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Beyond *The Hobbit*: J.R.R. Tolkien's Other Works for Children

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- As presented at The New York Tolkien Conference, March 17, 2019
- This presentation expands and updates an article I wrote in 2003 for *World Literature Today*

SLIDE 1: Title: The birthday cake from Smith of Wootton Major

SLIDE 2: Tolkien with his four children in the garden, Oxford, 26 July 1936

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien is best known to the world as the author of the classic fantasies *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. In his professional life, he was a superb philologist, a skilled translator, the author of a seminal essay on *Beowulf*, and a contributor to the Oxford English Dictionary. But Tolkien was also a father who loved to make up stories for his four children, write them down, and in many cases, as we've seen in the exhibit at the Morgan, illustrate them himself. Tolkien was an enthusiastic amateur artist with a unique style, loved color and line and repetitive decoration, but he was rather better at depicting landscapes than people. He usually worked in pen and ink, chalk, or colored pencil. In addition to *The Hobbit*, widely considered a classic of children's literature, he also wrote four shorter works specifically for children, two published during his lifetime and two posthumously, as well as many poems and a delightful collection of annual illustrated letters from Father Christmas.

SLIDE 3: Cover illustration of Roverandom: "The Gardens of the Mer-King's Palace"

Roverandom is Tolkien's earliest known work specifically for children. It began as a story told to two of Tolkien's sons a year or so before he started work on *The Hobbit*. The tale had its origins in an incident that occurred during a seaside vacation the family took in September 1925. Tolkien's second son Michael, then five years old, had a miniature toy dog of which he was very fond. One day he lost it on the beach, and it was never seen again. To console the boy—after all the loss of a beloved toy is a traumatic event for a child—Tolkien made up a story about a real dog turned into a toy by an enchanter, and his adventures under the sea and in the Moon. Michael's older brother John was particularly taken by the story, and Tolkien retold and embellished it before beginning to write it out and illustrate it in 1926-27. He submitted it to his publishers while *The Hobbit* was in production, but after that book became an unexpected success, they wanted more stories about hobbits instead.

Roverandom was published posthumously in 1998 with Tolkien's own illustrations from manuscripts held at Oxford. His illustrations for *The Hobbit* may be his most sophisticated and polished, but the picture chosen for the cover of *Roverandom*— "The Gardens of the Mer-King's Palace"— is a fine example of his best work, really conveying a sense of being under water.

The story itself is episodic and charmingly surreal. A dog named Rover offends a wandering wizard named Artaxerxes and is turned into a toy as punishment. He is given to a small boy, who loses him on the beach. There Rover meets another wizard, who turns him into a real dog of toy size, then sends him off to stay with the Man-in-the-Moon, a powerful wizard in his own right. He visits the land where children go when they dream, and meets the little boy again.

And so they came suddenly to a sheer precipice, not very high, but dark and polished like jet. Looking over, Roverandom saw below a garden in twilight; and as he looked it changed to the soft glow of an afternoon sun, though he could not see where the soft light came from that lit all that sheltered place and never strayed beyond. Grey fountains were there, and long lawns; and children everywhere, dancing sleepily, walking dreamily, and talking to themselves. Some stirred as if just waking from deep sleep; some were already running wide awake and laughing: they were digging, gathering flowers, building tents and houses, chasing butterflies, kicking balls, climbing trees; and all were singing.

‘Where do they all come from?’ asked Roverandom, bewildered and delighted.

‘From their homes and beds, of course,’ said the [Man-in-the-Moon]. (42)

SLIDE 4: Interior illustration from Roverandom: “The White Dragon Pursues Roverandom & the Moondog”

Rover wants to go back home, but Artaxerxes’s spell cannot be broken until the little dog apologizes and pleads with him in the mer-king’s palace under the sea. Finally Roverandom, as he is now known, is reunited with his boy.

The reader familiar with Tolkien’s works may notice echoes of some incidents and characters from *The Hobbit*. There are three irascible wizards in *Roverandom* who bear a close kinship to Gandalf, and a dragon with a “particularly tender” spot on his stomach. A seagull flies the little dog to the moon, just like the Eagles carried Bilbo and the dwarves to the Carrock, and there are giant spiders weaving bad dreams in the moon-mountains. There is also a surprising link to the larger “legendarium” which lies behind all of Tolkien’s Middle-earth tales, when a great whale carries Roverandom in sight of fair Elvenhome itself, and the dreaming children recall an early story and poem from the legendarium about “The Cottage of Lost Play” (*BoLT I* 13-40). The narrative voice is similar to that in *The Hobbit*, with a sense of sheer delight in words for their own sake. There are, for devotees of biography, tantalizing glimpses of what might have been family jokes—the little boy talking to his new toy in “the best dog-language he could manage” for example. There are borrowings from and references to other

