



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,  
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

---

Volume 14  
Number 3

Article 1

---

Spring 3-15-1988

## "There and Back Again" ~ Odysseus and Bilbo Baggins

Kenneth J. Reckford

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Reckford, Kenneth J. (1988) ""There and Back Again" ~ Odysseus and Bilbo Baggins," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 14 : No. 3 , Article 1. Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol14/iss3/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact [phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:  
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>

SWOSU<sup>TM</sup>

---

## Mythcon 51: A VIRTUAL “HALFLING” MYTHCON

July 31 - August 1, 2021 (Saturday and Sunday)

<http://www.mythsoc.org/mythcon/mythcon-51.htm>



## Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico; July 29 - August 1, 2022

<http://www.mythsoc.org/mythcon/mythcon-52.htm>

### Abstract

Sees parallels between incidents in *The Odyssey* and *The Hobbit*. Bilbo and Odysseus also share similar development as heroes during their respective journeys.

### Additional Keywords

Homer—Characters—Odysseus—Relation to Bilbo; Homer. The Odyssey—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Bilbo—Relation to Odysseus; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Hobbit—Relation to The Odyssey; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Hobbit—Sources—Classical literature



## "There and Back Again" - Odysseus and Bilbo Baggins

Kenneth J. Reckford

The influence of the Classics on Tolkien is a vast subject that has not received, nor is likely to receive, the care and attention that it deserves. One reason for this is that the Northern influences on Tolkien's imagination and writings have been more immediate and more obvious than the Mediterranean ones. Another is that the influence of, say, Virgil's *Aeneid* on *The Lord of the Rings* cannot be treated in isolation without superficiality and probable error. I suspect that Virgil's direct impact on Tolkien may have mattered less than his indirect influence by way of Tennyson, who died in 1892, and who handed on a strong poetic sense of, and language for, the "passing" of things, and even the passing of an Age. What seems more difficult is to understand Tolkien's appreciation of Virgil in connection with his appreciation of *Beowulf*. His own 1936 essay, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," shows us the way.<sup>2</sup>

But let me postpone these larger considerations and simply add one small leaflet to the appreciation of *The Hobbit*, which we are celebrating in this fiftieth anniversary year. My paper, on Odysseus and Bilbo Baggins, is not meant as a definitive piece of source criticism. Tolkien knew and liked Homer — in Greek, of course; and he could hardly have avoided showing Homer's influence now and then, whether conscious or unconscious. I want, first, to point out some general similarities between *The Hobbit* and Homer's *Odyssey* that may seem obvious, together with some differences that reflect the gap between myth and fairy tale. Then I want to give particular attention to Tolkien's trolls (who gave me nightmares when I was eight) and Homer's Cyclops. And lastly, I want to make some connections between Gandalf and Pallas Athena as they

act, or fail to act, in the two stories.

### I

As Joseph Campbell has shown, the pattern of adventure and return ("There and Back Again") is found universally in fairy tale and folk tale.<sup>3</sup> The hero (heroine) sets out on a quest; wins friends and allies; overcomes obstacles; fights powerful enemies; gains treasure and (often) a marriage; and returns home, to restore the kingdom and live happily ever after. That is the regular pattern, give or take a few disasters.

So with Bilbo Baggins. He sets out on a quest, albeit reluctantly, and half asleep, and without his pocket-handkerchief. He joins the dwarves, who come gradually to like, respect, and admire him. He meets difficulties and overcomes them: first with Gandalf's help, but then, increasingly, on his own: under the Misty Mountains, and in Mirkwood, and (as best he can) at the Lonely Mountain. He encounters evil: most tragically, in the hearts of dwarves. He survives, after accomplishing much (as Gandalf had predicted), and he returns home to reclaim his house and property — from the Sackville-Bagginses. He returns with gold and silver, and fine armor, and a little ring that helps you disappear when the wrong sort of people cross your path. A trivial bit of magic, but nice to have.

