

# **‘You tempt me grievously to a mythological essay’: J. R. R. Tolkien’s correspondence with Arthur Ransome**

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## **Abstract**

On December 13th 1937, the celebrated children’s author Arthur Ransome wrote to J. R. R. Tolkien with a few comments on Tolkien’s newly published book *The Hobbit*. Tolkien lost no time in replying, and his letter, held in the Brotherton Library of the University of Leeds, provides one of his earliest comments on his published fiction, and a relatively early explicit commentary on his mythic writing. This article publishes for the first time Tolkien’s response to Ransome in its entirety, and answers some of the questions regarding the chronology of Tolkien’s correspondence which arise. An analysis of the letter reveals that while, as many scholars have shown, the ‘sources’ and ‘inspirations’ of *The Hobbit* include the likes of *Beowulf* and the *Poetic Edda*, already in 1937 – and contrary to his own later claims – Tolkien’s principal primary source for fleshing out his prose stories with characters, places, and references to historical events was the vast legendarium he had created himself.

## **1. Introduction**

On Monday December 13th 1937, the celebrated children’s author Arthur Ransome wrote to J. R. R. Tolkien with a few comments on Tolkien’s newly published book *The Hobbit*. Tolkien lost no time in replying, and his letter of Wednesday 15th December 1937 provides one of his earliest comments on his published fiction, and a relatively early explicit commentary on his mythic writing. His reply has, however, never been published in full: here, therefore, we provide the first complete edition of Tolkien’s letter. Tolkien has proved a distinctive and enormously influential writer, and his letter to Ransome provides relatively early evidence for a creative process which demands investigation. A lot of ink has been spilt in trying to trace the sources and inspirations of Tolkien’s fictional writings (Kahlas-Tarkka

2004; see for the seminal investigation Shippey 1992 and for a survey relating to *The Hobbit* Anderson 2003, 4–7). Sources like *Beowulf*, the Poetic Edda, and – perhaps more importantly but less often noted – the *forncaldarsögur*, Icelandic sagas of adventure set before the settlement of Iceland, played a part in making *The Hobbit* such a perennially attractive book. Yet Tolkien’s letter to Ransome suggests – contrary to his own later claims – that his principal primary source for fleshing out his prose stories with characters, places, and references to historical events was the vast legendarium he had created himself. When Ransome wrote to Tolkien, he did so in playful acceptance of the fiction that *The Hobbit* was a translation of an ancient text, and perhaps for this reason elicited a rather different response from Tolkien than other early correspondents on *The Hobbit*. Tolkien’s letter to Ransome gives us an insight into the creative processes which shaped *The Hobbit*, and in particular shows that *The Hobbit* was more closely integrated into the legendarium of *The Silmarillion* than Tolkien generally recognised.

## 2. Arthur Ransome’s letter to J. R. R. Tolkien

December 1937 saw Arthur Ransome in a nursing home, recovering from an operation for an umbilical hernia which he had incurred while sailing on the Norfolk Broads (Brogan 1997, 249 fn. 1). Ransome’s friend and one-time publisher Stanley Unwin sent him a copy of Allen & Unwin’s new publication *The Hobbit*, prompting him to write to its author, J. R. R. Tolkien (Rateliff 2011, 873–76; cf. Tolkien 1981c, 27–28 [*Letters* no. 20]).

The letter which Ransome sent to Tolkien was edited by Hugh Brogan in his selective edition of Ransome’s letters (1997, 249). The edition does not explain where Brogan found the letter: the most obvious guess is that it is among papers of Tolkien’s held by his family (Brogan, pers. comm., 22nd July 2013). Another manuscript copy of the letter also exists: a transliteration made by Tolkien into his invented *tengwar* script, now among the papers held by his family. (*Tengwar* was created by Tolkien as an alphabet widely used in the fictional world of Eä for the writing of languages such as Elvish. The copy of Ransome’s letter is, however, a transliteration rather than a translation into any of Tolkien’s invented languages.) The *tengwar* copy of Ransome’s letter has been edited by Rateliff (2011, 873) and varies from the text published by Brogan not only in its punctuation (*tengwar* uses little) but also in a few lexical details. Presumably, then, either Tolkien altered the text as he copied it, or perhaps Brogan edited Ransome’s letter not from the fair copy received by Tolkien, but from a draft Brogan found among Ransome’s papers. (There is, however, no such draft among the main collection of Ransome’s correspondence in the Brotherton Library of the University of Leeds.)

As edited by Brogan – with the addition of variant readings from Tolkien's transcription – Ransome's letter to Tolkien reads:

To J. R. R. Tolkien, Oxford

Nursing Home,  
32 Surrey Street,  
Norwich

Dec. 13th 1937

Sir,

As a humble hobbit-fancier (and one certain that your book will be many times reprinted) may I complain that on page 27, when Gandalf calls Bilbo an excitable little hobbit<sup>1</sup>, the scribe (human no doubt) has written 'man' by mistake? On page 112 Gandalf calls the goblins 'little boys', but he means it as an insult so that is no doubt right<sup>2</sup>. But on page 294 Thorin surely is misinterpreted<sup>3</sup>. Why his concern for *men*? Didn't he say 'More of *us*', thinking of dwarves, elves, goblins and dragons and not of a species which to him must have been very unimportant. The error, if it is an error, is a natural one, due again to the humanity of the scribe to whom we must all be grateful for the chronicle<sup>4</sup>.

