

Winter 12-15-1989

On the Origin of the Name "Hobbit"

Donald O'Brien

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



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

Recommended Citation

O'Brien, Donald (1989) "On the Origin of the Name "Hobbit"," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 16: No. 2, Article 19.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol16/iss2/19>

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.

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



Online Summer Seminar 2023

August 5-6, 2023: Fantasy Goes to Hell: Depictions of Hell in Modern Fantasy Texts

<https://mythsoc.org/oms/oms-2023.htm>



On the Origin of the Name "Hobbit"

Abstract

Notes that although Tolkien believed at first that he had invented the word "hobbit," he became concerned that he might have encountered it and subconsciously reproduced it. Reviews a number of possible sources of the word suggested by scholars.

Additional Keywords

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

On the Origin of the Name 'Hobbit'

Donald O'Brien

According to a letter dated 7 June, 1955, written by Tolkien to W.H. Auden concerning the initial composition of *The Hobbit*:

All I remember about the start of *The Hobbit* is sitting correcting School Certificate papers in the everlasting weariness of that annual task forced on impetuous academics with children. On a blank leaf I scrawled: 'In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.' I did not and do not know why. I did nothing about it, for a long time, and for some years I got no further than the production of Thor's map. But it became *The Hobbit* in the early 1930s.¹

Tolkien could not remember precisely when he had written the first sentence of *The Hobbit*.² The name 'hobbit' itself apparently was first used by Tolkien, according to the recollection of his son Michael, prior to the composition of the sentence when Tolkien recounted stories orally to his children at their home at 22 Northmoor Road about "a small being with furry feet". Tolkien asked his children to name the creature and "then, answering himself, said 'I think we'll call him a "Hobbit".'³ Since the Tolkiens moved from 22 Northmoor Road in 1930, and because Michael recalled stories he himself had invented in 1929 based on the hobbit creature and that his father had written the opening sentence to *The Hobbit* in the summer before he began telling oral stories to the children, Michael Tolkien believed that the inception of *The Hobbit* "began" at any rate no later than that year (i.e. 1929).⁴ (TH, pp. vi-vii.) Grotta-Kurska quotes from a letter which he received from Michael Tolkien dated 10 August, 1975: "I first heard it at the age of 7, when John, my elder brother was 10, and Christopher 3. My sister was not even born then."⁵ Grotta-Kurska further adds: "Since Michael Tolkien had been born in November, 1920, this would place the time at summer, 1928."⁶ The salient fact for the evolution of the world of Arda was the mythopoeic influence of language on Tolkien's subcreative genius: "Names always generate a story in my mind. Eventually I thought, I'd better find out what hobbits were like. But that's only the beginning." (*Biography*, p. 172.) From that first sentence *The Hobbit* - the bulk of which was probably written between 1930 and late 1932 when C.S. Lewis read the manuscript⁷ - and *The Lord of the Rings* were born and a mediatory means was found for the presentation of the mythology of the First Age to modern readers.

The name 'hobbit' has been treated by some critics as Tolkien's own invention. For example, Grotta-Kurska has written: "In any event, the word hobbit is unquestionably, uniquely Tolkien's invention, like "pandemonium" in *Paradise Lost* and "chortle" in *Alice in Wonderland*." (Grotta-Kurska, p. 74.) According to Michael Tolkien, his father repeated the opening words to *The Hobbit* in the oral tales

to his children: "as if he had invented them on the spur of the moment." (TH, p. vi.) Tolkien himself at one time at least believed that he had invented 'hobbit' for when the *Oxford English Dictionary* staff contracted him concerning the inclusion of 'hobbit', as well as of 'hobbitry', 'hobbitish', etc., into the second supplement to the dictionary, he wrote to Roger Lancelyn Green in a letter dated 8 January, 1971: "I have had, therefore, to justify my claim to have invented the word." (*Letters*, No. 319, p. 406) His claim to its invention, or at least to its uniqueness in the English language, is repeated in his guide for translators of *The Lord of the Rings*:

Hobbit. Do not translate, since the name is supposed no longer to have a recognized meaning in the Shire, and not to have been derived from the Common Speech (=English, or the language of translation).⁸

But his claim in the letter to Lancelyn Green of 1971 to having himself invented the name was undermined by an uneasiness of long standing. Many critics have sought a possible source for 'hobbit'. In fact the enquiry began as early as 1938 when a letter published in *The Observer* on 16 January suggested the possibility that there existed an old fairy tale called "The Hobbit" published in a collection which the anonymous letter writer may have read about 1904 concerning a creature called "hobbit". Tolkien replied in a letter published in *The Observer* on 20 February, 1938:

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 guess would have no more authority than those of future researchers, and I leave the game to them. ... I have no waking recollection of furry pygmies (in book or moonlight): nor of any Hobbit bogey in print by 1904. I suspect that two hobbits are accidental homophones, and am content that they are not (it would seem) synonyms.⁸

adding with a note of uncertainty: "Not quite. I should like, if possible, to learn more about the fairy-tale collection, c. 1904." (*The Observer*, p. 9, fn.) And he wrote to Lancelyn Green in the letter of 1971 cited above, still plagued at so late a date by the same that had arisen in 1938:

The O.E.D. has in preparation of its Second Supplement got to *Hobbit*, which it proposes to include together with its progeny: *hobbitry*, *-ish*, etc. I have had, therefore, to justify my claim to have invented a word. My claim rests really on my 'nude parole' or unsupported assertion that I remember the occasion of its invention (by me) ... Oh what a tangled web they weave who try a new word to conceive! (*Letters*, No. 319, pp. 406-07.)