books the young Tolkien children might have been enjoying around this time: E. Nesbit's *Five Children and It*, most obviously, but also "Lewis Carroll's Alice books, *Pinocchio*, *Peter Pan*, *The Wind in the Willows*, and Kipling's *Just So Stories*" (Swank, "Irish" 32). Kris Swank also traces the structure and many elements of the story to the Irish *immrama* or otherworld sea voyage, a genre with which Tolkien would have been professionally engaged as an academic at this time ("Irish" 32 et seq.).

But *Roverandom*, despite its charms and its interest as an early documentation of how Tolkien wove together his various influences, as a story lacks the sense of realism and serious purpose that readers of *The Lord of the Rings* and even *The Hobbit* might expect. Though the underlying tale shares the *immram*'s structure of transgression — exile — penitence and reconciliation, it feels whimsical and "miniaturized" in a way Tolkien later came to dislike, and condemned in his 1939 essay "On Fairy-stories."

SLIDE 5: Title page from *Mr. Bliss*

Mr. Bliss, like *Roverandom*, was inspired in part by Tolkien's children's toys. *Mr. Bliss* is an eccentric gentleman fond of very tall hats, who keeps an odd creature called a Girabbit in his garden, and one day decides to buy a motor-car. A series of comic accidents ensue, involving among other things cabbages, bananas, a donkey, a trio of bears, and a policeman. Humphrey Carpenter reports in his biography that Tolkien's own misadventures with his first automobile, purchased in 1932, were the source of some of *Mr. Bliss*'s escapades—Tolkien was said to have accelerated across busy intersections crying out "*Charge 'em and they scatter!*", and once knocked down a stone wall during a family vacation—but actually (according to Michael Tolkien's diary) the car in the story was based on a toy car and driver owned by Christopher in 1928. The three bears in the story were also inspired by stuffed bears owned by the Tolkien sons. Scull and Hammond remark that *Mr. Bliss* is unusual in that no early drafts or other evidence survive about its composition, so they tentatively date it to some time between 1928 and 1932. Priscilla was a noted collector of toy bears, having over 60 at one time, but born in 1929, she would not yet have begun her collection when this story was composed.

Mr. Bliss decides he is going to buy a motor-car simply because it is a fine day, and goes to Mr. Binks's shop:

"What colour?" said Mr. Binks. "Bright yellow," said Mr. Bliss, "inside and out."

"The will be five shillings," said Mr. Binks.

"And I want red wheels," said Mr. Bliss.

"That will be sixpence more."

"Very well," said Mr. Bliss; "only I have left my purse at home."

"Very well, then you will have to leave your bicycle here [...]."

It was a beautiful bicycle, all silver—but it had no pedals, because Mr. Bliss only rode down hill. ([8])

SLIDE 6: Mr. Bliss interior illustration: Girabbit jumping over the fence

Tolkien's illustrations for *Mr. Bliss*, which is a picture book rather than a story with occasional illustrations like *Roverandom*, are reminiscent of Beatrix Potter and Edmund Lear in both their absurdity and their attention to naturalistic detail. It was mainly the difficulty of reproducing these illustrations at a price that would keep the book affordable that prevented it from being published. It is intriguing to note the sophistication of Tolkien's picture-book technique—the text frequently comments on the pictures, and the pictures sometimes invade the text itself, as in this picture of the Girabbit jumping over a fence. At one point the narrator draws a small circle and writes "The car is just here (and the ponies and donkeys) but I am tired of drawing it," and at another notes that one character was left out of a picture (you can tell that his chair was drawn in after the rest of the picture was done) because "He swallowed a crumb the wrong way and is coughing in the scullery."

Along with *Roverandom* and *Farmer Giles of Ham*, *Mr. Bliss* was submitted to his publisher while *The Hobbit* was in production, and was considered for publication several times before Tolkien sold the manuscript to Marquette University in 1957. Eventually he decided it would best be published posthumously, and in 1982 it was printed as Tolkien wrote it but with transcriptions of his calligraphy on facing pages, then reprinted in 2011 as a sort of back-to-back book with the original reading from one direction and the transcription from the other.

