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## The Myths of the Author: Tolkien and the Medieval Origins of the Word *Hobbit*

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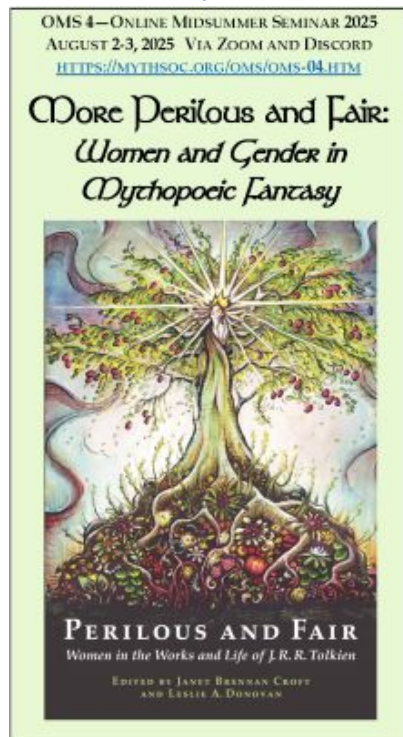
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## The Myths of the Author: Tolkien and the Medieval Origins of the Word *Hobbit*

### Abstract

Leads us on a linguistic journey into the origins of the words *hobbit* and *Baggins* and their surprising relations to one another.

### Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Hobbits—Origin of name

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THE MYTHS OF THE AUTHOR:  
TOLKIEN AND THE MEDIEVAL ORIGINS  
OF THE WORD *HOBBIT*

MICHAEL LIVINGSTON

**Tolkien's Myth of the *Hobbit***

AS HE TOLD THE STORY DURING A BBC INTERVIEW in 1965, it was in the summer of 1930<sup>1</sup> that J.R.R. Tolkien, who had recently been named Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford, sat down in his study to mark examinations for the Certificate in English Literature:

The actual beginning—though it's not really the beginning, but the actual flashpoint I remember very clearly. I can still see the corner of my house in 20 Northmoor Road where it happened. I had an enormous pile of exam papers there. Marking school examinations in the summertime is very laborious and unfortunately also *boring*. And I remember picking up a paper and actually finding—I nearly gave an extra mark for it; an extra five marks, actually—there was one page of this particular paper that was left blank. Glorious! Nothing to read. So I scribbled on it, I can't think why, In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. (Rateliff 1.xii)

Tolkien himself seemed to be aware of the unusual nature of that particular moment, and of course of that particular noun, *hobbit*: "I don't know where the word came from," he said in 1967; "You can't catch your mind out" (Rateliff 1.xiii). Tolkien did, however, apparently set his mind to the matter of the word: "Names always generate a story in my mind. Eventually I thought I'd better find out what hobbits were like" (Carpenter 172). Thus began, according to the standard account, the writing of *The Hobbit*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The chronology of the composition of *The Hobbit* has been a matter of some debate (see note 2, below). John D. Rateliff has amassed considerable evidence from Tolkien to conclude "with some confidence that the story was indeed begun in the summer of 1930 and completed in January 1933" (*History of The Hobbit* 1.xx), but the timeline nevertheless remains uncertain.

<sup>2</sup> References to *The Hobbit* are cued to the text presented in the *Annotated Hobbit*, edited by Douglas A. Anderson. On the circumstances of Tolkien's initial act of writing, see especially those materials presented by Rateliff in *History of the Hobbit*, 1.xi-xxvi, as well as the

By the time Tolkien was composing that book's eventual sequel, *The Lord of the Rings*, he had gone further than just figuring out what hobbits were like: he had constructed an artificial etymology for the word *hobbit*, one that would, as Peter Gilliver, Jeremy Marshall, and Edmund Weiner recently put it,

fit the word into the linguistic landscape of Middle-earth. This was a remarkable feat of reverse engineering, not quite like any of his other etymological exploits amongst the tongues of Middle-earth. (144)

On encountering the Rohirrim, the hobbits notice that their speech contains many words that sound like Shire words but have a more archaic form. The prime example is their word for the hobbits themselves: *holbytla*. This is a well-formed Old English compound (because Tolkien represents the language of the Rohirrim as Old English). It is made up of *hol* 'hole' and *bytla* 'builder'; it just happens, as far as we know, never to have existed in Old English, and if *hobbit* turned out to be a genuine word from folklore it is most unlikely that this would be its actual etymology. Worse still for this etymological exercise, the word *holbytla*—if it had ever existed—would have been far more likely to have come down to us as *hobittle* than as *hobbit*, a fact Tolkien would surely have known all too well.<sup>3</sup>

Whatever else we might say about Tolkien's imaginary etymology, at the very least we must admit that it is a fabrication of a later date than the word's appearance in *The Hobbit*, which was published in 1937. In early 1938, after reading a letter which had been published on 16 January in the *Observer* under the name "Habit" and which inquired among other things about the origin of the term *hobbit*, Tolkien responded that giving a definite answer to such a question might not be the best thing:

But would not that be rather unfair to the research students? To save them trouble is to rob them of any excuse for existing.