A doubt had set in in 1938 about the origin of 'hobbit' which would never be allayed in Tolkien's mind a doubt compounded by the several new 'sources' for 'hobbit' hypothesized by researchers.

Tolkien never satisfactorily resolved the dilemma in which he increasingly found himself, a predicament neatly summarized by the phrase "tangled web" in his letter of 1971. He resorted to one solution founded on a linguistic basis in the appendices to *The Return of the King*: as Shippey succinctly describes Tolkien's 'solution':

... having invented the word Tolkien felt obliged to give it an etymology, and to embed that deep in the structure of linguistic correspondences that holds Middle-Earth (sic) together.⁹

According to Tolkien:

Hobbit was the name usually applied by the Shire-folk to all their kind. Men called them *Halflings* and the Elves *Perianth*. The origin of the word was by most forgotten. It seems, however, to have been at first a name given to the Harfoots by the Fallohides and Stoors, and to be a worn-down form of a word preserved more fully in Rohan: *holbytla* 'hole-builder'.¹⁰

Tolkien had thus "worked out an acceptable etymology"¹¹ for 'hobbit' grounded in a starred plausible word equatable to Old English through the language of the Rohirrim. He thereby created an etymological internally consistent tautology: In a hole in the ground there lived a hole-builder. (*The Road*, p. 52.) The etymological excursus is echoed in Tolkien's later statement in the letter of 1971: "... that the only E. word that influenced the invention was 'hole'." (*Letters*, No. 319, p. 406.) Notwithstanding the linguistic exercise, the problem did not evaporate. It, in fact, reached a critical stage when Tolkien was faced with the inclusion of 'hobbit' in the supplement to the O.E.D. He wrote to Dr. R.W. Burchfield, the director of the dictionary staff, on 11 September, 1970, about the entry for 'hobbit', stating that he was bothered about inserting "invented by J.R.R. Tolkien" into the definition, fearing that future "investigations by experts" might reveal earlier occurrences of 'hobbit'. (*Letters*, No. 316, pp. 404-05.) The definition that Tolkien wrote was accepted by the dictionary staff with some alteration of Tolkien's wording and with the incorporation of the words "invented by J.R.R. Tolkien".¹² It is curious that Tolkien requested that "... if an alleged older story called 'The Hobbit' can be traced, then the (meaning "hole-dweller") may be transferred to the etymology." (*Letters*, No. 316, p. 405.) The dictionary staff did not accede, however, to Tolkien's request that 'hole-dweller' be transferred to the etymology, an action which would have been tantamount to the acknowledgement of the invented etymology in *The Return of the King*. One can only wonder at the reaction of the staff to this request. At any rate the etymological explanation "hole-dweller" was retained, but expanded to read "said by him to mean 'hole-dweller'" in reference to Tolkien.

What can be said about the predicament into which Tolkien found himself, the "tangled web" as he describes it. An examination of the evidence and of the principal lines of inquiry by researchers into the origins of the name 'hobbit' is an order.

The anonymous writer who signed himself as 'Habit'

of the letter to *The Observer* published on 16 January, 1938, proposed the possible existence of: "... an old fairy tale called "The Hobbit" in a collection read about 1904." (*The Observer*, p. 9) To the best of my knowledge no such story has been discovered. Yet its possible existence continued to exercise Tolkien even as late as his letter of 1971 to Lancelyn Green. In particular, he was worried about a tale entitled *Puss Cat Mew* which had been read to him prior to 1900 and which he feared might contain a 'hobbit': he asked Lancelyn Green to check out this tale. According to Lancelyn Green:

At one point he was troubled about the origin of Hobbits who were about to find their way into the supplement of the Oxford English Dictionary as his original invention, and felt that something he had read as a child might have given him the idea or even the name, which had remained in his subconscious and had come back to him as a new invention when he started telling stories to his own children. For some reason he felt that this might be a story called "Puss-Cat Mew", of which he remembered the name but not the contents; and I was able to relieve his anxiety by guiding him to a story of that name in a volume by E.H. Knatchbull-Hugessen (later Lord Brabourne) called *Stories for my Children*, published in 1869 - which had no connection with any Hobbits.¹³

Further exhaustive examination of this work by Christina Scull has confirmed Lancelyn Green's conclusion.¹⁴

After an initial false claim that 'hobbit' had been found in Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584),¹⁵ Philip Howard announced on 31 May, 1977,¹⁶ that a 'hobbit' had been discovered by an outside reader for the staff of the *Oxford English Dictionary* in *The Denham Tracts* via a quotation of the relevant passage in the tracts in Katherine Briggs' *A Dictionary of Fairies* published in 1976,¹⁷ (it should be pointed out that this occurrence of 'hobbit' was first spotted by R. Sinclair.¹⁸) Although Briggs' book also contains a brief survey of Tolkien's career,¹⁹ she did not recognize the significance of the 'hobbit' in the "long list of fairies, spirits, goblins and other such creatures"²⁰ which she quotes in full from *The Denham Tracts*. Michael Aislabie Denham had spent a great part of his life studying the folklore of the British Isles and died in 1859 leaving a wealth of unpublished material. James Hardy, of the Folk Lore Society, assembled the material and published it as *The Denham Tracts* in two volumes appearing in 1892 and 1895. Much of the list derives from Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft*; hence perhaps the initial assumption that 'hobbit' derived from Scot's work, in which it, in fact, does not appear. Howard enthusiastically identified the tracts as Tolkien's "source". The list in the tracts²¹ is arranged in no apparent order. Thirty one of the names are discussed in footnotes, which Briggs has not quoted. Unfortunately 'hobbit' is not footnoted. 'Hobbit', like many other names in the list (e.g. hobgoblins, hob-and-lan-thorns, hobby-lan-thorns, etc.), is merely classified in the index as "a class of spirits". (Hardy, *ibid.*, p. 388.) Hardy's list is quoted in full as an appendix to this article.