I am, sir,

Yours respectfully

Arthur Ransome

Ransome's copy of *The Hobbit* survives and both of the suggested alterations are marked there in pencil (Mellone 2006). Rateliff wrote that 'it is not known whether Ransome sent the following letter to Tolkien directly ... or as an enclosure' accompanying a letter sent by Unwin to Tolkien on December 15th (2011, 873). But Unwin's letter would have had to have been delivered speedily indeed for Tolkien to have written his reply to Ransome, as he did, on the same day as Unwin sent it. Ransome must have written to Tolkien directly, which would have been easy enough if he had known either Tolkien's Oxford college or that he worked in the Oxford English School.

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1 excitable little hobbit] excitable hobbit *Tengwar MS* (Rateliff 2011, 873).

2 no doubt right] no doubt all right *Tengwar MS* (Rateliff 2011, 873).

3 misinterpreted] misrepresented *Tengwar MS* (Rateliff 2011, 873).

4 the chronicle] this chronicle *Tengwar MS* (Rateliff 2011, 873).

### 3. J. R. R. Tolkien's letter to Arthur Ransome.

Although adverted to in Carpenter's selection of Tolkien's letters (Tolkien 1981c, 435), Tolkien's reply to Ransome was first published, in much reduced form, in Hugh Brogan's edition of Ransome's letters (1997, 249–51) from the original manuscript (Leeds, Brotherton Collection, Ransome correspondence Box C5; ID 9128 in the Brotherton's letters database at <https://bei.leeds.ac.uk/FreeSearch/LIBSPCOL/Letters/index.html>). Brogan was a fan not only of Ransome's work but also of Tolkien's, and had himself corresponded with Tolkien in the 1940s and '50s (Tolkien 1981c [*Letters* nos. 114, 117, 118, 151, 169, 171, 179]). Accordingly, the letter was referenced in Anderson's *Annotated Hobbit* (2003, 48 n. 36, 152 n. 11, and 348 n. 2) and Scull and Hammond's exhaustive chronology of Tolkien's activities (2006, 208). Subsequently, Rateliff expanded the editing of the correspondence by including excerpts from Tolkien's related communications with Stanley Unwin, along with a thorough commentary (2011, 873–76). He did not have access to the actual letter Tolkien sent to Ransome, which Brogan had excerpted, but he did have another manuscript copy of the letter: having transliterated Ransome's letter into tengwar, Tolkien drafted his own reply on the verso, also in tengwar. However, this text of the reply is incomplete, either because Tolkien gave up or, more likely given that he filled the verso to exactly the same extent as he filled the recto in the letter he actually sent to Ransome, because a further sheet of the tengwar text has been lost. Rateliff re-edited Tolkien's letter from this tengwar text, but when this ran out reprinted Brogan's excerpts, thus omitting the end of the letter (2011, 878–79). In consequence, Tolkien's letter to Ransome has never been published in its entirety.

Here, by the kind permission of the Tolkien Estate, we give a complete transcription of the letter received by Ransome. We annotate all divergences from the existing editions except for minor differences of punctuation and capitalisation (Tolkien's tengwar manuscript, in particular, is punctuated much more lightly than a text in Latin script would be, and tengwar lacks majuscules; cf. Rateliff 2011, 878–89). By way of palaeographical detail, it is worth noting Tolkien's decision to mark word-breaks at the line-ends not only with a hyphen at the right-hand margin, but with a corresponding one where the word picks up in the left-hand margin – already an archaic feature in Tolkien's time and a pointer to his archaising proclivities. The letter measures 183×238mm. A photographic reproduction is, at the time of writing, available at [http://tolkiengateway.net/wiki/Arthur\\_Ransome\\_15\\_December\\_1937](http://tolkiengateway.net/wiki/Arthur_Ransome_15_December_1937). The envelope in which the letter was sent does not survive.

[recto]

December 15th 1937

Dear M<sup>r</sup> Ransome,

I am<sup>5</sup> sure M<sup>r</sup> Baggins would agree in words such as he he [sic] used to Thorin – to have been fancied by you, that is more than any hobbit could have expected<sup>6</sup>. The scribe, too, is delighted to be honoured by a note in your own hand, and by criticisms showing so close a scrutiny of<sup>7</sup> the text. My reputation will go up with my children – the eldest are now rather to be classed as ‘men’<sup>8</sup>, but on their shelves, winnowed of the chaff left behind in the nursery, I notice that their ‘Ransomes’ remain.

You tempt me grievously to a mythological essay; but I restrain myself, since your criticisms are good even though the offending words may be defensible. For the history of the Hobbit must come before many who have not before them the exact history of the world into which M<sup>r</sup> Baggins strayed; and it is unwise to raise issues of such import.<sup>9</sup> I will replace ‘man’ on p. 27 by the ‘fellow’ of an earlier recension. On p. 112<sup>10</sup> I agree in feeling that Gandalf’s ‘insult’ was rather silly and not quite up to form – though of course he would regard the undeveloped males of all two-legged species as ‘boys’. I am<sup>11</sup> afraid the blemish can hardly be got over by vocabulary, unless ‘oaves’ would be an improvement? On p. 294 I accept ‘of us’ as a great improvement: men is there just a loose<sup>12</sup>

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5 I am] I’m (Rateliff 2011, 874).