However, with regard to the Habit's principal question there is no danger: I do not remember anything about the name and inception of the hero. I could guess, of course, but the guesses would have no more authority than those of future researchers, and I leave the game to them. (*Letters* 30)

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summary by Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond in *J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide* 2.385-93.

<sup>3</sup> Though Tolkien is himself consistent in his "translation" of *hobbit* as "hole-builder" (see *LotR*, appendix F), Shippey prefers the translation "hole-dweller, hole-liver," which he calls "perfectly plausible Old English" (though using an unattested verb) and which results in the following re-translation of the initial line of *The Hobbit*: "In a hole in the ground there lived a hole-liver" (*J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* 46).

Tolkien might well have been facetious about “future researchers” delving so deeply into his work, but in hindsight he was remarkably prescient: the author’s claim to not remember any influences seems to have quieted the matter for a time, but the silence would not last.

In 1970 the matter arose again as a result of the decision to include *hobbit* in the Second Supplement to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), the very institution that had given Tolkien his own start in academia: after his return from the Great War he had worked as a staff member for the *OED* from 1919 to 1920, where he had used his keen linguistic capabilities to determine the etymologies for dozens of words between *waggle* and *wold*. On 11 September 1970, the 78-year-old Tolkien wrote to the then-editor of the *OED*, R. W. Burchfield, promising “a long letter on *hobbit* and related matters,” which would address the pressing issue of just where the word had come from: was it invented by Tolkien—a claim that Tolkien reported “was not clear”—or did it pre-exist his work, having been rooted in his mind years before he put pen to paper and wrote that first line of *The Hobbit*? The editors were proposing that the phrase “invented by J.R.R. Tolkien” be included within the definition, and Tolkien voiced some concern on the point, since “investigations by experts” might prove the claim invalid (*Letters* 404-05).

While there is, unfortunately, no record of Tolkien’s “long letter” to Burchfield ever having been sent or received, Tolkien did address the issue of his “claim to have invented the word” in a separate letter to Roger Lancelyn Green a few months later, on 8 January 1971:

My claim rests really on my “nude parole” or unsupported assertion that I remember the occasion of its invention (by me); and that I had not *then* any knowledge of *Hobberdy*, *Hobbaty*, *Hobberdy Dick* etc. (for “house-sprites”); and that my “hobbits” were in any case of wholly dissimilar sort, a diminutive branch of the human race. Also that the only E[nglish] word that influenced the invention was “hole” [...]. Oh what a tangled web they weave who try a new word to conceive! (*Letters* 406-07)

Tolkien, if we are to take his words at face value, apparently *thought* he had fabricated the word that had made him both rich and famous, but he could not be sure. The story of *The Hobbit* was written, Tolkien said, “out of the leaf-mould of the mind” (Carpenter 178)—incorporating bits of such medieval works as *Beowulf* and the Eddic materials alongside references to contemporary works and even aspects of Tolkien’s own biography—and the same might well have been true of the famous word itself, which he might have stumbled upon at some forgotten point: “one cannot exclude the possibility,” he goes on to say to Green, “that buried childhood memories might suddenly rise to the surface long after.”

Tolkien died in 1973, and thus did not live to see the 1976 publication of the Supplement in which *hobbit* joined the *OED*, with clear attribution for its existence given to the author:

In the tales of J.R.R. Tolkien (1892-1973): one of an imaginary people, a small variety of the human race, that gave themselves this name (meaning "hole-dweller") but were called by others *halflings*, since they were half the height of normal men.

Following the *OED*'s acceptance of a Tolkien origin for *hobbit*, the term is now under trademark by Tolkien Enterprises, and the vast majority of critics (and fans) of his works have accepted Tolkien's tale of its inception without question. As Daniel Grotta-Kurska has summed up the matter, "the word *hobbit* is unquestionably, uniquely Tolkien's invention, like 'pandemonium' in *Paradise Lost* and 'chortle' in *Alice in Wonderland*" (79). Nevertheless, a lingering uncertainty about the word has quietly remained: "The word is Tolkien's most famous coinage," write Gilliver, Marshall, and Weiner, "if it is indeed a coinage" (145).

### Extant Theories of the Word

In a 1989 *Mythlore* article "On the Origin of the Name 'Hobbit,'" Donald O'Brien provided a summary of the many possible origins for the word *hobbit* then current:

- *Hobbit*, a name in a rather obscure list of a couple hundred "supernatural beings" from what are generally known as the *Denham Tracts*, a nineteenth-century gathering of materials by amateur folklorist M. A. Denham. As Gilliver, Marshall, and Weiner later explained in 2006, there are actually four versions of the *Tracts*, and *hobbit* first appears in the third version, published in 1853 (146-48). As they note, though the book was not popular by any stretch of the imagination, copies were "readily available in university libraries accessible to Tolkien (there is a copy in Oxford), and he was interested in folklore." Still, the mystery of the word's origins was not so simply solved:

If there were any other unusual items in the list which also occurred in Tolkien's writings, we might suspect that the Tract was the source for all of them; but even though such curious words might have been quite handy for some of his more light-hearted poems, there is no trace of them. There seems to be nothing that tips the scales in favour of the theory that he had somehow come across the word from the Tract. (148)