In spite of the enthusiasm that greeted Howard's dis-

covery,²² this is not the sole pre-1930 occurrence of 'hobbit' that Tolkien could have encountered. According to the OED, 'hobbits' is an archaic form of 'howitzer':

Howitz, haubitz. Obs. Forms: 8 *haw-, haubitz, hob* (b) itz. . 7 *howitz, 9 hau-, howitz.* (a. Ger. *haubitze* ... stone-sling, catapult ... 1710 HARRIS *Lex Techn.* II, *Hobits* are a sort of small Mortar from 6 to 8 Inches in Diameter. Their Carriages are like those of Guns, only much shorter. 1729 SHELVOCKE *Artillery* 377 Little Hobbits charged with the various kinds of Fire Balls.²³

'Hobbit' also appears as a local British noun, defined by the OED as follows: "*Hobbit, -it. local.* (perh. a phonetic var. of Hoppet.) 1. A seed-basket ... 2. A local measure = 2½ bushels."²⁴ Moreover, according to *The English Dialect Dictionary* edited by Joseph Wright, there is a Welsh noun 'hobbit' which is defined as follows: "HOBBIT, sb. Wal. Also written *hobit*. A measure of corn, beans, &c. ... being 2½ bushels imperial ..."²⁵ Presumably the last two citations refer to the same substantive. Tolkien was closely associated with Joseph Wright: he had read his *Primer of the Gothic Language* shortly before 1910, an experience which fuelled his love for the languages of northern Europe; he attended his classes and lectures at Oxford; Joseph Wright was a friend and a personal influence in harnessing and directing Tolkien's enthusiasm for language.²⁶ It is possible that Tolkien may have encountered the word 'hobbit' through acquaintance with Professor Wright and the relevant third volume of the dictionary containing the word 'hobbit' which was published in 1905. Whether the word 'hobbit' is in fact a Welsh word - I have not been able to confirm Wright's entry in *A National Dictionary of the Welsh Language with English and Welsh Equivalents* edited by Uwen Pughe and Robert John Pryse or in any other Welsh dictionaries - is irrelevant. However, one cannot know with certainty that this was Tolkien's source; certainly the meanings of the two last dictionary citations appear to have no obvious connection with Tolkien's hobbits.

As it was mentioned above, Tolkien worried about the possibility that a story entitled "The Hobbit" may have appeared in print prior to 1905 with which he may have been acquainted at one time but which he could not remember. Cofield has stated that:

I thought that the reference might be to 'The Hobyahs', an old folktale printed in *More English Fairy Tales* in the 1890s, subsequently appearing in other anthologies.

He wrote to Tolkien's biographer, Humphrey Carpenter, suggesting this as the possible source that had plagued Tolkien with doubt. Carpenter replied, and according to Cofield: "Mr. Carpenter said 'The Hobyahs' had been pointed out to him before and that he was sure this was the answer."²⁷ It may be mentioned that according to Katherine Briggs:

Hobyahs. These make a solitary appearance in folklore in a story in Jacob's *More English Fairy Tales*, reproduced from the *Journal of American Folk-Lore* (vol. III), communicated by a Mr. S.V. Proudfoot who had it from a Perthshire

family. There is no trace of Scottish dialect about it. The Hobyahs were horrifying GOBLINS who ate people and kidnapped children. They were, however, terrified of dogs, and with good reason, for they were finally eaten up by a large black dog.²⁸

Hobyahs are distinctly unlike Tolkien's hobbits, in spite of some resemblance of the name to Tolkien's starred Middle-earth source 'hobbita'.

'Hobbit' also appears in compound word forms. For example, it appears in a ninth century variant spelling 'hobbit-hoy' of 'hobbede-hoy':

*Hobbedehoy ... hobbadahoy ... hobbedehoy ... colloq. Forms: α.6 hobbedehoye, 8-9 hobbede-hoy, hobbede-, 9 hobbedehoy; 8-9 hob (b) letehy, hobbiery-hoy, B.6 hobbad de hoy, habber de hoy, 7 hab (b) erdehy, hoberdehy, hoberdey-hoy, hober-de-hoy(e), hubber de hoy, 9 hoberdehy, γ. 7 hobet-a-hoy, hoberdehy, 8 hoberdehy, hobby de hoy, 8-9 hobby-dehy, 9 hobby-de-hoy, hoberde-hoy, hobbiery-hoy, hobbede-, hoberde-, hoberdehy, hobbiery-hoy, hobbiery-hoy (A colloquial word of unsettled form and uncertain origin. One instance in *hoble* occurs in 1540; otherwise *hober-, hober-* are the prevailing forms before 1700; these, with the forms in *hober-, hobby-*, suggest that the word is analogous in structure to *Hoherdiance, Hobbidance, and Hobbi-dehy*. ... Some of the variants are evidently due to the effort of popular etymology to put some sense into an odd and absurd-looking word. It is now perh. most frequently associated with *hoble*, and taken to have ludicrous reference to an awkward and clumsy gait. (OED, Vol. V, p. 316.)*