SLIDE 7: Cover of a British edition of *Farmer Giles of Ham*, by Pauline Baynes

Farmer Giles of Ham also started out as a tale told to amuse Tolkien's children, but in its finished form it is earthy, humorous, and filled with philological jokes. Marquette University owns several versions of the story as it evolved over the years. First there is the bare skeleton of the tale as told to his children in the late 1920s when they were caught in a rainstorm after a picnic. A more polished version was sent to his publisher shortly after they decided to bring out *The Hobbit*, but it was not accepted at that time. Tolkien then revised it for a presentation to a learned society in 1938 (in lieu of the lecture on fairy stories they had been expecting!), and this is where the more sophisticated linguistic jests and digs at academia were added. For instance, the learned parson is characterized as "a grammarian, [who] could doubtless see further into the future than others," with "grammar" punning on its more occult relatives "glamour" and "grimoire" and slyly poking fun at Tolkien's own profession. After *The Hobbit* was

published, Tolkien again revised *Farmer Giles*, adding a satirical, mock-scholarly “Foreword” presenting it as an actual ancient text newly translated. Some of the opinions he expressed in his essay on *Beowulf* become, in this introduction, subtle jokes at the expense of the sort of critics who can’t see the forest for the trees. The fictitious writer of the forward praises the story highly for its glimpses of medieval history and explication of antique place-names, and adds disparagingly, “Some may find the character and adventures of its hero attractive in themselves.” This was the version published in 1947.

In *Farmer Giles of Ham*, our hero Ægidius Ahenobarbus Julius Agricola de Hammo scares off a giant who has invaded his fields and squashed flat his favorite cow. The King of the Middle Kingdom hears of his bravery and resourcefulness, and sends him an old sword as a token of his esteem, which turns out to be the magic dragon-slaying sword Tailbiter. But then the wily dragon Chrysophylax decides to visit the kingdom.

The parson (and the miller) hammered on the farmer’s door. There was no answer, so they hammered louder. At last Giles came out. His face was very red. He [...] had sat up far into the night, drinking a good deal of ale; and he had begun again as soon as he got up.

They all crowded around him, calling him Good Ægidius, Bold Ahenobarbus, Great Julius, Staunch Agricola, Pride of Ham, Hero of the Countryside. And they spoke of Caudimordax, Tailbiter, The Sword that would not be Sheathed, Death or Victory, The Glory of the Yeomanry, Backbone of the Country, and the Good of one’s Fellow Men, until the farmer’s head was hopelessly confused.

“Now then! One at a time!” he said, when he got a chance.
“What’s all this, what’s all this? It’s my busy morning, you know.” (34)

SLIDE 8: Interior illustrations from Farmer Giles by Pauline Baynes: Caudimordax, confrontation with Chrysophylax

Like Bilbo and Frodo, Giles is a reluctant hero with more about him than one might guess. With the help of the sword Tailbiter, and of his brave (and wise) grey mare, Giles conquers the clever (but not clever enough) dragon and forces him to give up his gold. The King tries to claim the gold for his own, but Giles, disillusioned by the king and his court, and as independent-minded as any hobbit, uses the treasure to set up his own Little Kingdom and rules it long and merrily.

Tolkien had not created any illustrations for *Farmer Giles of Ham*, so his publisher commissioned Pauline Baynes, whose wonderful mock-medieval vignettes, in Tolkien’s words, “reduced my text to a commentary on the drawings.” She went on to illustrate his *Smith of Wootton Major*, *Adventures of Tom Bombadil*, and *Bilbo’s Last Song*, as well as his friend C.S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia*. *Farmer Giles* is also available in a critical

edition edited by Christina Scull and Wayne Hammond (1999, Houghton Mifflin) which reproduces the illustrations more clearly than most of the intervening editions manage to do.

SLIDE 9: Covers of two editions of Smith of Wootton Major, by Pauline Baynes

Smith of Wootton Major is different from all of Tolkien's other children's works, and is perhaps closest kin to his adult short story "Leaf by Niggle." It is a mature, late work, written when Tolkien was in his seventies, and began as a foreword to a new edition of George MacDonald's "The Golden Key," rather than as a story told to children and polished by retelling. It is, as Tolkien writes, "An old man's book [...] weighted with the presage of 'bereavement'" (*Letters* 389.) The simple introduction Tolkien had planned, explaining Faery by means of a fable about a cook and a cake, grew into a dreamy and elegiac story with allegorical and autobiographical undertones, a subtle meditation on the life of an artist concealed inside a short and deceptively simple fairy-tale.

At a children's party, young Smith eats a piece of cake containing a magic star from the land of Faery, which enables him to visit that enchanted land as often as he wishes. He encounters reminders, such as a troop of elven mariners returning from war, that Faery is a vast world with concerns of its own, one that extends physically and temporally far beyond the understanding of the human visiting it. Smith is "a learner and explorer" (*Smith* 24); he learns many things in his travels, "some of which gave him joy, and others filled him with grief" (37), and some which "he could not clearly remember nor report to his friends" (26).