Of course, like all good fairy tales, *The Hobbit* is also a story of personal growth. There is something childlike about hobbits, and especially about Bilbo Baggins, when the story begins; and like every child, Bilbo has to acquire skill and self-confidence as he continues on life's journey. It is

exciting to watch him take on responsibility for himself and for his friends, as he rescues them from spiders in Mirkwood, and from the Elvenking's dungeons; and still more, to see him grow in compassion and understanding. His greatest moment comes when he gives the Arkenstone to Bard and the Elvenking, to help in their bargaining. To give away a treasure is more important, and more liberating, than to acquire one. Not (as Tolkien might say) for the last time.

Homer's *Odyssey* too could be subtitled, "There and Back Again." As it begins, Odysseus has been away almost twenty years, ten years at Troy, almost another ten wandering, trying to get home. His wife, Penelope, is besieged by suitors. His son, Telemachus, goes out in search of news of his father, in Books 1-4 of the *Odyssey*; then 5-12 describe Odysseus' adventures: from Calypso's island to the land of the Phaeacians; and then, in a flashback, from Troy to Calypso's island. But this is only half of the *Odyssey* -- though the better known half. In Books 13-24, Odysseus returns to Ithaca. He recognizes; he meets friends and enemies; and eventually, with Athena's help, he overcomes the suitors and regains his place as Penelope's husband and Ithaca's king.

The pattern is satisfying and right: sea and land, adventure and return, exploring strange lands and restoring the kingdom at home. Odysseus has a keen curiosity about people and places and a strong hunger for adventure, but what is most remarkable about him is his still stronger will to return to Ithaca and Penelope, which accompanies his acceptance of mortality. And he grows: not so much in skill and craft, which he clearly showed at Troy, as in patience, understanding, compassion, and human wisdom. He grows morally and spiritually, from the sacker of cities, the merely achieving warrior who helped conquer Troy, to the man who knows how to wait; who can warn the suitors about the morality implicit in mortality, which they are, however, too brash and blind to comprehend; and who can rediscover and reclaim his several roles on Ithaca in a series of recognitions that are absolutely right.

Homer's *Odyssey* can be read on three levels. First, as a success story in which human wit, courage, and endurance overcome enormous obstacles and win final victory. Second, as a story of moral and spiritual growth, and choice, and the overcoming of temptations -- especially the temptation *not to return* (which is still very strong in our own time). And third, as a story of deep psychological growth, of the soul's journey through death to new life. Of course, epic poems are shadowed with pain, loss, and death to an extent that fairy tales are not. All of Odysseus' comrades are killed, eaten, drowned -- and not altogether through their own fault. In *The Hobbit*, only three dwarves perish out of thirteen. And yet, to compare small things to great, the similarities are more striking than may at first appear.

## II

Odysseus' encounter with the Cyclops and Bilbo's meeting with the trolls recall a common

story-pattern in folktale that is most easily illustrated by "Jack and the Beanstalk." You will remember how Jack sells his mother's only cow for a handful of beans, which seem quite useless but sprout wonderfully in the night; how Jack climbs up and comes to the Giant's castle; how the Giant's wife hides him; how he steals, in turn, a golden hen that lays golden eggs, two sacks of gold coins, and a magical golden harp -- which cries out "Master, Master!"; how Jack runs away, climbs down the beanstalk just ahead of the giant, and kills him by cutting it down; so Jack and his mother live happily ever after.

There are many variants of this story and of Homer's Cyclops, to which I shall come shortly. One is the tale of Conall Yellow-claw and the Giant.<sup>4</sup> Conall comes upon the giant, and is trapped. He pretends to "heal" him and puts out his one eye, and he escapes under a buckskin. He also gets a magic ring, but the ring sticks to his finger and calls out, "I am here!" So he cuts off his finger, ring and all, and throws it into the sea. The giant plunges in, and drowns, and Conall goes home with the treasure.

