



A review of
**The Hobbit and
Tolkien's Mythology:
Essays on Revisions
and Influences**

Shaun Gunner

Readers and scholars of *The Hobbit* have long recognised what J.R.R. Tolkien himself came to realise: that the book's narrative sits rather awkwardly alongside the larger body of Tolkien's Middle-earth 'legendarium'. Following in the footsteps of John D. Rateliff, who produced some compelling work in *The History of The Hobbit*, *The Hobbit and Tolkien's Mythology* aims to fill a genuine hole in Tolkien scholarship by analysing the impact of *The Hobbit* on Tolkien's mythology, rather than – as is more common – looking at the impact of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* on the development of *The Hobbit*.

The book itself provides a generous supply of 15 articles by 16 scholars and academics. Together with some less well-known writers, some of the scholars on offer have an impressive pedigree: alongside John D. Rateliff sit Jane Chance (founder of the 'Tolkien at Kalamazoo' symposium), Verlyn Flieger (co-editor of the *Tolkien Studies* journal as well as Tolkien's *On Fairy-stories* and *Smith of Wootton Major*), Gerard Hynes (co-editor of *Tolkien: The Forest and the City*), and Kristine Larsen (who regularly writes about the cosmological aspects of Tolkien's works).

The first section of the book is all about Tolkien's dwarves and their development. The two contributors in this section, Hynes and Rateliff, do an excellent job of analysing the historical development of Tolkien's dwarves and, in particular, their transformation from evil actors in the early versions of the legendarium to their more positive incarnation in *The Silmarillion* post-*The Hobbit*. Both authors provide some compelling accounts of the development of the dwarves and they complement each other perfectly. In comparing the characteristics of Tolkien's dwarves with those of William Morris, Andrew Lang and the Brothers Grimm, Hynes shows how Tolkien broke from the common portrayal of dwarves and drew on Norse, rather than Germanic, traditions. By contrast, Rateliff provides a cross-examination of the various stages of Tolkien's dwarves and, in one controversial and frustratingly brief paragraph, he cites the dwarves' atheism in 'The Nauglafring' (dated the late 1910s) as evidence of their intended evil nature in earlier texts.

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The second section of the book is all about Durin's Day and, it is fair to say, will have very niche appeal even within Tolkien scholarship. Sumner Gary Hunnewell's article tries to calculate a date for Durin's Day and argues persuasively that Tolkien drew inspiration from the Celtic calendar. Larsen's article follows this Celtic trend while delving into the astrology-mythology of Middle-earth and Durin's Day, but Larsen also rather disappointingly provides a lengthy description of J.K. Fotheringham's career and theories without tangible evidence of its salience. Both articles are genuinely fascinating but they fail to advance our understanding of *The Hobbit's* influence on the legendarium. They are symptomatic of the fact that this book is a diffuse collection of papers delivered at a single conference, rather than a coherent body of work on the same subject.

The third section of the book is nebulously named 'Themes' and is a random hodge-podge of articles which forces the reader to accept that the book's title and stated aims perhaps only related to a minority of its contents. Flieger's article 'Tolkien's French Connection' is undoubtedly the star of the show, convincingly demonstrating that – despite Tolkien's apparent Gallophobia – *The Hobbit* was as indebted to the *aventures* of French romances as the Norse sagas. This is followed by a brilliant article by Damien Bador on how Tolkien's use of invented languages created a depth to *The Hobbit* that rooted the story in the wider mythology that echoed the scale of *The Silmarillion*. As a side note, Tolkien scholars have a tendency to be overly forgiving of their favourite author, so it was amusing – almost pleasing – to see Bador criticise the tone of *The Hobbit* as having 'facetious, patronizing narration'.

Some of the other strong articles in this section include: Gregory Hartley's article 'Civilized Goblins and Talking Animals: How *The Hobbit* Created Problems of Sentience for Tolkien', which also touches on the perennial favourites of the irredeemability of orcs and whether Tolkien's orcs constitute racism; and Justin T. Noetzel's article on how Beorn and Bombadil are integrated with their landscapes and how naming their environments signifies sovereignty over their habitats. The weaker articles include: Michelle Markey Butler's article about Internet memes of the films, which is not about the book at all; and Vickie L. Holtz-Wodzack's piece arguing that we should see *The Hobbit* as a pilgrimage. Sadly Holtz-Wodzack's supporting evidence is limited to supposing that Tolkien meant 'holy day' when he wrote 'holiday' followed by simply and repeatedly narrating the events of the book as a 'pilgrimage' rather than an 'adventure' or 'quest'.

One final point about the editing of the book: although some of the articles could have benefited from a little careful pruning to prevent tangential waffling on personal hobby-horses, more unforgivable is the sloppy spelling errors of Tolkien's characters and locations when this is a specialist Tolkien publication. No doubt many of the contributors are familiar with Tolkien's anger at his publishers correcting 'elven' and 'dwarves' to 'elfin' and 'dwarfs', so it was surprising to see 'Moriah' for 'Moria', 'Sarumon' for 'Saruman' (repeated many times by one contributor), and 'Middle-earth' variously spelt 'Middle-Earth' and 'Middle

Earth' by several writers. The last was especially irritating as variant spellings occurred within a single sentence on several occasions! It is, however, fair to say that these mistakes were limited to the less accomplished Tolkien scholars, but that does not make such blatant mistakes any more forgivable.

Misspellings aside, this collection of essays is a thoroughly worthwhile investment despite the fact it is an incongruous selection of articles. Although the articles are a little hit and miss, the hits far outweigh the misses and the articles by Rateliff, Hynes, Flieger and Bador are outstanding, thoughtful and compelling. Just beware that this collection of essays is more broadly about *The Hobbit* (including two about *The Hobbit* films) rather than the more narrow focus on *The Hobbit's* influence on Tolkien's wider legendarium.

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