6 could have expected] could expect (Rateliff 2011, 874).

7 a scrutiny of] an acquaintance with (Rateliff 2011, 874).

8 ‘men’ ] men (Rateliff 2011, 874). The lack of quotation marks here is characteristic of the lack of punctuation in the Tengwar MS generally, but the presence of the quotation marks in the letter to Ransome anticipates Tolkien’s subsequent analysis of the term *men*, distinguishing the sense at this point in the letter of ‘adult males’ from the sense ‘human beings’ deployed later: see section 5 below.

9 Brogan (1997, 249–51) omits the beginning of this paragraph until this point.

10 112] 212 (Rateliff 2011, 874). The Tengwar MS is in error; the sent letter is correct.

11 I am] I’m (Rateliff 2011, 874).

12 Here the tengwar text breaks off, also at the end of a leaf (Rateliff 2011, 874).

[verso]

rendering of Thorin's word for 'people' – the language of those days, unlike modern English, had a word that included the Two Kindreds (Elves and Men) and their likenesses and mockeries. 'Of us' exactly represents this: for Thorin certainly included 'humans' in his comment, for Elves and Dwarves were mightily concerned with them, and well aware that it was their fate to usurp the world; but he was not at that moment thinking chiefly of Men (with a capital). The ancient English, of course, would have felt no<sup>13</sup> hesitation in using 'man', of elf, dwarf, goblin, troll, wizard or what not, since they were inclined to make Adam the father of them all.<sup>14</sup> Needless to say, that is not the 'true tale' according to the history of the elves. As for hobbits no high legends deal with their origin, and having no better information I am inclined to claim them as a pleasant if miniature variety of our own kind, or of some related strain. They are 'mortals' anyway: but the scribe avoided that word as too puckish, and apparently inaccurate. Since elves too can be killed – but with very different results indeed<sup>15</sup>. These matters are not raised in the hobbit-memoires, and are only alluded to in passing by Thorin (foot of p. 293). The interpretation of his words, which would be quite inapplicable to Men<sup>16</sup> (or hobbits), brings in other matters, known to my children; but as they are too remotely mythological I am afraid they are unlikely to be published.

I must apologise for writing at such length. I hope you are well enough to endure it or forgive it, trusting that your address does not indicate a serious illness. I hope the enclosed list of other minor errors will serve to correct your copy – but, if there is a reprint (sales are not very great) I hope you will allow me to send you a corrected copy.

Yours very respectfully,

JRR Tolkien

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13 no] Corrected by the scribal hand from *not*.

14 Here the existing editions break off until the end of the paragraph. The following, last paragraph is further omitted by Rateliff (2011, 874–75).

15 indeed] Corrected by the scribal hand from: *inded*.

16 Men] Corrected by the scribal hand from: *men*.

As his letter implies, Tolkien enclosed a list of corrections. This has caused a measure of confusion, because it was not mentioned in Brogan's edition (nor has it been circulated online). Mellone (2006) reports that 'there was no evidence of Tolkien's list of corrections in the book or on the shelves' among Ransome's books ((held in the Ransome Room at the Museum of Lakeland Life and Industry in Kendal), not knowing that the list was in the Brotherton Library with Tolkien's letter; Rateliff was left to speculate about its contents (2011, 877). The list is written on a smaller sheet (116×186mm), and has not been edited previously.

Corrections for 'the Hobbit' ·

- p. 64 'five feet high the door &c.' is a correct translation of the red runes; the words on p. 30 (8, 9 from end) should be corrected to agree.
- p. 64 l. 14 from end for 'where the thrush &c' read 'when' as the runes actually do.
- p. 104 l. 17 for back read black
- p. 210 l. 5 from end. read 'above the stream'
- p. 216 l. 4 for leas read least.
- p. 248 l. 3 from end for nay read any.

Ransome implemented these corrections in his copy in ink (Mellone 2006).

Tolkien's letters are accompanied in the Brotherton Collection by four colour plates from *The Hobbit*: 'The Hill: Hobbiton-across-the Water' (no subtitle); 'RIVENDELL' (subtitled 'The Fair Valley of Rivendell'); 'Bilbo comes to the Huts of the Raft-elves' (subtitled 'The dark river opened suddenly wide'); and 'Conversation with Smaug' (subtitled ' "O Smaug, the Chiefest and Greatest of all Calamities!" '). There is no record of these being added to the collection later, so it appears that Tolkien sent these plates to Ransome with the letter. Tolkien had painted these illustrations (along with the illustration of the eagle subtitled 'Bilbo Woke Up with the Early Sun in His Eyes') during July and August 1937 with a view to their inclusion in the first American edition (Anderson 2003, 14). They were not included in the first British edition of *The Hobbit*, which had been published with ten black and white illustrations on September 21st 1937 and which Ransome had been sent. However, Allen & Unwin had decided to include the four which appear in the Ransome collection in the second impression of the British

edition, which was ready for publication by December 19th 1937 (though official publication was on January 25th 1938; Hammond 1993, 4–15).