I do not want to discuss rings just now, or to comment on the loss of fingers (there may be Freudians around). But it seems reasonable to give some psychological explanation of those folktale elements that turn up independently in so many lands. First, these stories help us, especially as children, to face what may seem overwhelming problems and to see these as somehow manageable. Bruno Bettelheim has argued that this applies especially to Oedipal feelings about mothers and fathers, who may appear negatively in stories as witches and ogres to be destroyed.<sup>5</sup> Second, fairy tales teach the importance of taking care, of being sensible as well as good. And third, I would add that these stories sometimes help us to recognize, and to confront, not only our uncontrolled *id* but also our Shadow: that in ourselves which can be treacherous, enslaving, or corrupt. As with the Cyclops and the Trolls.

Odysseus' encounter with the Cyclops Polyphemus is his first great adventure after leaving Troy. (In between comes a quick, unsuccessful raid and some lotus-eating, which Odysseus quickly interrupts.) Briefly, then: he lands on an island; he crosses over to the mainland with twelve men; he finds sheep, goats, and cheeses near a great cave, where he waits around, though his men urge him to leave; and sure enough, a monster comes, the huge one-eyed Cyclops who drives his sheep into the cave and closes it with a great slab of rock. He sees the Greeks, bashes two of them against the cave wall, and eats them. It is gross. (Odysseus appeals to civilized custom and to the gods, but the Cyclops pays no attention.) So, the next day, after Polyphemus eats breakfast and goes out, Odysseus shapes, heats, and hides a long pointed stake. That evening, he gets the Cyclops drunk (at supper) on some strong brandy he happens to have brought along. The Cyclops is pleased. He offers Odysseus a present -- to be eaten last. Then he falls asleep, dribbling bits of manflesh mixed with wine. Odysseus reheats the stake, and he and four others bore out the Cyclops' eye. The

next day, Odysseus escapes, after concealing himself and his men under great rams that the blinded Cyclops leads out to pasture, unsuspecting. And they put out to sea again, and escape.

Homer tells the story carefully. One nice folk-tale touch is the use of wine, carefully prepared for, to get the monster drunk. Another is the "No-man" trick. When Polyphemus asks for the stranger's name, Odysseus prudently replies that it is *Outis*, "No-man." And so, later, when the other Cyclopes gather around and ask, "Who has hurt you, Polyphemus? Who has done you harm?" he answers, "No-man has hurt me." -- "Oh," they say, "Then it must be the gods. Sorry about that." It is a good punch line, carefully prepared.

Odysseus displays cleverness in this episode, quick thinking under stress, and bold, appropriate action. Still, he was stupid to get caught in the first place; and afterwards, from his boat, he taunts the Cyclopes and almost gets himself and his men killed. And he gives away his name, this time. And he offends Polyphemus' father, the sea-god Poseidon, who will become Odysseus' greatest enemy and persecutor. What could have been a simple story of man *versus* monster is incorporated into an epic poem heavy with tragic meaning, despite its happy ending. To put it differently: Odysseus has the marks of a competent hero in Book 9, but morally and spiritually he still has a long way to go.

With Bilbo and the trolls -- and this is Bilbo's first real adventure -- we find ourselves in a related and frightening world but one that carries comic reassurances. For if the trolls are scary, as ogres generally are (and Tolkien's drawing of those scaly, brutish creatures in their firelit clearing in the woods reminds me that I was justifiably scared when I was eight), they are also very silly in the way they talk and act.<sup>6</sup> They would seem even sillier if Tolkien were reading to us, imitating the low sentiments and Cockney accents of Bert, Tom, and William. They were drinking pretty heavily, too, and the beer rather muddles what few wits they may have, preparing them for defeat. That is funny as well as Homeric -- though we might remember how appalling drunken grown-ups seemed when we were children. What is more important is that, unlike the Cyclopes, the trolls never get to eat anybody on this occasion. They talk, indeed argue a lot about roasting, boiling, or just plain squashing their prisoners, but they never do it -- and we know, somehow, that they won't.