- *Hobbits*, an archaic 18<sup>th</sup>-century form of the word *howitzer* (*OED*). O'Brien gives little comment to the possibility, but Gilliver, Marshall, and Weiner later call it "quite attractive," even though they cannot manage any substantive connection between Tolkien's little people and field artillery (149).
- *Hobbet/-it*, a local British noun defined as either a "seed-basket" or "a local measure" (*OED*). O'Brien briefly notes that this term appears in Joseph Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary* (*EDD*), which Tolkien knew well, but he otherwise states that it has "no obvious connection with Tolkien's hobbits" (34).
- "The Hobyahs," child-eating goblins from a fairy-story of the same name. O'Brien concludes that they are "distinctly unlike Tolkien's hobbits" (34).
- *Hobbity-hoy*, a colloquial word meaning "a clumsy or awkward youth" (*OED*), which O'Brien says might "[mirror] the immaturity of Bilbo [...] when he embarked on his adventure; the similarity is probably fortuitous" (34).
- *Hobbity-bobbity*, an obscure term for the nettle (*OED*) that O'Brien lets pass without comment, probably for good reason.
- *Hobbet*, a Scottish word for a thief or a laughing-stock (*OED*), which O'Brien notes might "echo Bilbo's occupation of thief and his somewhat whimsical [...] nature" (34-35).
- *Hob*, meaning a rustic or a clown; also can mean "a hobgoblin, sprite, elf" (*OED*). O'Brien does not comment on the word, but Robert Giddings and Elizabeth Holland have suggested that it is "an answer to the riddle of the origin of the word" (141); Michael Stanton has added as evidence to this postulation the fact that "we find old Hob Hayward, a hobbit, at the Brandywine Bridge when Merry and the others return to the Shire" (280).
- *Hobby*, a small horse (*OED*).
- *Hobbididance*, "a malevolent sprite" (*OED*).
- *Hoppet*, a small basket (*OED*).
- *Rabbit*, a word that Tolkien on multiple occasions strongly and specifically disavowed as an influence on his own. Nevertheless, a few scholars have not hesitated to postulate a connection, most recently spurred on by the revelation of a cancelled footnote to the origin of the word within an early draft of *Lord of the Rings* Appendix F: "I must admit that its faint suggestion of *rabbit* appealed to me. Not that hobbits at all resembled rabbits, unless it be in burrowing" (*Peoples* 49; see Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien*, 3-5, 45-47, and *Annotated* 146). O'Brien discusses the word at length, providing four possible *hobbit* etymologies utilizing *rabbit*, along with the numerous moments in Tolkien's works in which the hobbits are related to rabbits (35-36).

To O'Brien's summary we can add other suggestions for influence:

- *Babbitt*, the title character from Sinclair Lewis' 1922 novel, which Tolkien freely admitted as a possible association—though this relationship, if it exists, has the appearance of being quite slight (Carpenter 165, Rateliff 1.xiii).
- Tolkien acknowledged that E.A. Wyke-Smith's 1927 book *The Marvellous Land of Snergs* influenced the appearance of his hobbits, but there is nothing to be found there in terms of their species name (*Letters* 215; compare Hammond and Scull 5). Likewise, Marjorie Burns makes the case for John Buchan's 1921 book *Huntingtower* providing a template for Bilbo's adventures, though it cannot be seen to have influenced the word *hobbit* ("Tracking").
- The Arthurian "half-man (Habit)" referenced by Lady Charlotte Guest in 1849, pointed out by Marjorie Burns (*Perilous Realms* 21-22, 183n33); it is likely a coincidence (but nonetheless interesting) that the anonymous writer of the 1938 letter to the *Observer* mentioned above utilized this name.

For his part, O'Brien concluded his short study with the opinion that he no one theory was particularly convincing: "the evidence supports no alleged resolution of the origin of 'hobbit' unequivocally" (37). Instead of one source, he finally suggests, it may be that more than one of these words were lodged in Tolkien's mind, so that the word is of an "eclectic" generation. While this is probably so, there is far more to be said about several of these words, most particularly the word *Hobbet/-it* from Wright's *EDD*, which O'Brien might have been too quick to dismiss as having "no obvious connection with Tolkien's hobbits" (34).

### The Hobbit and the Hobbet

As noted above, the word *hobbet/-it* has two meanings in the *OED*: first as "a seed-basket" (perhaps a spelling variant of *hoppet*, separately mentioned by O'Brien but not discussed by him; see more below) and second as "a local measure = 2½ bushels." The two usage quotations given are confined to the second meaning, and, strangely, they do not include the spelling *hobbit*:

1863 MORTON *Cycl. Agric. Gloss.* (E.D.S.), *Hobbet* (N. Wales) of wheat, weighs 168 lbs.; of beans, 180; of barley, 147; of oats, 105; being 2 ½ bushels imperial.

1896 *Daily News* 8 Oct. 9/5 Potatoes are rotting in the ground and can be had for 3s. a hobbet.