The presence of the plates in the Ransome collection is probably explained by a letter to Tolkien from Stanley Unwin. On the same day that Tolkien was writing to Ransome, Stanley Unwin was writing to Tolkien. The letter is unpublished but says (in Scull and Hammond's summary) that 'the first printing of *The Hobbit* has sold out, but a reprint with four colour illustrations will be available almost immediately' (2006, 208). The same day, Unwin sent, separately, the manuscripts which Tolkien had submitted of the *Silmarillion* and some other work. Rateliff (2011, 873) quoted the following, presumably from the same letter as that summarised by Scull and Hammond:

I sent a copy of THE HOBBIT to Arthur Ransome, who is temporarily laid up at a nursing home in Norwich, and he writes –  
 'THE HOBBIT is my delight; great fun. Thank you for sending him. Do the author's new coloured pictures include a portrait of Bilbo Baggins? Or does he refrain?'

This shows that Unwin had mentioned the new colour illustrations to Ransome, but implies that Ransome had not at that point seen any, so the plates in the Ransome Collection are unlikely to have come from Unwin. Tolkien's reply to Unwin the next day asked which illustrations Unwin had chosen and whether the five originals had yet returned from the USA. Notwithstanding Tolkien's apparent uncertainty here, given Ransome's evident interest in the colour illustrations and the appearance in the Ransome collection of the four plates which were used in the second impression, it looks like Unwin had sent these as off-prints to Tolkien, and Tolkien popped them into the letter to Ransome which he had written the day before but presumably not yet sent (which would explain why they are not mentioned in his letter). If so, the decision belies Tolkien's pride in his work, despite the continual self-effacement regarding his artistic skills he expressed in his letters during 1937.

Ransome replied to Tolkien on December 17th (ed. Brogan 1997, 251; repr. Rateliff 2011, 875); Tolkien followed up some of the suggested changes in a letter to Allen & Unwin of December 19th (Tolkien 1981c, 27–28 [*Letters* 20]; partially repr. Rateliff 2011, 876). While he did not send Ransome a copy of the next edition of *The Hobbit* as he had promised, he did have Ransome sent an advance copy of *The Lord of the Rings* (Rateliff 2011, 877).



#### 4. 'The exact history of the world into which Mr Baggins strayed': *The Hobbit* and *The Silmarillion*

In his foreword to *The Return of the Shadow* (Tolkien 1988, 7), Christopher Tolkien wrote that 'how my father saw *The Hobbit* – specifically in relation to "The Silmarillion" – at the time of its publication is shown clearly in the letter that he wrote to G. E. Selby on 14 December 1937' – that is, the day before J. R. R. Tolkien wrote to Ransome. Christopher Tolkien quoted from the letter (published in full as Tolkien 1987, 4, with a correction in Rateliff 2012, n. 4):

I don't much approve of *The Hobbit* myself, preferring my own mythology (which is just touched on) with its consistent nomenclature – Elrond, Gondolin, and Esgaroth have escaped out of it – and organized history, to this rabble of Eddaic-named dwarves out of Völuspá, newfangled hobbits and gollums (invented in an idle hour) and Anglo-Saxon runes.

Christopher Tolkien then explained the significance of this statement:

The importance of *The Hobbit* in the history of the evolution of Middle-earth lies then, at this time, in the fact that it was published, and that a sequel to it was demanded. As a result, from the nature of *The Lord of the Rings* as it evolved, *The Hobbit* was drawn into Middle-earth – and transformed it; but as it stood in 1937 it was not a part of it. Its significance for Middle-earth lies in what it would do, not in what it was. (Tolkien 1988, 7)

This analysis is consistent not only with the position which J. R. R. Tolkien took in his letter to Selby, but with his stated position in much of his other, post-war correspondence and commentary (Rateliff 2012). However, there is an emergent consensus (epitomised by Olsen 2012, 9, 167) that *The Hobbit* sat more squarely within the legendarium represented by *The Silmarillion* than Tolkien suggested, an argument with significant implications for understanding Tolkien's creative process when he wrote *The Hobbit*, and how he achieved its verisimilitude. Rateliff has recently shown how the manuscripts of *The Hobbit* show a rather deep relationship with the world of the *Silmarillion*; that Tolkien's letter to Selby is more consistent with this view than appears at first sight; and that Tolkien's letter to Ransome supports this further (2012; cf. 2011, esp. 876–77). Likewise, while happy to demonstrate Tolkien's creative use of medieval sources and scholarly methodologies (Bibire 1993a), Paul Bibire has situated *The Hobbit* firmly within the context of Tolkien's legendarium, arguing (1993b, 203) that

*The Hobbit* ... opens up a new world which ultimately is related in time to that of *The Silmarillion*, but not in place or persons. In this, of course, it is comparable with the Númenor material, which never achieved final literary form.

*The Hobbit* is not alone, then, in the fashion by which it extends the history of Middle Earth.

