



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

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

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Volume 42  
Number 2

Article 31

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April 2024

## ***J.R.R. Tolkien's The Hobbit: Realizing History Through Fantasy* by Robert T. Tally Jr.**

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### **Recommended Citation**

Beronio, Bianca L. (2024) "*J.R.R. Tolkien's The Hobbit: Realizing History Through Fantasy* by Robert T. Tally Jr.," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 42: No. 2, Article 31.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol42/iss2/31>

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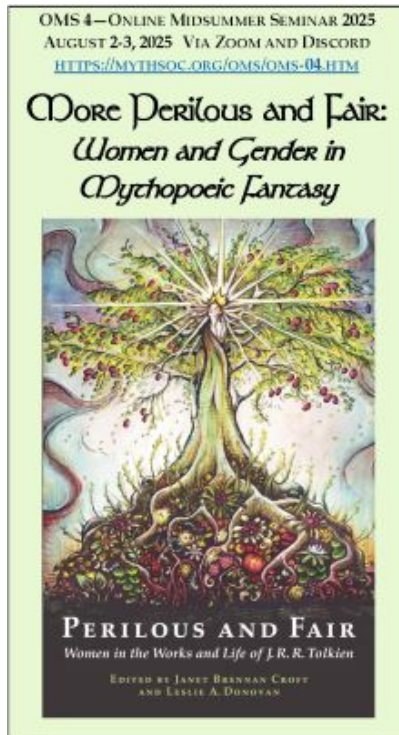
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Online MidSummer Seminar 2025  
More Perilous and Fair: Women and Gender in Mythopoeic Fantasy  
August 2-5, 2024

Via Zoom and Discord

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**J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S *THE HOBBIT*: REALIZING HISTORY THROUGH FANTASY.** Robert T. Tally Jr. Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. 101 pp. \$22.99 (pbk).

“IN A HOLE IN THE GROUND THERE LIVED A HOBBIT”; these words, penned in the weary hours by Oxford University professor J.R.R. Tolkien would not only launch his literary career, but bring forth an entire genre of literature (*Hobbit* 9). *The Hobbit*, published in 1937, quickly became a bestseller, and with the followup novel *The Lord of the Rings*, published in three parts between 1954 and 1955, an enduring popular culture phenomenon was born. Yet readers are quick to note the difference in tone between *The Hobbit* and Tolkien's later Middle-earth works; Tolkien himself would come to regret many of the literary choices made in *The Hobbit* that critics felt cemented it as a children's novel, in stark contrast to the high fantasy seen in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*. Much has been written on the topic of Tolkien's legendarium, with the last decade presenting a golden age for Tolkien studies bolstered by the popularity of adaptations such as Peter Jackson's films and the Amazon Prime series, *The*

*Rings of Power*. Robert T. Tally Jr.'s *J.R.R. Tolkien's The Hobbit: Realizing History Through Fantasy* serves not only as a primer and companion text to Tolkien's seminal novel, Tally also paves the way for a new avenue within the world of Tolkien studies with his claim that despite the "canonical position it occupies within the fantasy genre, *The Hobbit* is ultimately a historical novel" (Tally xi). An Tolkien scholar, Robert T. Tally Jr. brings his signature brand of Marxism and narrative theory, along with historicism, to peel back the layers of Tolkien's first published Middle-earth work to lay bare the bones beneath.

*Realizing History* delves deep into *The Hobbit*, providing both seasoned scholars and casual readers with concrete evidence for claiming the novel as a historical text. In "The Way to Talk to Dragons," Tally looks first at the narrative voice in *The Hobbit*, which he calls "at once authoritative, belonging to one who so thoroughly knows this other-worldly world as to be able to speak with confidence but also in a rather matter-of-fact way about dealings with dragons, but it is also familiar and friendly, implicitly admitting the audience into the same sphere of authoritative knowledge" (16). The interpellation by Tolkien's narrator endows the reader with knowledge of the inner-workings of Middle-earth in a way that is not condescending; rather, the familiarity of our narrator is akin to that of a documentary narrator, à la David Attenborough, allowing the reader to observe this fantastic world while interjecting only to provide clarification to guide the reader towards what Tally calls "a greater world-historical consciousness (16). The familiarity of *The Hobbit's* narrative style, along with the comical anachronisms by its characters, sharply contrast with the high fantasy setting and epic voice found in later works such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*. Yet Tally asserts that the "eccentric style of *The Hobbit*" is exactly what makes the "grand historical reality" (16) of this world accessible to its readers, as Bilbo Baggins and the narrative style itself serve as "a mediating presence between English modernity and the epic northern European past" (17). As Tally reminds readers in the introduction, "the humility and down-to-earthiness" of Bilbo and by extension the narrator, serve to bolster Tolkien's vision of history, grounded in the reality that "'the wheels of the world'" are not always turned by men of power, but by the humble, unremarkable, and ordinary (6).