John C. Morton's *Cyclopedia of Agriculture*, the first work cited here, was hardly an uncommon book. Published in several issues by the English Dialect Society



(EDS) in the middle of the nineteenth century, it is a source of record for some 156 entries in the *OED*—including many under Tolkien’s *W*—and much of its material was re-used in other books. James Britten’s *Old Country and Farming Words*, for instance, which was published by EDS in 1880 and is itself oft-used by the *OED*, took a great deal of its material from Morton, including Morton’s *OED*-cited 1863 glossary entry verbatim on page 171, with the one variation of using the familiar (to us) spelling *hobbit*.

In fact, though unnoted by O’Brien, variants of this word—*hobbit*, *hobbet*, *hobbett*—appear with striking regularity across the nineteenth century once one starts looking for them.<sup>4</sup> The 2 May 1863 issue of Charles Dickens’s weekly journal *All the Year Round*, for instance, includes an editorial from Dickens entitled “At Your Fingers’ Ends,” which argues for English adoption of the continental metric system.<sup>5</sup> About the lack of coherency to then-current English weights and measures, Dickens complains:

If I buy wheat at Swansea, I must order by the stack of three bushels; if at Barnard Castle, by the boll of two bushels, and must not, when I compare quantity and price, confuse this boll with two other bolls, one of two hundred and forty, the other of two hundred and eighty pounds. If I buy at Beccles, I must order by the coomb of two hundred and forty pounds. If at Preston, by the windle of two hundred and twenty. If at Wrexham, by the hobbet of one hundred and sixty-eight. But even if I do happen to know what a hobbet of wheat means at Wrexham, that knowledge, good for Flint, is not good for Caernarvonshire. A hobbet of wheat at Pwllheli contains eighty-four pounds more than a hobbet at Wrexham; and a hobbet of oats is something altogether different; and a hobbet of barley is something altogether different again. (235)

Dickens’s assumption that his wide readership would at least be marginally familiar with the term *hobbet* and the difficulties stemming from its various definitions is at least partially explained by the existence of a number of nineteenth-century court cases concerned with the matter: *Tyson v. Thomas* (1825) dealt with the measure of corn by *hobbett*, *Owens v. Denton* (1835) centered on the sale of malt by the *hobbit*, and *Hughes v. Humphreys* (1854) addressed the matter of selling wheat by the *hobbit*, “a term used in Wales to express a quantity consisting of four pecks, each peck weighing forty-two

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<sup>4</sup> For the sake of clarity, I will henceforth generally refer to the word under the form *hobbet*, except where making direct reference to its orthographical presentation within another work.

<sup>5</sup> The editorial is unsigned, but the context strongly implies his authorship, which has, in fact, been subsequently established by scholars. See Oppenlander 264.

pounds" (McClelland and Younge 1.119-29; Pollock 40.692-94; Chambers et al. 2.356-57 and also in Ellis and Blackburn 954-55).

So common was the term, in fact, that *hobbet* seems to have been a default example for anyone complaining about the lack of standards in weights and measures, beginning as early as 1790 (73 years before the *OED*'s earliest citation), when Sir John Riggs Miller complained before the House of Commons about "the capricious, absurd, and irrelevant names and proportions of the weights and measures which custom, folly, or knavery, have introduced into our dealings":

The *coomb*, *seam*, *hobbett*, *gawn*, *faggott*, *gad burthen*, (the three last particularly applied to different weights of steel) the *fother*, *cade*, *last*, *dicker*, *wey*, *clove*, *boll*, *batement*, *windle*, *hoop*, *kernel*, *frolet*, *eighteen day*, and *half eighteen day* measures. &c. &c. &c. appear to be denominations so arbitrary, and so totally irrelevant to the nature, quantity, or quality of the objects to which they are applied, that one would suppose they had been introduced merely to confuse that which should be obvious, and to introduce mystery into that which should be level with the meanest capacity. (18; rpt. Young 273-74)

Miller's speech, though approved in the records, clearly failed to make its intended mark: Still in 1888 the House of Commons' Select Committee on Corn Averages was making news by hearing testimony about the variant measures that fell under the term *hobbit* (34). One can almost hear in these complaints an echo of Gandalf's exclamation to Bilbo at the beginning of *The Hobbit*: "What a lot of things you do use *Good morning* for!"—which Deirdre Greene points out "foregrounds the lexicographer's concern with the semantic possibilities of words and phrases," the same concern that drove Tolkien in both the academic and creative realms (*Annotated* 33; Greene 196). And if, in fact, this philological quality drove Tolkien's potential interest in the word *hobbet*, he would not have been alone. In an 1878 brief on "Names of Weights and Measures," by "F.S." (whom I cannot identify with certainty) in *Notes and Queries*, *hobbet* appears again:

As a new Act of Parliament, namely, the Weights and Measures Act of 1878, is coming into operation on January 1 next year, we may suppose that many old names now in use will fade into oblivion. Even now some of the local names of weights and measures are strange or unknown to those who are not living where they are likely to hear them mentioned; they are, however, of *unquestionable value to the philologist*. [...] The more common names of course every one knows. They are, for the sale of grain, the quarter, load, bushel, bag, or barrel. The less known names, and soon

likely to be forgotten, are these (i.b. = imperial bushel): sales of grain &c., are made by the coom of 4 i.b. in Beccles and other places; boll of 2 i.b. in Newcastle, Plymouth, Darlington, &c.; boll of 6 i.b. in Berwick, Dunse, Kelso; boll of 240 lbs. in Glasgow; windle of 220 lbs. in Preston; hobbett of 168 lbs. in Denbigh. (345; emphasis mine)

The philologist's interest in the potential disappearance of such words would lay, naturally, in their etymological and cultural histories, the very area that so fascinated Tolkien throughout his life. It is in the etymology for *hobbet* in particular—which, like much of the foregoing, O'Brien did not discuss—that we can begin to speculate more directly on the possible connections between the word and Tolkien's hobbits.