One meaning of 'hobbedehoy', "a youth at the age between boyhood and manhood, a stripling; esp. a clumsy or awkward youth" (Ibid.) mirrors the immaturity of Bilbo unaccustomed with the ways of the world outside the Shire when he embarked on his adventure; the similarity is probably fortuitous. 'Hobbit' also appears in:

HOBBITY-BOBBITY, n.comb. The nettle, *Urtica dioica*. Found only in the riddle in *puot. n.Sc. 1881 W. Gregor Folk-Lore* 80: "Hobbity-bobbity sits on this side o' the burn, Hobbity-bobbity sits on that side o' the burn An gehn ye touch hobbity-bobbity, Hobbity-bobbity 'ill bite you?" Etym. obscure ...²⁹

There are moreover many variant word forms so close in spelling to 'hobbit' that they might easily be considered to be related to 'hobbit', if not etymologically, at least as an inspiration to Tolkien. For example, the Scottish words 'hubbit', 'hubbet' and 'hobbet':

HUBB, v., n. Also hob (b).

I. v. To suspect or accuse of dishonesty, hold guilty of a crime ... Pa.p. or ppl.adj. *hubbit, hubbet, hobbet*, suspected of dishonesty ... *Den hobbed him as a thief; hobbet ut o' de place*, driven from a place on account of disparaging talk or accusations, especially of theft. *A hobbet thief*, a veritable thief. II.n. A laughing-stock, a butt, an object of public derision.³⁰

The association of this word with crime, especially theft, and being an object of derision curiously echo Bilbo's occupation of thief and his somewhat whimsical, some-

times less than serious hobbit nature. The short e is etymologically close to short i and long u to long o. Any of these forms 'hubbitt', 'hubbitt', 'hubbitt' are etymologically close to 'hobbit' (cf. both 'hobbit' and 'hobbit' cited under 'hobbit', and 'hobbity-hoy' and 'hobbity-hoy' cited under 'hobbit' above).

Scottish 'hub' and English 'hob' may possibly be roots for many of the words mentioned here, although the etymology of the family of 'hob-' words is problematic and they may be based on diverse roots 'hob' of different origins and meanings. The first entry 'hob' in the OED is defined as follows:

Hob ... Also 4-6 *hobbe*. (A familiar by-form of *Rob* = Robin, Robert: cf. the parallel *Hodge*, *Hick* for Roger, Richard, with H for R; also *Dob*, *Dobbin*, and *Dick* with initial D.)
1. A familiar or rustic variation of the Christian name *Robert* or *Robin*. Hence formerly a generic name for: A rustic, a clown.
2. = Robin Goodfellow or Puck; a hobgoblin, sprite, elf.
... To *play hob*: 'to play the devil', work mischief.³¹

The other entries 'hob' carry a wide range of meanings: e.g.

Hob, sb. (Origin obscure: perhaps more words than one.)
1. (Formerly *hub*.) In a fire-place, the part of the casing having a surface level with the top of the grate ...
2. A (rounded) peg or pin used as a mark or target in games; esp. one of the iron pins used in quoits. Also, a game in which these are used ...
3. (Also *hub*.) 'A hardened, threaded spindle, by which a comb or chasing-tool may be cut' ...
4. The shoe of a sledge.³²
5. Short for *HOBNAIL*.

'Hob' may be linked in some instances with 'hobby' possibly etymologically through association with such names as 'Robin' and by sense through the clownish aspect evident in some usages of 'hob' and the sense of 'hobby' representing an ungainly immature horse.

Hobby ... sb. Forms: 4 *horny*, 5-7 *hoby*, 6 *hoby*, *hobbie*, 7 *hobby*, 6- *hobby*. (ME. *hobyen*, *hoby*, in OF. *hobin*, *hobi*, *haubty*, whence mod. F. *aubin*, It. *ubino*.)

1. A small or middle-sized horse; an ambling or pacing horse; a pony." (OED, vol. v, p. 316.)

HOBBY(1), *HOBBY-HORSE*, an ambling nag, a toy like a horse, a favourite pursuit. ... A *hobby* is now a favourite pursuit, but formerly a toy in imitation of a prancing nag, the orig. sense being a kind of prancing horse.³³

The first two syllables of the obsolete word 'hobbitidance', perhaps derived from:

...*Hobby* or *Hobbet*, perh. in same sense as *Hob* ... but perh. associated with *Hobby-horse* ...

representing

... The name of a malevolent sprite or friend one of those introduced in the morris-dance. (OED, vol. V, p. 315.)

resembles 'hobbit' with dental d in place of t, paralleling the variant spellings 'hobbity-hoy', 'hobbity-hoy' and 'hobbity-hoy' cited above under 'hobbit'. See also 'hobbit' in:]

HOBBEDY'S-LANTERN, sb. War. Wor. Clo. Also written *hobdy's*, *hobdy's* War. ...

1. Will-o'-the-Wisp or *ignis fatuus*.

2. A hollowed turnip, with spaces cut to rudely represent eyes, nose, & mouth, with a lighted candle put inside.³⁴

We could range further afield to such word forms as 'hoppet':

Hoppet ... Chiefly north. dial. Also 7- *hobbet*, 9 *hoppett*, -itt. ... A basket, esp. a small hand basket. ... 1688 R. Holme *Armoury* III. 392/1 An *Hoppet* or *Hobbet* ... is a Vessel of wood to carry corn in by him that soweth the same." (OED, vol. V, p. 382.)