Thus Tolkien's letter to Ransome, written the day after his letter to Selby, is consistent with the alternative narrative of the genesis of *The Hobbit* in which it was rather intimately integrated into the Middle Earth legendarium. Both letters were written in the midst of illness; at about the same time, Tolkien was learning that Allen & Unwin would not in the foreseeable future publish *The Silmarillion*, and yet, it would seem, was also in the midst of writing the first chapter of the sequel to *The Hobbit* that was to become *The Lord of the Rings* (perhaps hinted at in his letter to Ransome by the mention in the plural of 'the hobbit-memoires'; Tolkien 1981c [*Letters* nos 18, 19, 20]; Rateliff 2012). This was a time, then, when Tolkien must have had quite complex feelings about his fiction. The letter to Ransome reflects the side of Tolkien, subsequently downplayed, which demanded that *The Hobbit* be read as a part of the world of *The Silmarillion*. Tolkien was no doubt prompted to a stouter representation of his work partly by the professional rather than personal nature of the correspondence with Ransome, and was presumably encouraged by Ransome's cheerful participation in the supposition that *The Hobbit* was not a work of fiction, but a translation of which Tolkien (or some earlier copyist) was the 'scribe' – to which Tolkien responded gamely, making his letter itself, in a sense, part of his corpus of pseudo-mythological fiction. As Rateliff pointed out, Tolkien's statement in his reply that 'the history of the Hobbit must come before many who have not before them the exact history of the world into which M<sup>r</sup> Baggins strayed' is a fairly clear allusion, for those familiar with the rest of Tolkien's *œuvre*, to the integration of *The Hobbit* into Tolkien's wider legendarium – especially Tolkien's reference to Elves and Men as 'Two Kindreds', which Tolkien seems to have introduced into his pseudo-mythological writing in 1930 (Rateliff 2011, 77; Rateliff 2012, n. 13). The portion of the letter which Rateliff had not seen, however, makes the connection between *The Hobbit* and the *Silmarillion* legendarium clearer again. We begin our analysis of this section of the letter by elucidating some of the philological background to Tolkien's handling of Ransome's letter.

## 5. 'The ancient English ... would have felt no hesitation in using "man"'

Ransome's key point about *The Hobbit* was that Tolkien used the word *man* inclusively of mythical beings. Ransome did not readily recognise Bilbo as a 'man' when he read the passage ' "Excitable little man," said Gandalf, as they sat down again. "Gets funny queer fits, but he is one of the best, one of the best – as fierce as a dragon in a pinch" ' (Tolkien 1937, 27). As Tolkien promised, this was changed to 'excitable little fellow' in the second edition, published in 1951 (1981a, 27). Reading Thorin's dying words 'if more men valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world' (Tolkien 1937, 294), Ransome suggested (the slightly less sententious) 'if more of us valued food...', again a change accepted in the second edition (1981a, 57). In Brogan's analysis, Ransome's letter 'hit where it hurt, and Tolkien accepted his criticisms' (1984, 11 n. 2). Rateliff has accordingly taken these developments as evidence for Tolkien's willingness, contrary to a reputation for intransigence, to accept criticism and adapt his work (2011, 878 n. 1), and both Ratefliff (2011, 877) and Hammond and Scull (2005, 57) have seen Ransome's criticism to underlie Tolkien's later avoidance of *man* in the sense of 'person' as opposed to 'human', and his coining of the term *gentlehobbit* in place of the putative alternative *gentleman* in *The Lord of the Rings*.

However, neither Ransome nor Tolkien took these points too deeply to heart: the other occasions on which the word *man* is used in *The Hobbit* to denote beings other than everyday humans went unnoted by Ransome and unaltered by Tolkien. A page after Gandalf's characterisation of Bilbo as 'an excitable little man', Gloom says to Bilbo that 'Gandalf told us that there was a man of the sort in these parts looking for a Job at once', to which Gandalf replies 'you asked me to find the fourteenth man for your expedition, and I chose Mr. Baggins. Just let any one say I chose the wrong man or the wrong house, and you can stop at thirteen and have all the bad luck you like' (Tolkien 1981a, 28–29). Bilbo later tells the dwarf Balin 'what he thought of a look-out man who let people walk right into them like that without warning' (though here the use of *man* in a compound lessens the strength of its connotation of a particular species; 1981a, 96). Tolkien changed his text in line with Ransome's suggestion, but arguably more out of deference than conviction.

Part of Tolkien's defence of his usage to Ransome was that 'the ancient English, of course, would have felt no hesitation in using "man", of elf, dwarf, goblin, troll, wizard or what not, since they were inclined to make Adam the father of them all'. This is an early explicit articulation of how he understood a noun which he used in ways which were rather distinctive (and already liable to come across as patriarchal), and it is worth exploring what he had in mind. Tolkien was

almost certainly thinking primarily of *Beowulf* lines 102–14 (the celebrated passage which also gave him the noun *orc*, ed. Klaeber 1950, 5; cf. Rateliff 2011, 877):

Wæs se grimma gæst      Grendel haten,  
 mære mearcstapa,      se þe moras heold,  
 fen ond fæsten;      fifelcynnes eard  
 wonsæli wer      weardode hwile,  
 siþðan him scyppend      forscifen hæfde  
 in Caines cynne.      þone cwealm gewræc  
 ece drihten,      þæs þe he Abel slog;  
 ne gefeah he þære fæhðe,      ac he hine feor forwræc,  
 metod for þy mane,      mancynne fram.  
 þanon untydras      ealle onwocon,  
 eotenas ond ylfe      ond orcneas,  
 swylce gigantas,      þa wið gode wunnon  
 lange þrage;      he him ðæs lean forgeald.

That fierce spirit/guest was called Grendel, the famed border-walker, he who occupied waste-lands, the fen and the fastness, the homeland of the giant-race – the ill-blessed man inhabited them for a time, after the Creator had condemned him; the eternal Lord avenged that killing on the kin of Cain, because he [Cain] slew Abel. He did not profit from that feud, but the Measurer banished him for that crime, from humankind. Thence all misbegotten beings spang forth, ogres [*eotenas*] and elves [*ylfe*] and orcs [*orcneas*], likewise giants [*gigantas*], which struggled against God for a long while. He gave them repayment for that.