Bilbo does not, of course, visit the trolls through his own rashness or idle curiosity. He is sent to burgle, and he makes a half-decent try. The magic purse gives him away, in the usual manner of folktales. And, being an honest hobbit, he can't quite manage to conceal the truth. He is "a bur -- a hobbit." There are "lots" of others, "No, none at all, not one." Deception and trickery, like burglary, are not native accomplishments of a Bag-gins.

In the end all the dwarves get caught, but Thorin is alerted by Bilbo and puts up a fight:

Thorin came at last -- and he was not caught unawares. He came expecting mischief, and didn't need to see his friends' legs sticking out of sacks to tell him that things were not all well. He stood outside in the shadows some way off, and said: "What's all this trouble? Who has been knocking my people about?" "It's trolls!" said Bilbo from behind a tree. They had forgotten all about him. "They're hiding in the bushes with sacks," said he.

"O! are they?" said Thorin, and he jumped forward to the fire, before they could leap on him. He caught up a big branch all on fire at one end; and Bert got that end in his eye before he could step aside. That put him out of the battle for a bit. Bilbo did his best. He caught hold of Tom's leg -- as well as he could, it was thick as a young tree-trunk -- but he was sent spinning up into the top of some bushes, when Tom kicked the sparks up in Thorin's face. (pp. 49-50)

Here, more than anywhere, we are reminded of Homer: "a big branch all on fire at one end; and Bert got that end in his eye before he could step aside." But that is as much violence as we get. No boring out of eyes, just a few burns and bruises to put the trolls out of temper. Gandalf tricks them into arguing until dawn, so they are turned to stone: an effective solution and a nonviolent one. And then, with Bilbo's help (this time), they discover the usual treasure: two swords from the Goblin wars; a fine knife for Bilbo; and some pots of gold to be claimed later by the returning hobbit.

Both the placing of this episode and the details of the fight given earlier suggest Homer's influence on Tolkien. And so do two later episodes.

Odysseus, it will be remembered, tied each of his followers beneath a central ram of three that he bound together. Then he put himself beneath the greatest ram of all (a symbol, surely, for his *machismo*), clung to its fleece, and waited for morning, to escape. In a similar way, Bilbo packs the dwarves into barrels -- but he is not quite Odysseus:

It was just at this point that Bilbo suddenly discovered the weak point in his plan. Most likely you saw it some time ago and have been laughing at him; but I don't suppose you would have done half so well yourselves in his place. Of course he was not in a barrel himself, nor was there anyone to pack him in, even if there had been a chance!

Still, Bilbo manages. He rides his barrel; he is available, when the time comes, to help the not-quite-grateful dwarves out of their barrels; and the worst result, for now, is that he gets a bad cold.

But later (this is my second Homeric echo),

Bilbo makes a mistake rather like Odysseus. Dragons are tricky and dangerous, and Bilbo rashly boasts to Smaug. He gives too much away -- about the lucky number (he has thirteen friends); about barrel-riding. Smaug almost kills him, because Bilbo has been careless. And he is aroused against the Lake-men, who must have helped the barrel-rider. All this leads to Smaug's wrath and his eventual death -- for which, respectively, Bilbo must share both blame and credit. "Never laugh at live dragons" as the proverb will say.

If we look back, from the end, at Bilbo's encounter with the trolls, we see how well it marks the beginning of his slow climb toward heroism. He is as helpless in this episode as he ever will be. And yet: he does make a stab at burglary; he does take a part in the fight, though an ineffective one; and he does find the key afterward to the troll's cave. He is already on the way to justifying Gandalf's good opinion of him.