Then he knelt [before the Queen], and she stooped and laid her hand on his head, and a great stillness came upon him; and he seemed to be both in the World and in Faery, and also outside them and surveying them, so that he was at once in bereavement, and in ownership, and in peace. When after a while the stillness passed he raised his head and stood up. The dawn was in the sky and the stars were pale, and the Queen was gone. (38-39)

This mingled joy and grief becomes a grace that shows through in his craft, both in the shapeliness and delight of what he forges and his singing while he works. But after many years and adventures, including dancing with the Queen of Faery and meeting the King in an unexpected guise, he learns it is time to pass on his gift to another child, and reluctantly but freely does so.

SLIDE 10: Two interior illustrations for Smith by Pauline Baynes: Smith and his family, the elven warriors.

Tolkien preferred to avoid allegory in his writings, but it is tempting to see Tolkien himself in the boy Smith, who discovers he can sing in Elvish on his tenth birthday, and later shares stories and gifts from Faery with his wife and children, who can see the star on his brow. Smith's mysterious adventures hint in metaphor at the perils and rewards of the creative process in general, and Tolkien's own life as a writer in particular, but their exact meaning always hovers just out of reach. This melancholy and atmospheric tale is not going to be to every child's taste, but is something to be reread and pondered again and again by those to whom it speaks. Like *Giles*, *Smith* has also been published in a critical edition with additional scholarly material, edited by Verlyn Flieger (2005, HarperCollins), with the original illustrations by Pauline Baynes.

SLIDE 11: Tom Bombadil and Goldberry illustration by Pauline Baynes

Two collections of Tolkien's shorter works and a picture book also deserve mention as works suitable for children. *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil and Other Verses from the Red Book* is a collection of sixteen poems, purporting to be from *The Red Book* of the hobbits. Some date back in their earliest versions to poems Tolkien originally wrote in his youth ("Princess Mee," for example, first appeared in much simplified form as "Princess Ni" in *Leeds University Verse 1914-1924*). Tom Bombadil, who was based on a Dutch doll which belonged to Michael Tolkien, is the subject of two poems, one of which pre-dates his appearance in *The Lord of the Rings*, and which explain how Tom met and wooed Goldberry, bested Old Man Willow and the Barrow-wight, and spent a merry evening at Farmer Maggot's house.

Old Tom Bombadil had a merry wedding,
crowned all with buttercups, hat and feather shedding;
his bride with forgetmenots and flag-lilies for garland
was robed all in silver-green. He sang like a starling,
hummed like a honey-bee, lilted to the fiddle,
clasping his river-maid round her slender middle. (42)

SLIDE 12: Two-page spread from Bilbo's Last Song, by Pauline Baynes

Another poem, *Bilbo's Last Song (at The Grey Havens)* was published as a picture book with color illustrations by Pauline Baynes. This three-stanza poem, in which Bilbo bids farewell to his friends and anticipates his journey from the Grey Havens to the Uttermost West, does not appear in *The Lord of the Rings*, but it is reminiscent of "Bilbo's Song" and "The Old Walking Song." (It was a poem added to the later editions of the *Road Goes Ever On* song cycle.) Baynes's illustrations recount two stories—Bilbo and

the Elves riding to the Grey Havens through an autumnal landscape at the top of the page, and incidents from *The Hobbit* along the bottom. Though both the poem and the illustrations are lovely, a lack of familiarity with the story behind them could make it a frustrating experience for some children, unless it supplements or introduces an early reading of *The Hobbit*.

Day is ended, dim my eyes,
but journey long before me lies.
Farewell, friends! I hear the call.
The ship's beside the stony wall.
Foam is white and waves are grey;
beyond the sunset leads my way.

SLIDE 13: Covers of various editions of the letters from Father Christmas

Letters from Father Christmas is a collection of the annual illustrated letters Tolkien wrote to his children between 1920 and 1943, and left for them to find on the mantle above the fireplace, dusted with snow, on Christmas morning. They were lavishly and delightfully illustrated with drawings of Father Christmas, his assistants and neighbors, their home at the North Pole, and their misadventures, and complete with decorated envelopes with Polar postage stamps. Father Christmas writes about the children's letters to him, how they are doing in school, the toys he has brought them (or not been able to find), his ongoing problems with goblins and his clumsy polar bear assistant, and events in the wide world. As the years go by, the younger children are added to Father Christmas's greetings and their elders outgrow him, until only Priscilla receives the last few letters.