### Philological Puzzles

Regarding the etymology of *hobbet* O'Brien notes only that he could not confirm the language of origin but thought it "irrelevant" regardless (34). There is little question or debate on the matter, however. The 1904 *Judicial and Statutory Definitions* series defines *hobbet* as "a term generally used in Wales to express a quantity made up of four Welch pecks" (National Reporter System 3314), and this basic relationship between the word *hobbet* and Welsh is difficult to deny: The *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru (GPC)*—the Welsh equivalent, we might say, to the *OED*—pushes the Welsh term back at least to the late medieval works of Dafydd ap Edmwnd, 1450-80, several centuries before the earliest appearances in English. Curiously, the fact that the word is of Welsh origin might allow it to be seen as a conscious source without giving lie to Tolkien's claims that no "English" word influenced *hobbit*, though this would truly give new meaning to his terming the source search a "game" in 1971 (*Letters* 406-07, above).

Regardless, the editors of the *GPC* provide the following derivation and definition:

[*hob*<sup>2</sup> + *-aid*<sup>1</sup>; tebyg mai cfdds. o'r gair Cym. yw'r S. taf. *hobbet*] eg.b. ll. *hobeid(i)au*. Llond hob, mesur sych (gan amlaf) a'i faint yn amrwyio o ardal i ardal, llestr yn dal y cyfryw fesur, hob: *hobbet, hoop (measure), bushel*.

[*hob*<sup>2</sup> + *-aid*<sup>1</sup>; it is likely that the Eng. dialectal *hobbet* is an adaptation of the Welsh] *noun. m or f. pl. hobeid(i)au*. The fill of a hob, a dry measure (for the most part) whose amount varies from region to region, a vessel holding such a measure, hob: *hobbet, hoop (measure), bushel*.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For this translation, and indeed for help accessing the *GPC* and other Welsh materials in all respects, hearty thanks are owed to John K. Bolland.

The *GPC* was begun in 1921 but not completed until 2002, with this particular entry appearing in Volume 30 (1980), so it is uncertain how much of this information Tolkien could have known when he “invented” the word *hobbit*. He certainly had cause to be interested in the project given his close association with the *OED* and philological processes in general, however. More than that, we know that Tolkien was fascinated with Welsh from an early age, his love and knowledge of the language (he would ultimately teach Medieval Welsh at Leeds) surely having been fostered by his guardian in Birmingham, Father Francis Xavier Morgan, who was himself of Welsh descent and regularly took the young Tolkien and his brother on vacations in Wales (Coren 435; see also Tolkien, “English and Welsh,” 163, 192; compare *Letters* 12).

Even if Tolkien did not have access to the in-progress work of the *GPC*, therefore, he used works like William Owen-Pughe’s *Dictionary of the Welsh Language*—likely in its 1832 second edition, which included *hobaid* with the definition “The contents or capacity of a *hob*”—or early dialect resources such as William Salesbury’s *Dictionary in Englyshe and Welshe* (1547) and Thomas Jones’ *Y Gymraeg yn ei Disgleirdeb [Welsh in its Splendor]* (1688), which also included the term.<sup>7</sup> Even more certain than these, however, as O’Brien *did* rightly note, would be Tolkien’s intimate knowledge of the *English Dialect Dictionary*, published between 1898 and 1905 by Joseph Wright, who arguably did more than anyone else to shape Tolkien’s passion and knowledge for philology, not to mention his formal fascination with Welsh (Tolkien, “English and Welsh,” 163; Carpenter 37; *Letters* 356–58). Tolkien eventually came to regard Wright as both a “good friend and adviser,” and the two men grew close enough over the years for Wright to write a glowing recommendation in 1925 for Tolkien’s application for the Rawlinson and Bosworth Chair at Oxford, and for Tolkien to serve as an executor in Wright’s will in 1930 (*Letters* 397).

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<sup>7</sup> While the full contents of Tolkien’s personal library remain tantalizingly unknown, we do know that he at least owned an 1877 facsimile of Salesbury’s volume (see Scull and Hammond, *Tolkien Companion and Guide*, 1.12, noting correction of the date in their online corrigenda). More recently, however, Carl Phelpstead has observed that the pages of this particular book of Tolkien’s “remain uncut and were not read by Tolkien (in his own copy, at least)” (*Tolkien and Wales* 9). Phelpstead’s parenthetical aside cannot be dismissed, since the fact that Tolkien would have had ready access to these standard resources goes without question, and it would be difficult to imagine him not utilizing them either in the course of his pervading philological studies or in preparing for one of his specific endeavors (such as in readying to teach Medieval Welsh at Leeds; see Scull and Hammond, *Tolkien Companion and Guide*, 1.113, 127). Whether he saw *hobaid* in any of these volumes is, of course, yet another matter entirely. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer of this article for this information.