It is different with Odysseus. His victory over the Cyclops shows presence of mind, the ability to get out of a tight spot. Yet it was Odysseus' fault that he got into the Cyclops' cave in the first place, and that six of his men were eaten; and his subsequent behavior leads to many future hardships. If Bilbo has too little confidence (for confidence must come with experience), then Odysseus has too much confidence, or the wrong sort. He too has to grow up, morally and spiritually, in order to become the hero he was meant to be -- through experience, and effort, and the help (or opposition) of powerful gods. Which brings me to a final comparison, of Pallas Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom who helps Telemachus and Odysseus, and Gandalf, as he helps, or doesn't help, Bilbo and the dwarves.

### III

People writing about Homer often speak of "double motivation," and one of the best examples of this occurs when Athena comes to Ithaca and arouses Telemachus to sail in search of news of his father. At first Telemachus is passive. He feels isolated, helpless, unable to cope with all those wretched suitors. (Today he would spend his time watching soaps on TV.) But when Athena arouses him, as a messenger and stimulus from outside, and even prepares a ship for him and, in the guise of Mentor, accompanies him to sandy Pylos, all this corresponds also to something in himself. For Telemachus is a hero's son, and he knows, deep down, that something must be done. Athena just clears his mind and starts him off.

And similarly with Gandalf and Bilbo. The hobbit, fat and comfortable in his accustomed routine at Bag End, requires a good deal of pushing, cajoling, and sheer bullying if he is to run after the dwarves, one morning, without his pocket-handkerchief. A much later retrospect, "The Quest of Erebor," shows what strategy Gandalf had (or might have had) in mind.<sup>7</sup> In *The Hobbit*, however, Gandalf's function at first is simple to bring out that almost forgotten, Tookish sense of adventure in Bilbo's heart. It took some awakening, for Bilbo

was getting on in years. But, as Gandalf's intuition told him it was there.

To return to Homer: the grey-eyed goddess Athena cared for Odysseus and helped him constantly at Troy. Yet she was absent during his most dangerous adventures in fantasy lands (in *Odyssey* 9-12), perhaps because she disliked sackers of cities -- and of temples. Most of the Greek conquerors of Troy came to a bad end. But later, Athena returns to Odysseus' side. She persuades Zeus to arrange for him to leave Calypso's island. She makes him welcome in the land of the Phaeacians, who will send him home; and then, meeting him on Ithaca, she helps him plan and execute his revenge against the suitors. Perhaps (to put it simply) she likes the sort of person he has now become.

The case of Gandalf and Bilbo is obviously different. In the first place, Gandalf is not (in his present incarnation) a god; he leaves the group, it is because he has business with the White Council, who need to deal with the Necromancer then and there. Bilbo and the dwarves were frightened too. But, looking back, we realize that Bilbo could never have grown up, have become a hero, with the father-figure always around to guide and help. Once Gandalf is gone, Bilbo must learn to rely on his own wits (and knife, and ring) to become the burglar, adventurer, and leader that he was meant to be.<sup>8</sup>

Gandalf reappears much later in *The Hobbit* than Athena does in Homer's story, and it is a happy surprise for Bilbo, and for us:

As they passed through the camp an old man wrapped in a dark cloak, rose from a tent door where he was sitting and came towards them.

"Well done! Mr. Baggins!" he said, clapping Bilbo on the back. "There is always more about you than anyone expects!" It was Gandalf.

For the first time for many a day Bilbo was really delighted. (p. 258)

A happy surprise: but the time, I think, was right. For even if he was embarrassed and uncertain at the time, and Thorin would hardly be pleased, the handing over of the Arkenstone to Bard was Bilbo's finest moment in the story. A splendid act of burglary, it helps atone for Thorin's possessiveness and greed (and, dimly felt by Tolkien behind that, for the long tragedy of possessiveness chronicled in *The Silmarillion* and later)<sup>9</sup>; and it looks forward, beyond the author's present knowledge, to later stories -- to *The Lord of the Rings*, but also to *Smith of Wootton Major* -- where the right thing to do with something very precious is to throw or give it away. All the more appropriately, then, does Gandalf make his epiphany at just that moment, and take charge of things afterward as best he can.

.....