What's unique about *The Father Christmas Letters* is that they were never polished up and prepared for publication by Tolkien himself, unlike the other books I talked about earlier. They were produced solely for domestic consumption within the family circle, then collected for publication many years later by his son Christopher's second wife Baillie, who continued the tradition with their own children. The letters have been published in various editions, include a miniature stocking-stuffer size and one in which the letters can be removed from envelopes.

SLIDE 14: Two vignettes from the letters

Tolkien loved Christmas time, and it afforded him the opportunity to really relish being the father of young children. He was unusual among the other Oxford professors of his time in having a wife and family; most professors were bachelors. The letters often reference specific toys or books

the children have asked for, and I hope one day to do some research on things like Lotts Bricks and what sort of train sets the boys might have had or what Priscilla's vast collection of over 60 teddy bears might have looked like.

One of the other interesting things is that you can see, as Kris Swank pointed out in another of her papers, that some story elements in *The Father Christmas Letters* seem to have been borrowed from *The Hobbit*—and vice versa! They overlapped during some of the years of composition, and influence went both ways; and both tales also drew on elements of Tolkien's larger legendarium. In both *The Hobbit* and the *Letters* you will encounter "an old man with fireworks, a homely home, elves, goblins, dragons, and a gruff but affable bear" (Swank, "*Hobbit*" 127). And as John Garth suggested in his talk yesterday, the flood the North Polar Bear caused one year may even tie into Tolkien's "Atlantis-complex" and the drowning of Númenor!

SLIDE 15: Father Christmas and the aurora

This beautiful picture illustrates the 1926 letter and is in the Morgan exhibit. Having loved calligraphic effects since his mother first taught him to write, Tolkien made Father Christmas's penmanship especially wobbly for this letter. Father Christmas writes: "My dear boys,

I am more shaky than usual this year. The North Polar Bear's fault! It was the biggest bang in the world, and the most monstrous firework there ever has been. It turned the North Pole BLACK and shook all the stars out of place, broke the Moon into four—and the Man in it fell into my back garden. He ate quite a lot of my Christmas chocolates before he said he felt better and climbed back to mend it and get the stars tidy.

Then I found out the reindeer had broken loose. They were running all over the country, breaking reins and ropes and tossing presents up in the air. They were all packed up to start, you see—[...] it only happened this morning. [...]

But isn't the North Polar Bear silly? And he isn't a bit sorry! Of course he did it—you remember I had to move last year because of him? The tap for turning on the Rory Bory Aylis fireworks is still in the cellar of my old house. The North Polar Bear knew he must never, never touch it. I only let it off on special days like Christmas. [...]

Anyway, he was nosing around the ruins this morning soon after breakfast (he hides things to eat there) and turned on all the Northern Lights for two years in one go. You have never seen or heard anything like it. I have tried to draw a picture of it; but I am too shaky to do it properly and you can't paint fizzing light can you?

Light broken into refracted rainbows is a frequent image in Tolkien's work, background cosmogony, and poetry, and indeed his phrase "splintered light" is the title of one of the most important works of Tolkien criticism (by Verlyn Flieger). Here we see it in pictorial form.

SLIDE 16: Tolkien in his study

Tolkien's lesser-known children's works are worth reading for a variety of reasons. All are enjoyable in their own right, especially for the mix of humor and scholarship in *Farmer Giles of Ham*, the dream-like atmosphere of *Smith of Wootton Major*, and the charm of the Father Christmas letters. But for anyone with a more than casual interest in Tolkien as a writer and artist, they shed invaluable light on his creative process, his family relations, and the themes and motifs that underlie all his writing. His concern about man's depredations on the environment and the effects of war are evident as far back as *Roverandom*, and are particularly clear in Father Christmas's letters during World War II. Tolkien's family is shown to be a source of inspiration, especially during the period when his children's imaginative life revolved around their toys and their father's stories about them. Especially fascinating is how these children's stories demonstrate the maturation of Tolkien's skill at creating a coherent fantasy world in words and pictures—evolving from the oddly mixed cultural references and disjointed picaresque adventures of *Roverandom* and *Mr. Bliss*, with their sometimes-awkward illustrations, to the economically sketched world and mature authorial voice of *Smith of Wootton Major* and the technical mastery of his later Father Christmas illustrations. Reading Tolkien's children's works, and enjoying his own illustrations for them, show us how his greatest work of sub-creation, the world and story of *The Lord of the Rings*, fits into the pattern of his development as a writer and artist.

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