"*happen* v. Also *hop*(pe, *hoppie*, *oppen*, *oppien*, & (in sur-names only) *hope*, *hob*(be) ... (a) To dance; (b) to hop, leap, bound, bounce. ... *Tourn.* Tott. 15: There *hopped* Hawkin; there *daunsed* Dawkin. ... *Destr. Troy* 12506: Stith was the storme stird all the shippes *Hoppit* on hegh with heste of the floddes. ...

and to Alsatian 'hoppethopp' under:

Hobbitdehoy, a youth approaching manhood. (E.) A jocos word, very variously spelt ... The true origin is unknown. Perhaps suggested by E. *hobbe*, expressive of clumsy movement, and *hoy!* as an interjection. ... Alsace *hoppethopp*, a giddy, flighty, eccentric man ...³⁶

Lest such seemingly aimless listings of words bestir some linguistics experts overly much, it should be pointed out that Tolkien himself was willing to entertain such potential influences in the emergence of his 'hobbit':

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. (*Letters*, No. 319, p. 406.)

Many word forms such as 'hobberdy' have been discussed above. Tolkien's statement in itself is curious, in view of the depth and breadth of philological knowledge he displayed at the time referred to in this statement when he had begun to compose *The Hobbit* at about forty two years of age.

Several critics have focussed their attention on the possible influence of 'rabbit' on 'hobbit'. The rabbit-like qualities of hobbits were first raised in the letter to *The Observer* in 1938: Tolkien strongly denied these links:

Nor indeed was he like a rabbit. He was a prosperous, well-fed bachelor of independent means. Calling him a "nasty little rabbit" was a piece of vulgar trollopy, just as "descendent of rats" was a piece of dwarfish malice - deliberate insults to his size of feet, which he deeply resented. (*The Observer*, p. 9.)

Tolkien also stated in an interview with Charlotte and Denis Plimmer in 1968 that:

I don't know where the word came from. It might have been associated with Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*. Certainly not rabbit, as some people think. *Babbitt* has the same

bourgeois smugness that hobbits do. His world is the same limited place.³⁷

a statement which Lodigiani³⁸ has apparently accepted at face value, but which Manlove³⁹ and Palucci⁴⁰ have merely quoted without comment. In the letter of 1971 to Lancelyn Green, Tolkien again reiterated his dislike for the hobbit-rabbit linkage, echoing his letter of 1938 to *The Observer*:

Also that the only E. word that influenced the invention was 'hole'; that granted the description of hobbits, the trolls' use of rabbit was merely an obvious insult, of no more etymological significance than Thorin's insult to Bilbo 'descendent of rats!' (*Letters*, No. 319, p. 406.)

Tolkien's strong denials have not deterred researchers from persistently seeking linguistic links between 'hobbit' and 'rabbit'. Some proposed etymologies for 'hobbit' are:

- 1) Hobbs + rabbit;⁴¹
- 2) hob + rabbit;⁴²
- 3) hobby (as in 'hobby-horse') + rabbit;⁴³
- 4) ? + rabbit.⁴⁴

Some critics, such as Grotta-Kurska, (Grotta-Kurska, pp. 78-79.) have accepted Tolkien's denial of the influence of 'rabbit'. But Tolkien's reaction need not be accepted without some reservation, in view of the plethora of evidence suggesting a possible link. (*The Road*, p. 52.)

- 1) When Bilbo and company have left the Misty Mountains, Bilbo at one point resembles a rabbit feeding: As they went on Bilbo looked from side to side for something to eat.... He nibbled a bit of forrel, and he drank from a small mountain-stream that crossed the path, and he ate three wild strawberries that he found on its bank.... They still went on. The rough path disappeared. The bushes, and the long grasses between the boulders, the patches of rabbit-cropped turf... all vanished. (TH, pp. 87-88.)

However, the rabbit's similitude here contrasts with the omnivorous Bilbo who Tolkien describes as: "Not much good at skinned rabbits... being used to having it delivered by the butcher all ready to cook. (TH, p. 99)

- 2) When Bilbo and company are attacked by wolves, Bilbo: "could not get into any tree, as was scuttling about from trunk to trunk, like a rabbit that has lost its hole and has a dog after it." (TH, p. 90)
- 3) When an eagle "sharpened his beak on a stone and another seizes Dori, Bilbo begins "to think of being torn up for supper like a rabbit, when his turn came." (TH, p. 97.)
- 4) Shortly later the Eagle tells Bilbo: "you need not be frightened like a rabbit, even if you look rather like one." (TH, p. 97.)
- 5) Bilbo comments on Gandalf's revelation that they will meet a skin-changer, Beorn: "What! a furrier, a man that calls rabbits conies, when he doesn't turn their skins into squirrels?" (TH, p. 103.)
- 6) Shortly later Beorn pokes Bilbo's waistcoat and says: "Little bunny is getting nice and fat again on bread and

honey." (TH, p. 115.)

- 7) In chapter 17 Thorin "shook poor Bilbo like a rabbit" (TH, p. 233.) upon learning that Bilbo has given away the Arkenstone.⁴⁵
- 8) Aragorn's statement concerning Frodo's mithril shirt that Frodo wears:

Here's a pretty hobbit-skin to wrap an elven-princeling in.⁴⁶

is a curious echo of an old English nursery rhyme:

Bye baby Bunting
Father's gone a-hunting,
To find a pretty rabbit-skin
To wrap the baby Bunting in.⁴⁷

- 9) 'Coney-rabbit' is a prominent feature in the chapter "Of Herbs and Stewed Rabbit". It might be pointed out that 'coney-rabbit' has also appeared in the poem "Goblin Feet", originally published in *Oxford Poetry* (1915): "I must follow in their train Down the crooked fairy lane Where the coney-rabbits long ago have gone."

