



A review of
**Tales of the
Marvellous and
News of the Strange**

Ruth B. Bottigheimer

Malcolm C. Lyons, whose translation of *Tales of 1,001 Nights* appeared in the Penguin Classics in 2008, presents here an ancient story collection, *al-Hikayat al-'ajiba wa'l-akhbar al-ghariba* (*Tales of the Marvellous and News of the Strange*), preserved in Istanbul's Hagia Sophia Library. Dated to 1300-50 from its handwriting, but argued by some to be as late as the 16th century, *Tales of the Marvellous* shares some stories with the 15th-century Syrian manuscript used by Antoine Galland for his *Mille et Une Nuits* and others with the North African *Mi'at Layla wa'Layla* (*Hundred and One Nights*). *Tales of the Marvellous's* centre of gravity lies in the Near East and a generalised 'Persia', as well as in specific cities like Baghdad, Basra, and Damascus. Originally this manuscript consisted of two volumes with a total of 42 stories. The surviving first volume containing 18 stories comprises the Lyons translation.

In *Tales of the Marvellous*, a plot is often retarded by ancillary adventures. In 'The Story of Sul and Shumul' (227-54), for instance, Sul interrupts his pursuit of Shumul to spend three days in a palace of pleasure that the text describes in detail – its construction, landscaping, furnishings, and arrangements for entertainment and service – and only then receives the sought-for promise of help in his quest.

The most prominent narrative extender, especially noticeable for European readers and listeners, is verse insertion. When the forward roll of a story's prose jerks to a halt for a verse interpolation that lingers over an apparently insignificant aspect of a story, one feels a sharp sense of both novelty and authenticity. In 'The Story of the Forty Girls and What Happens to Them with the Prince' (97-112), the storyteller focuses on their swaying hips at the suspenseful moment at which the warrior maidens return to their palace and find evidence of an intruder:

With slender waists and murderous coquetry
They aim at us with their wide eyes,
Lovely dark eyes that have no need of kohl.

They came up robed in beauty, stealing away my wits,
And when they tried to move forward a pace,
It was as though their feet were stuck in mud. (102)

Four narratives, all love stories, take this retarding device to an extreme, as they rock back and forth between prose and verse, with an omnipresent 'poet' repeatedly addressing his audience in verse, as do the characters themselves. In 'The Story of Miqdad and Mayasa' (269-94), Miqdad, preparing to do battle for his beloved Mayasa, hurls rhymed challenges at approaching warriors and proffers gentle rhymes to his beloved herself. She responds spiritedly, encouraging him to do battle and entreating the help of the Prophet's martial son-in-law Ali. In the scenes that follow, even Miqdad's old mother gives voice to a fervent rhymed prayer to the Prophet, but Miqdad's treacherous opponents are only allowed prose. In comic contrast the *Tales of the Marvellous* storyteller turns verse-insertion into an impatience-inducing spoof in 'The Story of Budur and 'Umar' (179-206).

Tales of the Marvellous stories begin, and then end, with formulaic acknowledgements of God's greatness: 'Praise be to the One God and may His blessing and peace rest on Mohammed and his family' (254), or very briefly, 'This is the whole story, and God knows better' (225), or even 'This is the complete story. May God bless our master Mohammed, his family, and his companions and give them peace' (294). No two narrative closures are precisely the same in *Tales of the Marvellous*, even though all return to and acknowledge Allah's omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence.

Far greater attention has been paid to the *Thousand and One Nights* than to this collection. It has been available to Western scholars through the translations of individual stories into German by Max Weisweiler, Hans Wehr, Otto Spies, Sophie Grotzfeld, and Heinz Grotzfeld, which Ulrich Marzolph gathered together as *Wundersame Geschichten* (1999).

Readers might be curious about the uses to which a collection like this could have been put. Likelihoods range from preparation 1) for an individual purchaser; 2) as a commercial object to be rented for personal reading pleasure, or 3) as a prompt for a public performance, or 4) as a mix of the above. The general absence of structurally complex 'boxed' tales and the frequent use of retarding devices in *Tales of the Marvellous* confirm the manuscript's suitability for public performance, without excluding the possibility of private leisure reading.

The tales are gripping, whether telling of elaborate automata guarding hidden treasures, of a band of warrior maidens, of the sea-born Julnar and her handsome son's mortal conflict with the vicious Queen Lab, or of the puzzling amalgam of Christian, Jewish, and pagan practices in the closing tale, 'The Story of Mahliya and

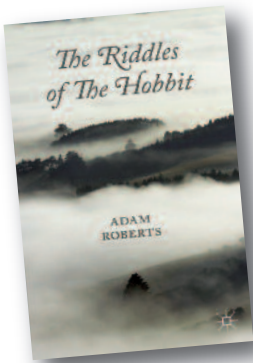
Mauhub and the White-Footed Gazelle'. And there are ten more equally captivating stories.

Robert Irwin's 'Introduction' (ix-xliv) clarifies concepts inherent in the medieval and early modern genre of Muslim story collections, outlines the collections principal cultural and literary categories (such as 'Prophecy', 'Coincidence and Fate', and 'Dreams of Opulence' to mention only three) and introduces lay readers to relevant scholarship, while a useful glossary (441-7) provides ready explanations for any and all unfamiliar names, places, coins, and Arabic literary terms.