This passage is unusual in Old English and not entirely representative of Anglo-Saxon world views (e.g. Hall 2007, 71–73), but was evidently representative enough for Tolkien as he articulated his views to Ransome. Though it is not particularly evident in Tolkien's letter, he was surely also thinking of the fact that the Old English word *mann* had a broader semantic range in respect of gender as well as species: while probably connoting men (as the prototypical examples of humans in Anglo-Saxon world-views), Old English *mann*, like its Old and Modern Icelandic cognate *maður*, denoted 'people' irrespective of gender (in addition to Bosworth–Toller 1898, s.v. see Fell 2002, 201–7). Thus when, four days after writing his letter to Ransome, Tolkien wrote to C. A. Furth at Allen & Unwin, he said in a postscript discussing Ransome's letter:

*Men* with a capital is, I think, used in text when 'human kind' are specifically intended; and *man, men* with a minuscule are occasionally and loosely used as 'adult male' and 'people'. But perhaps, although this can be mythologically

defended (and is according to Anglo-Saxon usage!), it may be as well to avoid raising mythological issues outside the story.

The letters to Ransome and Furth, then, together bear out Tolkien's tendency to look to Old English semantics as a justification for his literary usage. They also, however, attest to a degree of equivocation on Tolkien's part as to whether he rigorously distinguished between *men* and *Men*. In the letter to Furth this comes through in Tolkien's 'I think'. Meanwhile, in his letter to Ransome, discussing the speech by Thorin on which Ransome had commented, Tolkien first wrote 'the interpretation of his words, which would be quite inapplicable to men (or hobbits)' and then corrected *men* to *Men*. Evidently he did not distinguish the two without effort. As Rateliff has shown, Tolkien's letter to Ransome is helpful for understanding Tolkien's attitude to wizards at the time of *The Hobbit*'s publication (2011, 48–52, at 50). Tolkien's claim that Anglo-Saxons would use *man* of 'elf, dwarf, goblin, troll, wizard or what not' hints that the Gandalf of *The Hobbit* is, like elves, dwarves, goblins and trolls, not to be understood as an ordinary person (i.e. wizards are *men* but not *Men*), which in turn aligns *The Hobbit* more closely with Tolkien's wider legendarium.

Tolkien's discussion of *men* in his letter helps us to understand the creative process outlined by Shippey (1992, 53):

Good writing began with right words. Tolkien accordingly schooled himself to drop forms like 'elfin', 'dwarfish', 'fairy', 'gnome', and eventually 'goblin', though he had used all of them in early works up to and including *The Hobbit*. More importantly, he began to work out their replacements, and to ponder what concepts lay behind the words and uses which he recognised as linguistically authentic.

There is extensive and well known evidence for these gradual developments (see for example the discussion of *orc* by Hammond and Scull 2005, 24–26), but Tolkien's allusion in his letter to Ransome to the Old English usage of *man* and, through this, to *Beowulf*, provides a useful datum point in tracing the intellectual process by which Tolkien developed and then crystallised the nomenclature of Middle Earth.

## 6. 'As for hobbits...': the origins of Hobbits in Tolkien's mythology

For the present study, however, the most intriguing details of Tolkien's letter lie naturally in the passage which has not yet been edited. Continuing from the statement '... since they were inclined to make Adam the father of them all', Tolkien wrote:

Needless to say, that is not the ‘true tale’ according to the history of the elves. As for hobbits no high legends deal with their origin, and having no better information I am inclined to claim them as a pleasant if miniature variety of our own kind, or of some related strain. They are ‘mortals’ anyway: but the scribe avoided that word as too puckish, and apparently inaccurate. Since elves too can be killed – but with very different results indeed. These matters are not raised in the hobbit-memoires, and are only alluded to in passing by Thorin (foot of p. 293). The interpretation of his words, which would be quite inapplicable to Men (or hobbits), brings in other matters, known to my children; but as they are too remotely mythological I am afraid they are unlikely to be published.

Tolkien never wrote ‘high legends’ regarding the hobbits: as he later wrote in the prologue to *The Lord of the Rings*, ‘Concerning Hobbits’ (Tolkien 1981b, 18–19),

The beginning of Hobbits lies far back in the Elder Days that are now lost and forgotten. Only the Elves still preserve any records of that vanished time, and their traditions are concerned almost entirely with their own history, in which Men appear seldom and Hobbits are not mentioned at all.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that at the time of writing the letter to Ransome, Tolkien seems not to have written anything on the origins of Hobbits (as he says in the letter, he has ‘no better information’). The history of Hobbits only began to emerge in the writing and rewriting of the opening chapters of *The Lord of the Rings* in 1937–39, and particularly in the revision of the prologue in 1948–50 (Tolkien 1988, chapter XIX, pp. 319ff; Tolkien 1996, chapter I, esp. pp. 14–15). Of the ‘true’ mythological origins of Hobbits Tolkien never wrote more than he says in the letter to Ransome; unlike the other races in Tolkien’s legendarium, the Hobbits do not have a origin story, telling of their creation and awakening into the world (Tolkien 1981c, 158 [*Letters* no. 131]). What is striking about Tolkien’s letter to Ransome is that it shows that Tolkien was in 1937 already integrating Hobbits into his legendarium precisely as he always would thereafter. Tolkien’s expression of ignorance as to the origins of Hobbits might seem consistent with his dismissive mention to Selby of ‘newfangled hobbits and gollums (invented in an idle hour)’, but it was Tolkien who brought the matter of Hobbits’ origins up, not Ransome: Tolkien was, therefore, already choosing to think about how to integrate them into Middle Earth, and had indeed already hit upon a strategy which continued to please him. Its mimesis of the gaps in real historical records, and consonance with *The Hobbit’s* narrative of the moral triumph of the little person caught up in great events – a theme which Tolkien was to develop with tragic power in *The Lord of the Rings* – made what was initially perhaps an *ad hoc* explanatory gambit, conceivably even invented as Tolkien wrote to Ransome, stick.