Other references to rabbits (TH, pp. 100, 119, 137, 188, 195) add nothing to a possible hobbit-rabbit link.

Shippey alone has attempted to rationalize a possible link between 'rabbit' and 'hobbit': he argues that the rabbit was originally not native to England, having first appeared around the thirteenth century, paralleled by the appearance of the word 'rabbit', not an Anglo-Saxon word, first attested no earlier than 1398 ('coney' is attested no earlier than 1302), and that the rabbit became a familiar feature of England and its lore; similarly hobbits are an alleged "ancient people,"⁴⁹ to be accepted into the tradition of Elves and Dwarves, and yet equally a modern English lore and embodying many modern characteristics anachronistic to ancient European traditions (e.g. potatoes, tomatoes, tobacco).⁵⁰

What conclusions can be drawn from the above evidence? On the one hand we have Tolkien's own uncertainties concerning the origin of the word 'hobbit'. On the other hand we have the three principal lines of enquiry pursued by researchers into this matter: attempts to link 'hobbit' with

- i) a pre-1930 occurrence of 'hobbit';
- ii) a pre-1930 word resembling 'hobbit';
- iii) rabbit.

Tolkien was aware of these main lines of enquiry. His reactions do not resolve the problem. He could not remember any specific link between his 'hobbit' and any alleged or possible source. Moreover no suggestion put forward by the many researchers has resolved the issue, and this further examination of all of the evidence adds no conviction to any possible solution. Certainly nothing has been "proven" by the above evidence. One possible solution might be eclectic approach, such as has been adopted by R. Matthews:

Middle English roots abound in the language of Middle Earth (sic), and even a cursory look at how hobbit and human interact reveals Tolkien's playful ironic sen-

sibility at work. The hobbit himself is full of contradictions. He possesses all the refinements of civilized life, but his furry feet and rabbit-burrow life in a hole in the ground point out how far away we are from our animal origins. The hobbit is the primary focus for the exercise of Tolkien's linguistic and literary hobby. (The word "hobby" seems to be related to "hobbit," and akin to Old French *hober*, "to move (+ et. etc).") He knew and liked Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*, and that title may have been partly involved in his choice of hobbit. A "hob" is "a hobgoblin or elf," and is a root which seems appropriate for Middle Earth. It also is used to designate a rounded peg or pin used as a target in quoits and similar games, and this sense of center pin or target seems appropriate in the context of the story as well. The name has connections with the Middle English "hobe(n)" and High German "hoppeln" which came to designate "an awkward of difficult situation" from its original sense to jolt. That our "Unexpected Party" involves a jolt (like lightning) neatly echoes the various implications of hob at the hub of our hobbit world. The linguistic values in the opening pages re further complicated by "burglar" ("our little Bilbo Baggins, the burglar, the chosen and selected burglar"). The root here is "burg" and is related to borough, a fortified city. The hobbit is only your average city dweller coming to face uncanny challenges from a mythic world he has never tangled with before. That he lives in a kind of burrow adds another playful association.

Tolkien's linguistic training runs wrinkling through these stories. He had earned a considerable reputation while helping complete the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Though the A-H section, including both "burglar" according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, since "Hob" is a shortened form of the Christian name Robert or Robin (Rob = Hob), formerly "a generic name for a rustic, a clown." Tolkien uses all the various senses of this name, making Bilbo and later Frodo into rustics and clowns at times, and allowing them to become a type of wise fool. And, of course, the English audience would pick up the Robin association with its rustic folk hero Robin Hood, the good robber and comic burglar.⁵¹

Mathews' analysis, apart from some obvious errors, by reason of its variegated diffusiveness and meandering comprehensiveness, misses the crux of the problem.

It cannot be concluded that Tolkien was influenced by any known occurrence of a word 'hobbit' or by a 'hobbit'-like word or by rabbit. I myself suspect that Tolkien 'invented' 'hobbit' through the subconscious influence of an earlier hobbit in the Denham tracts, or more probably, I believe, either by the 'hobbit' in *The English Dialect Dictionary* edited by his mentor and friend Joseph Wright, or by the simple perfect active/participial adjectival forms 'hubbet', 'hobbet' of the verb 'hub' defined to mean "to suspect or accuse of dishonesty, hold guilty of a crime," approximating Bilbo's career as a burglar. However, it must be reiterated that the evidence supports no alleged resolution of the origin of 'hobbit' unequivocally. Tolkien described the situation best when he wrote:

Oh what a tangled web they weave who try a new word to conceive. (*Letters*, No. 319, p. 407.)

Appendix

I include here the complete text of the list of fairies found in *The Denham Tracts*. Those entries in the list which are explained to varying degrees in footnotes in the tracts are indicated by asterisks.