Translator: Malcolm C. Lyons, intro. Robert Irwin.
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A review of **The Riddles of The Hobbit**

Jane Carroll

The popularity and perpetuity of J.R.R. Tolkien's work is assured. The recent film adaptations and the publication of a series of texts – *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún* (2009), *The Children of Húrin* (2007) and his translation of *Beowulf* (2014) – make it clear that Tolkien's star is rising still. Accordingly, critical interest in Tolkien is flourishing and Adam Roberts' book is one of many critical texts that seeks to engage with Tolkien's imaginative output. Roberts' argument is that riddles are imaginatively powerful things and that Tolkien's work, being full of enigmas, is so popular and interesting because it appeals to the same instinct that makes us want to solve crosswords and whodunnits. *The Riddles of The Hobbit* sets out to unravel some of the puzzles of Tolkien's Middle-earth – not just the riddles Bilbo and Gollum tell and guess under the mountains in *The Hobbit* but other riddles

too, including the puzzling epigraph at the entrance to Moria and the puzzling relationship between Tolkien's works of imagination, medieval literature and nursery rhymes.

The ten chapters of the book address different aspects of Tolkien's work – some range into wider discussions of *The Lord of the Rings* and genre fantasy and are not, strictly speaking, concerned with riddles at all. Throughout, Roberts offers connections between Tolkien's work and its Old Norse and Old English antecedents and provides sound translations of medieval texts to support his arguments. The writing is, at times, charmingly self-deprecating and moves playfully between formal and casual registers. The book has some very interesting arguments about Tolkien's work. The central chapters 3 and 4 about the 'Riddles in the Dark' scene are certainly the strongest in the book. These are tightly focused and contain fresh and even innovative material. Roberts' enthusiasm for riddles and for Tolkien's work is abundantly obvious, though some of his arguments are perhaps a little too cryptic for their own good. For instance, I'm not convinced by Roberts' argument that connects the riddles told by Gollum and Bilbo to the *Alvissmál*, a poem from the *Poetic Edda*. This involves a convoluted process of assigning each of the answers a letter and then rearranging these letters to make a sort of acrostic. The logic behind assigning each of the letters is not clear. For example, the reason why 'L' is assigned as the letter for 'teeth' is not satisfactorily explained.

This book is about riddles and, perhaps appropriately, is deeply puzzling in many ways. I haven't worked out why Roberts refers to Old English and Old Norse cultures under the umbrella term 'Anglo-Saxon' or why he describes *The Lord of the Rings* as a 'portal-quest fantasy'. At times, this book feels very imbalanced. Some of the arguments, Roberts admits, follow 'a roundabout route' but others are terse and could be usefully expanded and developed. The summary of *Beowulf* in Chapter 6, for example, is longer than the whole of Chapter 5. Another kind of imbalance is found in the tone of the book. As well as moving between formal and informal registers, Roberts swings between critical analysis and creative writing. Roberts will be familiar to Tolkien readers as the author of the parodies *The Soddit* (2012) and *The Sellamillion* (2012) and, perhaps because he is so comfortable with the creative mode, this book is full of odd reworkings of scenes and alternative scripts for conversations between Bilbo and Gollum, and between Oedipus and the Sphinx. These are sometimes entertaining but I can't help feeling that they are somewhat out of place in the context of an academic study. Perhaps most baffling of all, the final argument about the etymology of the word 'hobbit' is secured by a reference to a Middle English romance which Roberts himself has invented. I'm not sure what the point of this is – perhaps it is intended to be playful and ironic, but it comes over as

conceited and serves only to undermine the validity of what has gone before because it casts suspicion on other supporting material.

An obvious flaw with the book is that Roberts doesn't engage with much current Tolkien scholarship or establish a sense of how his work relates to other recent critical work on Tolkien. This is not the first book to trace connections between Tolkien's work and medieval literature – several of the links Roberts discusses have already been made before in Stuart D. Lee and Elizabeth Solopova's magnificent *The Keys of Middle-Earth: Discovering Medieval Literature through the Fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien* (2005) – and it seems wrong simply to ignore the work of other scholars. While the articles on riddles in Tolkien's work by Thomas M. Honegger and by Erin Sebo may have come slightly too late for inclusion here, I see no reason to exclude, for example, any reference to Robert Eaglestone's 2006 collection (to which Roberts contributed an essay on the symbolism of the ring which is largely repeated in Chapter 7 of this book).¹ This is a pity, firstly, because it makes it difficult for the scholar to welcome this book as a serious contribution to Tolkien studies and, secondly, because it makes it difficult for the avid fan to know where to go next to satisfy her curiosity about Tolkien's work.

This book offers a charming if, at times, oddly bewildering look at the role of riddles in Tolkien's work. Roberts' enthusiasm for riddles and his passion for Tolkien's work are abundantly obvious. As he provides such lengthy summaries of *Beowulf* and the saga of the Nibelungs, it seems that Roberts' intended reader is an enthusiastic fan who is unfamiliar with Tolkien's medieval sources. *The Riddles of The Hobbit* serves as a useful introduction to these sources and as a good starting point for the keen Tolkien fan to begin to unravel the mysteries of Middle-earth.

Author: Adam Roberts.
Palgrave Macmillan (2013), 186pp.

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References

1. Adam Roberts, 'The One Ring', in *Reading The Lord of the Rings: New Writings on Tolkien's Classic*, ed. Robert Eaglestone (Edinburgh: A & C Black, 2006), 59-70.