There can be no question of Tolkien's intimate familiarity with Wright's influential *EDD*: in a friendly letter to Wright's wife dated 13 February 1923 (less than a decade before supposedly writing the opening line of *The Hobbit*), Tolkien not only inquires after his former tutor's well-being but also adds his judgment that the "*EDD* is certainly indispensable, or 'unentbehrlich' as really comes more natural to the philological mind, and I encourage people to browse [sic] in it" (*Letters* 11). Despite this fact, we cannot be so positive that Tolkien ever opened Wright's *EDD*—which remains one of the standard references for English philological studies—to look up the word *hobbit*, either before or after his supposed invention of it. If he had done so, however, he would have found it: the Welsh word for "a measure of corn, beans, &c," is included *not* under the *OED* headform *hobbet* but under the familiar (to us) Tolkien spelling *hobbit*.

Wright's *EDD*, though used in the construction of many of its entries, differs from the *OED* in that it only attempts to records the use of words: it does not attempt to provide etymologies to explain their origins. If Tolkien would have had any interest at all in the word *hobbet*, therefore, we might naturally presume that he would also have familiarized himself with both the definition and etymology of *hobbet* from his old haunt, the *OED*. The etymology given there, it turns out, is uncertain to say the least. Unlike the *GPC* (and the *EDD*), it records nothing of a potential connection to the Welsh, instead speculating that the word is "perh[aps] a phonetic var[iant] of *hoppet*"—a word listed separately by O'Brien as a potential *hobbit* source, and intriguingly close in form to *hoppettan*, the name Théoden initially gives the hobbits in one of the early drafts for *Lord of the Rings*, which Christopher Tolkien observes means "to leap, jump for joy" in Old English (*War* 36, 44n28). Within the *OED*, the term *hoppet* means first "a basket, esp. a small hand-basket," with citations starting in the seventeenth century indicating its general use in collecting corn; and, second, "a large bucket, used for lowering and raising men and materials in the shaft of a mine or other excavation," with citations beginning in the nineteenth century. Piling uncertainty upon uncertainty, the *OED* provides an etymology for *hoppet* that is just as indefinite as that given for *hobbet*: "? f. *hopper*<sup>1</sup> with dim. suffix. Cf. also *hobbet*" (*OED* *hoppet*<sup>1</sup>).

Tolkien was a man who loved riddles of linguistic history, as his fascination with the history of the word *Attila* attests (*Letters* 264, 447n), and there's no doubt that he could have easily added yet another complicating thought to the odd mix of images presented by the word *hobbet*, for the simplest derivation of the word possible would be a combination of the word *hob* with the diminutive suffix *-et*. Here again, the *OED* leads us into a rather fertile field, returning to the previously suggested source word *hob*, derived from Robin or Robert, often used as a generic name for "a rustic, a clown" (*hob*, n1.1), which may bring to mind Tolkien's statement in an interview that "The Hobbits are just

rustic English people" (Carpenter 176). Even more to the point, *hob* was used as early as the well-known medieval Towneley Mystery Cycle to mean "a hobgoblin, sprite, [or] elf" (*hob*, n1.2a). This much has been previously noted by critics (including O'Brien), but a return to Wright's *EDD* reveals additional Tolkien connections in this regard: two pages before the striking appearance of Tolkien's friend and mentor's entry for *hobbit* is his more lengthy report on the usages of the word *hob* as a noun. Under Wright's record for the meaning "sprite, hobgoblin" (n1.3), he provides a quotation from northern Yorkshire discussing "Hob Hole" and relating it to "the Cave at Mulgrave," which "is distinctly said to have been 'haunted by the goblin'" — an echo of hobbit holes, and perhaps even of the Great Goblin beneath the Misty Mountains whom Bilbo encounters on his way toward finding the ring in *The Hobbit*. From Derbyshire Wright quotes Lady Verney's *Stone Edge* (1868), a book that features among its "campfire" retellings of older tales the story of "giant Hobb," who "hath ever a little un alongside o' him, a dwarf like" who can climb in through windows to commit thievery at mills (120-21). One of the listeners to the tale in Verney's book objects with the sage knowledge that "the Hobb niver was knowed to come beyond the Dale," and the characters' talk at once turns to a nearby burial mound left from a "big battle," which is filled with bones, pikeheads, and other relics of war — mounds that could be echoed in part by Tolkien's own Barrow Downs (121-22). A bit further down the page in the *EDD* (under *hob* n1.4.2), Wright lists the dialectal appearance of *hobman*, a word he says means "a fairy, sprite, hobgoblin," with a quote again from northern Yorkshire: "Each elf-man or hobman had his habitation, to which he gave his name." Is it not easy, on hearing this, to recall the man-like, elf-friend, hole-dwelling hobbit Mr. Baggins of Bag-End, hired by the not-too-dissimilar dwarves to commit thievery?