Grose observes, too, that those born on Christmas Day cannot see spirits; which is another incontrovertible fact. What a happiness this must have been seventy or eighty years ago and upwards, to those chosen few who had the good luck to be born on the eve of this festival of all festivals; when the whole earth was so overrun with ghosts, toggles*, bloody-bones, spirits, demons, ignis fatui, brownies*, bugbears, black dogs, spectres, shellycoats, scarecrows, witches, wizards, barguests*, Robin-Goodfellow*, hags*, night-bats, scraggs, breaknecks, fantoms, hob-goblins, hobbolds, boggy-boes, doobies*, hob-thrusts*, fetches*, kelpies, warlocks, mock-beggars*, mum-pokers, Jemmy-burties, urchins, satyrs, pans, fauns, sirens, tritons, centaurs, calcars, nymphs, imps, incubusses, spooms, men-in-the-oak, hell-wans, fire-drakes, kit-a-can-sticks, Tom-tumblers, melch-dicks, lars, kitty-witches, hobby-lanterns, Dick-a-Tuesdays, Elf-fires, Gyl-burnt-tails, knockers, elves*, raw-heads, Meg-with-the-wads, old-shocks, ouphs, pad-foots, pixies, piteers*, giants, dwarfs, Tom-pokers, tut-gots, snapdragons, sprets, spunks, conjurors, thurses, spurns, tantarabobs, swaithes*, tints, tod-lowries, Jack-in-the-Wads, mormos, changelings, redcaps, yeth-hounds, colt pixies, Tom-thumbs, black-bugs, boggarts, scar-bugs, shag-foals, hodge-pochers, hob-thrashes, bugs, bull-beggars, bygorns, bolls, caddies, bomen, brags, wraithes*, waffs*, flay-boggarts, fiends, gallytrots, imps, gytrashs, patches, hob-and-lanterns, gringes, boguets, bonelesses, Peg-prowlers*, pucks, fays, kidnappers, gally-beggars, hudskins, nickers, madcaps, trolls, robinets, friars' lanterns, silkies*, cauld-lads*, death-hearses, goblins*, hob-headless*, buggaboos, kows*, or coves, nickies, nacks (necks), waiths*, miffies, buckies, gholes, sylphs, guests, swarths, freiths, freits, gy-carlins (Gyre-carling) pigmies, chittifaces, nixies*, Jimmy-burnt-tails, dudmen, hell-hounds, doppel-gangers*, boggleboes, bogies, redmen, portunes, grants, hobbits, hobgoblins, brown-men*, cowies, dunnies*, wirrikows*, alholdes, manninkins, follets, korreds, lubberkins, cluricauns, kibolds, leprechauns, kors, mares, korreds, puckles, korigans, sylvans, succubuses, blackmen, shadows, banshees, lean-hanshees, clabbernappers, Gabriel-hounds, mawkins, doobles*, corpse lights or candles, scrats, mahounds, trows, gnomes, sprites, fates, fiends, sylbils, nick-nevins*, whitewomen, fairies*, thrummy-caps*, cutties*, and nisses, and apparitions of every shape, make, form, fashion, kind, and description, that there was not a village in England that had not its own peculiar ghost.⁵²

Endnotes

1. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, edited by Humphrey Carpenter, with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), letter #163, p. 215. Hereafter referred to as *Letters*.
2. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (London: Unwin Hyman, 1987), p. vi. Hereafter referred to as *TH*.
3. *TH*, p. vi; Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien, A Biography* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1977), p. 177. Hereafter referred to as *Biography*.