## 7. '... they are "mortals" anyway': immortality in Tolkien's mythology

The fate of Hobbits after death is never stated in any of Tolkien's fictional works, so it is interesting that Tolkien's letter to Ransome addresses this topic (and that Tolkien chose to bring it up). However, Tolkien's statement on the subject is rather ambiguous. The sentence 'they are "mortals" anyway: but the scribe avoided that word as too puckish, and apparently inaccurate' leaves one in doubt as to the significance of the term *mortal*, why it is inaccurate, and whether Hobbits are, therefore, mortal or not. But the letter to Ransome implies, like various of Tolkien's later writings, that (to quote a probably 1951 letter to Milton Waldman) Hobbits are 'a branch of the specifically *human* race' (Tolkien 1981c, 158 n. † [Letters no. 131]), and as such by implication Hobbits shared the fate of Men. Thus, Tolkien's objection in the letter to Ransome to the word *mortal* is explained not by equivocation over whether Hobbits were actually mortal or not but by the complexity of the afterlives of races as given in his legendarium, which made the connotations of *mortal* misleading.

The core of Tolkien's mythology – 'known to his children', but 'too remote' from *The Hobbit* to feel publishable in 1937 – was published posthumously in a redacted form as *The Silmarillion* (Tolkien 1983). While Hobbits barely get a mention in this work, it does contain the creation myths of Elves, Men and Dwarves, as well as accounts of their afterlives<sup>17</sup> – albeit all given from an elven point of view, something which Tolkien was careful to stress when he explained his mythology to correspondents (see, *inter alia*, Tolkien 1981c, 145, 147 [Letters no. 131]; and 285 [no. 212]).

The reason why Tolkien, in the letter to Ransome, says that the word *mortal* is inaccurate is explained by the first chapter of *The Silmarillion* (Tolkien 1983, 47–48):

For the Elves die not till the world dies, unless they are slain or waste in grief (and to both these seeming deaths they are subject) ... and dying they are gathered to the halls of Mandos in Valinor, whence they may in time return. But the sons of Men die indeed, and leave the world ... Death is their fate, the gift of Ilúvatar, which as Time wears even the Powers shall envy ... Yet of old the Valar declared to the Elves in Valinor that Men shall join in the Second Music of the Ainur; whereas Ilúvatar has not revealed what he purposes for the Elves after the World's end ...

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17 For these, see Tolkien 1983, 18–20, 47–48, 49–51, 56, 122–24.

In other words, the fates of Elves and Men are different. Elves are restricted to the ‘circles of the World’ (the universe) until the end of time, whereas Men escape it in death.<sup>18</sup> While Elves, too, can die in body, their spirits go to the halls of Mandos in Valinor – a paradise on earth, but within the Circles of the World – and they may in time return to the World as the same person as they had been before, with all their memories intact (Tolkien 1981c, 286 [*Letters* no. 212]).

Most of this mythology had been written by the time *The Hobbit* was published (Tolkien 1981c, 346 [*Letters* 257]), and therefore even if Tolkien at the time considered Hobbits a ‘newfangled’ addition to the legendarium, the remark by Thorin on his death-bed refers to established facts of the legendarium: ‘I go now to the halls of waiting to sit beside my fathers, until the world is renewed’ (Tolkien 1981a, 270 [*The Hobbit* chapter 18]). As Anderson has pointed out (2003, 348 n. 1), Tolkien’s ideas about the fate of Dwarves after death wavered, but Thorin’s statement here is at least consistent with the fate of Dwarves as given in chapter 2 of *The Silmarillion* (Tolkien 1983, 51):

For [the Dwarves] say that Aulë the Maker, whom they call Mahal, cares for them, and gathers them to Mandos in halls set apart; and that he declared to their Fathers of old that Ilúvatar will hallow them and give them a place among the Children in the End. Then their part shall be to serve Aulë and to aid him in the remaking of Arda after the Last Battle.

In other words, Dwarves share a fate somewhat akin to those of both Elves and Men: they remain within the Circles of the World (i.e. the Universe) until the end of Time, but will survive beyond it, in a fashion reminiscent of the remaking of the world after the *Ragnarök* as described in the Old Norse poem *Völuspá*, from which Tolkien drew the names of the Dwarves in *The Hobbit*. However, since they remain in the World after death, their fate is indeed different from that of Men or Hobbits.<sup>19</sup> Thus the letter can be read as situating *The Hobbit* in a world fully consistent with that of *The Silmarillion*.