Assuming we have all the related evidence from the Tolkien Estate, there can be nothing of surety when it comes to our attempts to find a source for Tolkien's *hobbit* — if indeed there is a source at all! At the same time, when we view the wide range of meanings for the pre-1930 words broached by O'Brien and further discussed here, there is much that *might* have provoked Tolkien to construct his inarguably unique and influential characters and story: even when it comes to the *hobbit* that O'Brien disregarded, with its origins clouded somewhere between Welsh and English, between rural farming and mining, between bushels, baskets, buckets and barrels, we can find connections. The origins of Tolkien's hobbits, too, are obscure even within the broad expanse of Middle-earth, and though it is English in so very many ways, the Shire is an England of a particularly rural sort. The surface connections between the agrarian hobbits and the farming associations of *hobbit* are clear enough; indeed, the seemingly symbiotic relationship between the hobbits to their land might be paralleled by an interesting ca. 1600 usage ("a 'hobbett of land'" ) that transfers

the measurement of grain to a measurement of land (presumably the amount needed to grow a hobbit of grain; Palmer and Owen 66). At the same time, the farming hobbits are diligent hole-diggers and -dwellers, a “mining” aspect of their otherwise agrarian society visible not only in Bag-End and Tolkien’s imagined etymology for *hobbit*, but also in many of the hobbit names. At the end of *The Hobbit*, for instance, the lawyers auctioning off Bilbo’s estate are “Grubb, Grubb, and Burrowes,” words clearly associated with digging underground: *Grubb*, for instance, as Tolkien points out in his “Nomenclature,” is supposed to “recall the E[nglish] verb *grub* ‘dig, root, in the ground’” (Hammond and Scull 759; compare *Annotated* 360). Barrels, too, have their connection, as they are a surprisingly central feature of Bilbo’s adventures in *The Hobbit*, from their use in his escape with the dwarves from the wood-elves by means of the empty barrels that are floated down the river to the men of Lake-town, to his consequent naming of himself as “Barrel-rider” to Smaug (*Annotated* 279). It is this epithet that Smaug henceforth attributes to Bilbo, and it is likewise the clue that sends the dragon against the men of Lake-town, a fact that Bilbo is quick to realize, causing him to voice regret to the dwarves about his riddling remark: “I wish to goodness I had never said that about Barrel-rider; it would make even a blind rabbit in these parts think of the Lake-men” (*Annotated* 284-85).<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly, if the word *hobbit* is related to bushels, the same might be said of several other terms related to Tolkien’s hobbits, arguably including the name of Bilbo Baggins. While Tom Shippey has noted a possible connection between the name Baggins and the term *bagging* (*Road* 66), a relationship furthered by Douglas A. Anderson (*Annotated* 30-31), Tolkien, in his “Nomenclature of *The Lord of the Rings*,” a guide intended to aid translators of his text, states that *Baggins* derives not from *bagging*, but from the word *bag*, which it is “intended to recall.” The association is so strong that he insists that any translated form “should contain an element meaning ‘sack, bag’” (753; see also *Peoples* 48). Tolkien repeats this essential information when he discusses the origin of the name Sackville-Baggins, which first appeared at the end of *The Hobbit* as a cousins interested in occupying Bilbo’s vacant Bag-End. *Sackville*,

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<sup>8</sup> It rather pushes credulity, but one might also argue that the appearance of Tolkien’s hobbits owes something to the curious etymological possibilities of *hobbit* (alongside the aforementioned *Snergs*). In a 1938 communication with Houghton Mifflin, the American publisher of *The Hobbit*, Tolkien described his imagined hobbit: “I picture a fairly human figure, not a kind of ‘fairy’ rabbit as some of my British reviewers seem to fancy: fattish in the stomach, shortish in the leg. A round, jovial face; ears only slightly pointed and ‘elvish’ [...]. Actual size—only important if other objects are in picture—say about three feet or three feet six inches” (*Letters* 35). Hobbits, it seems, look like some combination of a human and a short elf, recalling perhaps Tolkien’s earlier description of them as “a diminutive branch” of humanity, with the general roundness and height of a barrel.

Tolkien writes, “is of course joined in the story with *Baggins* because of the similar meaning in E[n]glish (= C[ommon] S[peech]) *sack* and *bag*, and because of the slightly comic effect of this conjunction. Any compound in the L[anguage] of T[ranslation] containing elements meaning (more or less) equivalent to *sack/bag* will do” (762). Indeed, no less an authority than Bilbo Baggins himself, in his conversation with Smaug in *The Hobbit*, makes riddling use of his name’s derivation from the simple noun *bag*: “I come from the end of a bag, but no bag went over me,” thus underscoring Tolkien’s “simple word-association joke” in the phrase “Bagg-ins of Bag-End” (*Annotated* 279; Rateliff 1.45). While we might think of the word *bag* in relatively simple terms, a glance at the *OED* again provides a reference to bushels: “A measure of quantity for produce, varying according to the nature of the commodity.” For potatoes, according to an 1845 citation, “There are three bushels to the bag” (*bag*, n.II.6).