4. Daniel Grotta-Kurska, *J.R.R. Tolkien, Architect of Middle Earth* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 1976), p. 78 footnote. Hereafter referred to as Grotta-Kurska.
5. Grotta-Kurska, p. 78 footnote.
6. *Biography*, p. 177: TH, p. vii.
7. J.R.R. Tolkien, "Guide to the Names in The Lord of the Rings," in Jared Lobdell (ed.), *A Tolkien Compass* (Lanham, Ill.: Open Court, 1975), p. 168.
8. J.R.R. Tolkien, "Hobbits," *The Observer* (20 February, 1938), p. 9; cf. *Letters*, #25. Hereafter referred to as *The Observer*.
9. T.A. Shippey, "Creation from Philology in The Lord of the Rings," in Mary Salu and Robert T. Farrell (eds.), *J.R.R. Tolkien, Scholar and Storyteller* (Ithaca-London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1979), p. 296. Hereafter referred to as Shippey.
10. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966), p. 408.
11. T.A. Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982), p. 52. Hereafter referred to as *The Road*.
12. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, edited by J.B. Sykes (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976), p. 510.
13. Roger Lancelyn Green, "Recollections of Tolkien," *Amon Hen* 44 (May, 1980), p. 7.
14. Christina Scull, "The Fairy-tale Tradition," *Mallorn* 23 (1986), p. 30ff; Brian Dunsire, "Tolkien Workshop," *Amon Hen* 79 (May, 1986), p. 14.
15. Philip Howard, "Hobbit discovery is put back to a document of 1586," *The (London) Times* (6 May, 1977), p. 18.
16. Philip Howard, "Tracking the hobbit down to earth," *The (London) Times* (31 May, 1977), p. 14.
17. Katherine M. Briggs, *A Dictionary of Fairies* (London: Allen Lane, 1976), pp. 93-94.
18. Roderick Sinclair, *Amon Hen* 26 (May, 1977), p. 12.
19. Katherine M. Briggs, *op. cit.*, p. 401.
20. Philip Howard, "Tracking the hobbit down to earth," *The (London) Times* (31 May, 1977), p. 14.
21. James Hardy (ed.), *The Denham Tracts. A Collection of Folklore by Michael Aspley Denham*, vol. II (Nendeln, Liechtenstein: Kraus Reprint Ltd., 1976), pp. 77-80.
22. Roderick Sinclair, *op. cit.*, p. 12; Glen Goodnight, "'Hobbit' Found in 1586 Catalogue," *Mythprint* 15.4 (June, 1977), p. 47.
23. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. V (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1961 (corrected reissue)), p. 430. Hereafter referred to as *OED*. See also Joanne M. Such, *Mythprint* 15.6 (August, 1977), p. 3.
24. *OED*, vol. V, p. 315. On "hoppet", see below.
25. Joseph Wright (ed.), *The English Dialect Dictionary*, vol. III (Oxford: Henry Frowde, 1905), p. 185.
26. *Biography*, p. 37, 55-56; *Letters*, #272.
27. David Cofield, *Beyond Bree* (July, 1983), p. 9.
28. Katherine M. Briggs, *op. cit.*, p. 223.
29. William Grant and David D. Murison (eds.), *The Scottish National Dictionary*, vol. V (Edinburgh: The Scottish National Dictionary Association, 1960), p. 165.
30. William Grant and David D. Murison (eds.), *ibid.*, p. 212.
31. *OED*, vol. V, p. 314. Such meanings have induced Robert Giddings and Elizabeth Holland (J.R.R. Tolkien: *The Shores of Middle-earth* (London: Junction Books, 1981), p. 141) to suggest that 'hob' may be the source for 'hobbit':
"Hob may be etymologically an answer to the riddle of the origin of the word 'hobbit' - a Middle English byform of Rob, short for Robin, Robert; now dialect, except for hob-goblin - at one time a generic term for rustic or clown; latterly Robin Goodfellow, or puck."
32. Rev. Walter W. Skeat (ed.), *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), p. 273.
33. Rev. Walter W. Skeat (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 273.
34. Joseph Wright (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 185.
35. Sherman M. Kuhn and John Reidy (eds.), *Middle English Dictionary*, pt. 7 (Ann Arbor: The Univ. of Michigan Press, n.d.), p. 935.
36. Rev. Walter W. Skeat (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 273.
37. Charlotte and Denis Plimmer, "The Man Who Understands Hobbits," *London Daily Telegraph Magazine* (22 March, 1968), p. 32.
38. Emilia Lodigiani, *Invito alla lettura di Tolkien* (Milan: Mursia, 1982), p. 69.
39. C.N. Manlove, *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1975), p. 287, n. 27.
40. Oriana Palusci, *John R.R. Tolkien* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1982), p. 67.
41. Edmund Wilson, "Oo, Those Awful Orcs," in Alida Becker (ed.), *The Tolkien Scrapbook* (New York: Gosset & Dunlap, 1978), p. 50.
42. John Sprott Ryan, *Tolkien: Cult or Culture?* (Armidale, N.S.W.: Univ. of New England, 1969), p. 137; Paul H. Kocher, *Master of Middle-earth* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1977), p. 108; Elizabeth Holland, "NTH Study Page No. 1, On the Road to Babylon," *The New Tolkien Newsletter*, reprints from vol. 1, Nos. 3 & 4 (1 Sept. 1981 & 1 March, 1982), p. 31.
43. Walter Schepers, "The Fairy-tale Mortality in The Lord of the Rings," in Jared Lobdell (ed.), *A Tolkien Compass* (Lanham, Ill.: Open Court, 1975), p. 55, n. 2.
44. *The Road*, p. 52; Shippey, pp. 296-297. The fact that some readers have been led to believe either by the title of *The Hobbit* or even by the plot that hobbits are rabbit-like creatures (e.g. Roger Williams, *Beyond Bree* (Feb. 1985), p. 7; Christine Lowrentz, *Mythos* 2.9-10 (Sept.-Oct. 1985), p. 10) is curious.
45. *The Road*, p. 52; Paul Kocher, *op. cit.*, p. 108.
46. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966), p. 350.
47. Geoffrey Ridden, *J.R.R. Tolkien: The Lord of the Rings: notes* (Burnt Mill, Harlow and Essex: Longman, 1984), p. 19; cf. Iwan Rhys Morus, "Review," *Amon Hen* 6 (1984), p. 16.
48. J.R.R. Tolkien, "Goblin Feet," *Mallorn* 23 (Summer, 1986), p. 34.
49. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, p. 10.
50. *The Road*, pp. 52-54. On the etymology of 'rabbit', see, for example, *OED*, vol. VIII, p. 88.
51. Richard Mathews, *Lightning from a Clear Sky: Tolkien, The Trilogy and Silmarillion* (San Bernardino, Calif.: Borgo Press, 1978), p. 10.
52. J. Hardy (ed.), *The Denham Tracts*, pp. 77-80.

MYTHOPOEIC CORE READING LIST

Mythlore frequently publishes articles that presuppose the reader is already familiar with the works they discuss. This is natural, given the purpose of *Mythlore*. In order to be a general help, the following is what might be considered a core reading list, containing the most well known and frequently discussed works. Due to the many editions printed, only the title and original date of publication are given. Good reading!

J.R.R. Tolkien

The Hobbit, 1937; "Leaf by Niggle," 1945; "On Fairy-stories," 1945; *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* 1954; *The Two Towers* 1954; *The Return of the King* 1955; *Smith of Wootton Major* 1967; *The Silmarillion* 1977; "Mythopoeia" 1989.

C.S. Lewis

Out of the Silent Planet 1938; *Perelandra* 1943; *That Hideous Strength* 1945; *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* 1950; *Prince Caspian* 1951; *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* 1952; *The Silver Chair* 1953; *The Horse and His Boy* 1954; *The Magician's Nephew* 1955; *The Last Battle* 1966; *Till We Have Faces* 1966.

Charles Williams

War in Heaven 1930; *Many Dimensions* 1931; *The Place of the Lion* 1931; *The Greater Trumps* 1932; *Shadow of Ecstasy* 1933; *Descent Into Hell* 1937; *All Hallow's Eve* 1945; *Tales from Logres* 1938, and *The Region of the Summer Stars* 1944

(the last two printed together in 1954).