*The Hobbit* is a story for children. As such, it differs enormously from Homeric epic -- and

indeed, from Tolkien's later "epic fantasy novel" -- in style, in scope, in significance. Comparison, for example, of the trolls with the cyclops makes the differences clear. And yet, the themes, methods, and deep insights of fairy tale are not, in the end, altogether so different from those of epic. The two genres influence and interpenetrate on another. Odysseus wanders off the known map into adventures in Faerie. Bilbo Baggins walks over the edge of the children's story into a larger, potentially epic-sized world, and plays his part in it -- a far more significant part than he or Gandalf or their (sub-)creator realized at the time. The hobbit still has obvious limitations as a hero. He does not subdue a troll himself -- let alone slay a dragon. Yet he does remarkably well, and in doing so, he points the way to a new, twentieth-century answer to the problem of heroism -- an answer that has proved a comfort to us all and, I think, something of a challenge as well.

## NOTES

- This slightly revised version of my talk at the 1987 Mythcon now reflects what I learned there, especially from Douglas Anderson, Bonnie-Jean Christensen, and John Rateliff. Passages from *The Hobbit* are taken from the Revised Edition (1965; Ballantine Books, 1966). References to *The Lord of the Rings* (LOTR) are also to the Ballantine edition.
- J.R.R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays," in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, edited by Christopher Tolkien, London: Allen & Unwin, 1938, pp. 5-48, especially 21-27 and note 21.
- Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968. I was delighted, after writing this paper, to find Bilbo's psychological development so well described by J. R. Wytenbroek in *Mythlore* 50 (pp. 5-8, 40).
- I thank my former student, Robert Scott Bowman, for bringing the Conall story to my attention; also other gifted students from my Classics 30A class (spring, 1987) who stimulated by thinking about the Cyclops and the trolls.
- Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976.
- The mix of brutish and silly appears wonderfully in Tolkien's original drawing, shown this summer in the Haggerty Museum of Art at Marquette University. See now the catalogue (J.R.R. Tolkien: *The Hobbit. Drawings, Watercolors, and Manuscripts*), p. 18, and the comments of Richard Schindler, p. 21, "Trolls," we learn later, "are only counterfeits, made by the Enemy in the Great Darkness, in mockery of Ents..." (LOTR II, 113). On the sinister side, they recall Grendel in *Beowulf*. For the comic side, see Tolkien's poem, "The Stone Troll," in *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*.
- For the "Quest of Erebor" as later re-imagined by Tolkien, see *LOTR III* (Appendix A), 447-49, and *Unfinished Tales*, pp. 321-36.
- As John Rateliff pointed out, the wizard (then Bledorthin) originally rescued the dwarves from the Elvenking's dungeons. His removal from the scene added immeasurably to Bilbo's heroic activity and growth.

- Rateliff (to whom I am again indebted) pointed out that, in an earlier version, Bilbo was given the "Gem of Girion" but became possessive. He also suggested that the Arkenstone functioned as a fairy-tale, hobbit version of a Silmaril. In a Jungian view, the Arkenstone (like the Ring) is "a symbolic realization of the Self through individuation": see Timothy R. O'Neill, *The Individuated Hobbit*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979.



## Mythopoeic Celtic Stationery by Patrick Wynne

This stationery is available for \$5.00 plus \$1.00 in handling. It features four designs, all found in *Mythlore* #35: The Celtic circles portray themes from J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Charles Williams. Each circle is at the top right of the page and is 3 5/8" in diameter, with a lined border around the page. The fourth design is of the four corners found on page 2 of issues before #50, but much larger in size. The set includes 4 sheets of each design, making 16 printed sheets, 12 blank sheets, plus sixteen envelopes. The paper is of neutral but beautifully antique-appearing parchment. Each set makes fine personal stationery both for men and women, and are excellent for a special mythopoeic gift. Send your order to: Orders Dept., 1008 N. Monterey St., Alhambra, CA 91801.