The letter also strikes an intriguing note in its characterisation of the word *mortal* as ‘too puckish’. This is surprising, as Tolkien used *mortal* extensively in his mythological writings, before and after *The Hobbit* – perhaps most memorably in the line ‘Nine [rings] for Mortal Men doomed to die’ in the ring-verse in *The*

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18 See the creation myth ‘Ainulindalë’ in *The Silmarillion* (Tolkien 1983, 13–24, esp. 21–24).

19 For other iterations of the afterlives of Elves, Dwarves and Men, see i.a. Tolkien 1981c, 285–87 [*Letters* no. 212].



*Lord of the Rings* (cf. Tolkien 1981b, 64), first attested in drafts dating to 1938 (Tolkien 1988, 258, 269–270; for dating cf. pp. 11, 369). It is hard to be sure what Tolkien meant by ‘puckish’: the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it with ‘of the nature of or characteristic of Puck’, the fairy of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and more generally ‘impish, mischievous, capricious’. It is hard to see how labelling Men and Hobbits as *mortal* would meet this definition exactly. Perhaps Tolkien was thinking more of Puck’s famous exclamation ‘Lord, what fools these mortals be!’ (which he later invoked when a Siamese cat breeder sought his permission to name her cats after characters from *The Lord of the Rings*: Tolkien 1981c, 300 [Letters no. 219]). *Puckish* in this sense would indicate that *mortal* seemed too much like a term of derision. In his ‘On Fairy-Stories’, first published in 1947 but based on a lecture composed in 1938–39, not too long after he wrote to Ransome, Tolkien wrote witheringly of Michael Drayton’s 1627 poem *Nymphidia* and, less explicitly but still clearly, of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as unsuccessful fairy stories (Tolkien 2008, 29–30, 61–62; cf. 137–38). While he seems to have been happy to use the term *mortal* in ‘On Fairy-Stories’, *puckish* in the 1937 letter perhaps echoes his distaste for the ‘flower-fairies and fluttering sprites with antennae’ (Tolkien 2008, 29) with which fairy stories could all too easily find themselves associated. It represents, in this reading, a further dimension of Tolkien’s experimentation with words as he sought to develop the vocabulary which would underlie *The Lord of the Rings*. This experimentation might in theory have seen *mortal* culled from his writing along with *elfin*, *dwarfish*, *fairy*, *gnome*, and *goblin*. Perhaps it simply proved too useful, both to the literary criticism represented by ‘On Fairy-Stories’ (and earlier ‘*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics’, 1936) and to the fiction-writing manifested eventually in *The Lord of the Rings*.

## 8. Conclusion

Publishing the complete text and full details of the letter which Tolkien wrote to Arthur Ransome should, if nothing else, help to resolve a few questions which have hovered over the contents of Tolkien’s letter and the chronology of his correspondence. In particular, it looks likely that Tolkien received copies of the colour plates, hot off the presses, for the second British impression of *The Hobbit* the day after writing to Ransome and included a set in his letter, emphasising the quiet pride he took in his artistic work.

Building on the work of Rateliff in particular, we have shown that Tolkien’s letter to Ransome implies how, contrary to a narrative which Tolkien was developing already at the time of *The Hobbit*’s publication, *The Hobbit* arose from and was

related to the world of *The Silmarillion*. Besides being important to appreciating Tolkien's creative process, this observation has a literary-critical significance for understanding the stylistic shift in *The Hobbit* from a light-hearted adventure story at the beginning increasingly into high seriousness towards the end of the book – a shift that was later replicated in magnified form in *The Lord of the Rings*. It has become a truism in criticism on *The Lord of the Rings* that the work owes much of its character and aesthetic appeal to its power to demand that the reader imagine and mentally explore narratives beyond those which comprise the plot: a world beyond the text. The relationship between *The Lord of the Rings* and the then unpublished *Silmarillion*, and a creative process which drew directly on historical and linguistic research methodologies, facilitated this. We have brought a little extra evidence to bear to show how this is also true of *The Hobbit*.

To Tolkien in 1937, Hobbits seemed, at least at times, out of place in relation to the Middle Earth of *The Silmarillion*, both in the sense that they did not feature in that work and in the sense that their diminutive character did not befit *The Silmarillion*'s epic tone. It was easy for Tolkien and later scholars of his work alike to view Hobbits as an anomaly whose place in the legendarium would only be developed later, during the writing of *The Lord of the Rings*. However, the unpublished section of Tolkien's letter to Ransome demonstrates that while Hobbits may have seemed like an anomaly in relation to Tolkien's existing accounts of Middle Earth, he had in fact by Wednesday 15th December 1937 already hit on the literary strategy for handling this problem that would serve him for the rest of his life: to embrace *The Silmarillion*'s silence on Hobbits as part of its verisimilitude, reflecting the gaps and problems that characterise real-life historical sources. *The Hobbit* sits more neatly into the legendarium, and perhaps more importantly into Tolkien's methods for creating that legendarium, than Tolkien would have had many of his correspondents (and indeed himself) believe. He may have set out to write a children's book, but the legendarium would not be suppressed. The fact that by 1937 it was developed to a considerable degree – places, races, languages and historical events had existed in more or less final form for years – meant that Tolkien could not help dipping into it even when writing a 'frivolous' story. Behind each seemingly innocuous 'fact' about Middle-Earth in *The Hobbit* is a fully constructed tale of origin and meaning that situates the fact into high legend.

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