end up shadowing the conclusion of Widdicombe's text. The book's fourth section skilfully addresses the historical ages of Middle-earth in order to explain this fictional world's internal logic regarding time and its passing. To this Widdicombe adds a description of Middle-earth's changing geography, thus providing a comprehensive image of Tolkien's creation. Widdicombe's next chapter describes the various peoples of Middle-earth following their appearance throughout the history of Tolkien's fictional world and sketches some of their most important characteristics. The unequal space Widdicombe grants to elves and hobbits in this section seems to reflect the author's opinion that even if hobbits are the protagonists of Tolkien's most successful work, elves "mattered even more to" Tolkien, an idea that could well lead to further debates on the subject (96). Crucially, throughout his text, Widdicombe demonstrates an extraordinary level of competence in referencing primary sources and Tolkien's letters. However, from a more rigorous perspective, it would be ideal to have specified that since Tolkien did not give his posthumous publications their final form, events and situations described in them should be considered cautiously when used to support readings of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

The final chapter in the *Guide* lists what Widdicombe considers to be the most important themes in Tolkien's legendarium. The author prefaces this section by admitting his own biases and goes on to succinctly discuss well-known subjects in Tolkien studies, such as the role of the powerless, the importance of courage, the meaning of death, and so on. Amongst these, perhaps the most polemic theme bears the title "Men and Women Have Particular Roles in Life," which serves as a coda for Widdicombe's own questionable treatment of Tolkien's female characters throughout his guide. At the beginning of his text, Widdicombe recognises the absence and supposed unidimensionality of these characters, tracing these aspects to the all-male world and literary models that Tolkien inhabited and followed, and, consequently, to this author's own lack of insight into the intricacies of women's experiences. However, instead of actively countering this situation, Widdicombe does little more to give these figures more relevance than passing mentions or pointing out comical gestures

(such as Tolkien's reference to female dwarves). In addition, he states in the sixth chapter that Tolkien "believed men and women had particular roles in life" without offering any textual proof and spends more words discussing Rosie Cotton as a character than Éowyn, Galadriel, and Lúthien combined (139). Widdicombe hence falls into the same troublesome patterns that he claims to be aware of at the start of his *Guide*.

As for the afterword and the appendixes, these cover the latest of Tolkien's posthumous publications, *The Fall of Gondolin* (2018), Tolkien's literary influences, the different films made on the legendarium, and scholarly sources on Tolkien. Widdicombe's criticism acquires a much more personal note when discussing films inspired by Tolkien's oeuvre, especially in his careful although short analysis of Peter Jackson's versions of *The Hobbit* (2012-2014) and *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003). His final thoughts are dedicated to essential Tolkien scholarship, including books, journals, and websites. Although Widdicombe provides an extensive list of sources, it becomes clear – especially in light of his assertions in "Future Tolkien Research" – that he has overlooked the ever-increasing body of work in Tolkien studies derived from, but not limited to, critical theory from at least the past decade. The research of scholars such as Jane Chance, Robert Eaglestone, Dimitra Fimi, and Anna Vaninskaya come to mind, not to mention anthologies such as the Cormarë Series from Walking Tree Publishers and *Tolkien Among the Moderns* (2015).

This review values Widdicombe's effort in creating an introductory text to Tolkien's works as a noble one: creating a guide for an author as complex as Tolkien necessarily entails risks such as over- and under-explaining, or fixing the reader's experience to specific interpretative possibilities. It is extremely difficult to avoid all of these obstacles in such a short number of pages and, in any case, this review also acknowledges Widdicombe's belief in the importance of Tolkien's literary production. Tolkien's words are important not only because of their aesthetic qualities, but also because they effectively discuss matters still essential to our times, even if in the end Widdicombe may believe that "[i]t is unfashionable in this postmodern age to talk about such supposedly naïve concepts" (4). This review contests that opinion: it is neither unfashionable nor are these concepts naïve.

NOTES

1. If Widdicombe bases his reading on the Jackson's filmic version of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, which indeed leaves out these characters, it is not specified.

2. Widdicombe does nevertheless describe himself as "moved by Christopher Tolkien's extraordinary, selfless achievement over more than forty years" (161).

BIONOTE

Mariana Rios Maldonado completed her BA in Literature and Spanish Linguistics at the Autonomous University of Zacatecas, Mexico, and her MA in Comparative Literature at the Peter Szondi Institute in Berlin's Free University, Germany. Her research focuses on the influence of Germanic culture in contemporary literature, Germanophonic fantastic literature between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as J. R. R. Tolkien's literary production. She is a PhD candidate in Comparative Literature at the University of Glasgow, UK, with the research project "Ethics, Femininity, and the Encounter with the Other in J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle-earth Narratives" and a CONACYT-FINBA scholar. Mariana is the Equality and Diversity Officer for the University of Glasgow's Centre for Fantasy and the Fantastic.