Tolkien gave us few clues about the derivation of the name *Bilbo*. Critics have seen connections to names in the works of P.G. Wodehouse, as well as to the character Gorbo in E.A. Wyke-Smith’s *Marvellous Land of Snergs*. Rateliff concludes that, despite these similarities, “Like *hobbit* itself, *Bilbo* is almost certainly Tolkien’s own coinage,” yet something of a connection to the farmer’s *hobbet* might be found here, too, if admittedly far more tenuous than can be had with *hobbit* (1.47-48). In the editorial cited above, Dickens’s complaints regarding the *hobbet* are preceded by his complaint regarding the *boll*, a word that could—especially in combination with Wyke-Smith’s Gorbo—influence Tolkien’s *Bilbo*. A strikingly similar lament to Dickens’s appears in the Proceedings of the Columbus (Ohio) Horticultural Society in 1896, in an entry in the “Editor’s Table” column on “British Local Weights and Measures”:

One would think that the same measure should be used in measuring wheat, barley and oats, but in Buteshire a boll of wheat equals 240 pounds, and a boll of barley equals 320 pounds, while a boll of oats in Argyleshire equals six bushels. In Flintshire a “hobbet” of old potatoes weighs 200 pounds, and a “hobbet” of new potatoes 210. (47)

A few decades earlier, Owen Wallis made a similar complaint before the London, or Central Farmers’ Club on 1 February 1858; he cites as examples of inconsistencies the different measures of the *boll*, *barrel*, *hobbit*, and *bag* in particular (202). In 1863 James Hayman likewise uses “the new boll, or old boll, the last, the hobbett, the windle, &c., &c.” to make his point about a lack of regulation in measurements (54). The last of these (yet another measure for grain), as it happens, could potentially be echoed within Withywindle, a tributary to the Brandywine, which itself forms the eastern border of the hobbits’



agrarian Shire.<sup>9</sup> With local variations, a *boll*, a *bag*, a *windle*, and a *hobbit*, therefore, are all near enough to the same thing at least when it comes to rural farming. As a result, when the “Sackville-Bagginses” are measuring up the possessions of “Bilbo Baggins Esquire, of Bag-End, Underhill, Hobbiton” at the auction at end of *The Hobbit* (presided over by the etymologically redundant legal team of “Grubb, Grubb, and Burrowes”), Tolkien’s words *might* be a tour-de-force of what Shippey calls a kind of “nonsense” redundancy that Tolkien cleverly embedded elsewhere in his work<sup>10</sup>: the “Bushel-town-Bushel-Ends” are measuring up the possessions of “Bushel Bushel-End Esquire, of Bushel-End, Underhill, Bushel-town.”

### A Cautious Conclusion

So what if anything are we to do with the thieving *hobman* who gives his name to his dwelling, or the diminutive rustic elf-man (*hob+et*), or even the *hobbet*, with its odd linguistic connections to farming and mining, bushels and barrels? Admittedly, it may be that, in the end, the speculative connections further examined here are just one long set of critically insignificant linguistic coincidences. There’s little doubt, after all, that the further one peers down the rabbit-hole of *hobbit* (if you’ll forgive yet one more play on words) the more one seems in danger of falling in and losing one’s way.

But in the alternative case—if there was indeed a source (or sources) for Tolkien’s invention—we are faced with deep-reaching dilemmas about Tolkien’s denial of such influences. The most likely solution to this potential problem, I suspect, is that the author never acknowledged his debt to the extant words because he truly did not remember any: the many possible features of the extant words had long simmered in Tolkien’s unconsciousness, his self-described “leaf-mould of the mind,” perhaps from his childhood in the west of England but certainly from sources like Wright’s “indispensable” *EDD*. These bits and pieces steeped in a kind of philological soup, tended over the fire of Tolkien’s vibrant imagination and stirred by the work he was doing for the *OED*, before they bubbled over in the form of *The Hobbit* at a place and time that still eludes our best attempts to lock it down. There can thus be no single word that stands behind Tolkien’s *hobbit*; there are many.

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<sup>9</sup> Tolkien’s “Nomenclature” gives no clear etymology for *windle*, though he does write that the construction “was modeled on *withywind*, a name of the convolvulus or bindweed” (779). Shippey suggests that *windle* comes from an unattested Old English word, \**windol* ‘winding brook’ (*Road* 108).

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Shippey, who notes that Tolkien’s *Bree Hill* literally means ‘Hill Hill’ (since *Bree* is almost certainly derived from Welsh *bre* ‘hill’), *Chetwood* ‘Wood wood,’ *Barrow Downs* ‘Hill Hills,’ and *Théoden King* ‘King King’ (*Road* 109).

If this is indeed so, then Grotta-Kurska, though wrong to conclude that “the word hobbit is unquestionably, uniquely Tolkien’s invention,” was absolutely right to compare it to Milton’s *pandemonium* (79). Like that word, Tolkien’s neologism is less new than it is reshaped from old linguistic parts: the devil, so to speak, is in the details.

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