

# THE JOURNAL OF INKLINGS STUDIES

**Mark Atherton,  
*There and Back Again:  
J. R. R. Tolkien and the Origins of The Hobbit.*  
Review by Trevor Hart  
The Journal of Inklings Studies Vol. 5, No. 1, April 2015**

Mark Atherton, *There and Back Again: J. R. R. Tolkien and the Origins of The Hobbit*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2012. 320 pp. ISBN: 978-1780769271.

As its title suggests, this is a book about origins. Specifically, I presume, about the origins of Tolkien's 1938 children's story *The Hobbit*. The way in which the title of the book is printed on its cover and title page, though, leaves the reader happily uncertain whether it is in fact the eponymous volume to which it refers, or rather the character who appears both as its chief protagonist and as a minor player in its altogether more substantial sequel, *The Lord of the Rings*. Perhaps this is deliberate, or at least a subconscious gesture towards the fact that, in practice, much in this current publication has to do unashamedly with both.

Actually, the question of literary origins is far from being an obvious one to pose with regard to Tolkien's imaginative corpus, since it is one he himself ostensibly eschewed in his readings concerning the literary outputs of others. As a form of criticism, he insisted, the enumeration

of sources (however successful) was akin to accounting for a fine soup or casserole simply by listing its constituent ingredients. The most important thing – what was actually *done* with them, the nature of the output – was thereby almost always overlooked. Yet Atherton's volume makes no claim to be a work of literary criticism, and questions of source and possible influence may have their proper place in works of other sorts.

If we presume that the literary work in question is indeed *The Hobbit*, then the opening of that work pretends in the direction of a significant *novum*, if not quite a *creatio ab initio*. The sentence 'In a hole in the ground there lived a Hobbit', save for its reliance upon our familiarity with the English language and a handful of associated ideas, raises more questions than it answers. It offers itself to us as a fleeting glimpse into an imaginary world in which it makes perfectly good sense, and of which, therefore, we are bound

to wish to learn more (unless we are ourselves singularly lacking in imagination and the sort of curiosity which is one of its key products). Yet, of course, like all other artistry, Tolkien's was in reality the product of all sorts of things: in T. S. Eliot's oft-cited words, 'of a lifetime, and not one lifetime only'. Atherton grasps this nettle in Tolkien's case, and addresses it on a variety of different levels.

The book is structured in three parts, though in practice they tend necessarily to overlap and interpenetrate – unsurprisingly, perhaps, in view of the fact that for Tolkien everything was finally connected to everything else. Nonetheless, the reader of this review may value an indication of the scheme adopted for convenience. Part One ('Shaping the Plot') deals with the plot, theme and setting of the world suggested in *The Hobbit*. It does so by referring the reader to aspects of Tolkien's own biography and experience, not least elements in his early life and exposure to literature. Part Two ('Making the Mythology') concentrates in particular on Tolkien's longstanding predilection for the myths of Northern Europe (especially Norse myth) and the unique legendarium (posthumously published as *The Silmarillion*) in which he himself had already invested some twenty years' work prior to embarking on the narrative of *The Hobbit*, and which

feeds into the latter both directly and indirectly. Here again, biography inevitably intrudes, in the form, for instance, of the impact upon his imagination of a 1911 trip to the mountain-scape of the Bernese Oberland in Switzerland, and of the industrialized methods of warfare which he experienced first-hand in the trenches of the Somme. Part Three ('Finding the Words') concentrates on Tolkien's professional academic commitments as a philologist in the period prior to 1938. It focuses on the ways in which his love of language and the history of words were to give birth to a mythopoeic enterprise rooted first and foremost in the imagination of a language and the world in which it might meaningfully be spoken. This is traced back to early days and the family's possession of a copy of the *Chambers Etymological Dictionary* still in Tolkien's cherished possession only months before his death in 1973. Words familiar to the aficionado of Middle-Earth, such as *beorn*, *wearg*, *orthanc* and *ent* were, Atherton reminds us, loan words from Tolkien's own professed specialism in Anglo-Saxon (Old English) culture.

There is much in this volume to inform and enrich the understanding of those already committed to discovering more about the heritage within which Tolkien's imaginative outputs must be situated. The pursuit of such roots and influences, far from undermining the

sense of the man's originality, simply serves to underline the remarkable contribution that his re-imagining of them made to literature and more besides.

There are, though, some odd gaps to be taken into account in the treatment afforded here. For example, Atherton cites the importance of the 'riddling' encounter with Smeagol, which results in Bilbo's acquisition of the ring of power (as it was later to be known), and refers the reader to a parallel encounter between the god Thor and the dwarf Alvis in the Icelandic *Elder Edda*, a text which Tolkien loved. Yet he skirts too conveniently around the question of Tolkien's known familiarity with Wagner's development of this same motif in *Das Rheingold*, in an encounter between the god Wotan and the dwarf Alberich that results in Wotan's acquisition of a similar ring of power (not part of the shared Icelandic source). This is a hotly contested area of Tolkien scholarship, but hardly one

that can be entirely ignored in a book on origins. Understated, though not entirely ignored, is the influence of Owen Barfield's *Poetic Diction* (1923), especially Barfield's notion of an 'ancient semantic unity' underlying contemporary 'scientific' language and its refined tools of precise, analytic definition. And, of course, there is the question of Tolkien's devout commitment to catholic Christianity in its Roman form. This is mentioned at several junctures, but its importance is consistently played down. Neither *The Hobbit* nor its more substantial literary sequel must ever be read as an allegorical rendering of 'Christian truth', lest Tolkien be set spinning in his grave. But he certainly believed that, reality being what it is, an imaginative venture such as his own would generate resonances, figurations and poetic points of contact with whatever reliable accounts of reality humankind might have to offer. That Christian faith proffered one such, Tolkien himself was in no doubt.

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