Additionally, as *Realizing History* points out, while the narrator's asides to the audience come across as "patronizing" to some, most notably Tolkien's biographer Humphrey Carpenter, the assumption by the narrator that the reader holds certain knowledge of Middle-earth instead serves to "constantly [draw] the reader into the world in which the story takes place" (Tally 19). It is through *The Hobbit's* narrative style that the reader begins "to realize a sense of history which we are all [...] helping to shape, but to which we are also simultaneous subject" (20). Both Bilbo and the narrator are mediators caught

between English modernity and an archaic past (20). Tally also points to the “diversity of voices” (21) throughout *The Hobbit* in adding layers of realism to Tolkien’s work, such as the middle-class English wisdom of Bilbo, the practiced politician voices of Thorin and the Master of Laketown, and the low speech of characters such as the trolls, goblins, and Mirkwood spiders whose mode of speaking “accentuates the rudeness and crudeness of the speakers” and “[depicts] them as uncultured rubes” (23). Notably, of the fantastic creatures found within *The Hobbit*, the dragon Smaug speaks in an elevated, “aristocratic” manner, his “dragon-talk” (23) proving to be exceptionally persuasive. Yet the novel’s most memorable voice comes to us in the form of the creature Gollum, whose “infantile” speech is punctuated by the creature’s curious lack of use of personal pronouns; despite Tolkien later making changes to the “Riddles in the Dark” chapter to make the importance of the ring Bilbo finds tie in with his later, larger works, Tally explains that Gollum’s speech patterns lay the foundation for the One Ring’s power to slowly “cause the ringbearer’s own person to ‘fade’” (24). The juxtaposition between what Yvette Kisor calls Gollum’s “baby talk” (qtd. in Tally 25) and his cannibalistic nature thus serves not only as a reminder of the terrifying consequences of coveting the One Ring but also cement Gollum’s status as one of Tolkien’s most infamous monsters.

Tally is known in academic circles for frequently making use of Marxist theory in his literary analyses and *Realizing History* is no exception. “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living” (Marx 15, qtd. in Tally 29). Using Marx’s words as a framework, Tally states that the world of *The Hobbit* is grounded in our own “historical truth,” one in which even the most common individual makes history, yet is also “subject to historical forces beyond our control” (29). While the fantasy genre is sometimes thought to be one of escapism, of separation from “the ‘real world’ and its history,” the intrusion of history in Tolkienesque fantasy, as it has come to be called, contributes to the allure of *The Hobbit* as sets it apart from “imaginary” worlds such as those of C.S. Lewis and Lewis Carroll, but instead help to ground it as “our own very ‘real’ world, only a version of it with a different history” (Tally 30). Tolkien himself makes this clear in his letters by stating plainly “I am historically minded. Middle-earth is not an imaginary world” (*Letters* 345, #183); the name alone signals this as it comes from the Old English *middangeard* or “the inhabited lands of Men between the seas” (320, #165). As he would go on to state, Middle-earth feels familiar to readers because “Middle-earth is *our* world,” reflecting our own historical truth back upon readers; “I wanted people simply to get inside this story and take it [...] as actual history” (qtd. in Carpenter 102, 220).

*Realizing History* delineates the parallels between *The Hobbit* and Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley*, heralded as the first historical novel; both Bilbo Baggins and Edward Waverley are unremarkable bourgeois Englishmen yet quickly become participants in historical conflicts that are not only shaped by their actions, while also being "unwittingly" subject to the very forces of history (Tally 31). Tally goes on to state that "*The Hobbit* could be read in the context of Georg Lukács's magnificent study, *The Historical Novel*, in which an ordinary [...] individual sustains a representation of world-historical events and individuals that discloses the emerging historical consciousness" (32). Bilbo Baggins, and the narrator, thus allow readers to experience this world, and its history, as our own. Bilbo himself is a relic of a time that was already fading from the English imagination when Tolkien first imagined him in his hobbit hole, yet he is still a modern gentleman against the backdrop of the medieval Middle-earth. Something of a homebody, Tolkien quickly establishes Bilbo as a comfortable hobbit who knows very little about the world he occupies; it is through his adventures with the dwarves that Bilbo becomes the fish "out of water" only beginning to acquire "an inkling of water" (qtd. in Tally 33). Applying Jerome de Groot's study of the historical novel to *The Hobbit*, Tally tells us that history is paradoxically similar to fantasy "in the relative discomfort or unfamiliarity it brings" (33), that while fantasy employs elements that set it apart from our world, it is grounded in the realm of reality. As Tally reminds us, one of the hallmarks of the historical novel "is the foregrounded presence of the ordinary little guy" (34), the unremarkable individual who is pulled into world-historical events by forces outside of their control and shapes these same events through their participation. Much like the ordinary "little fellows" who are forever changed by their entering into grand historical events, the Bilbo who returns home at the end of *The Hobbit* is forever changed, having become a part of "global history" (35). Despite Tolkien's embarrassment over the many "anachronisms of *The Hobbit*," they only serve to cement its status as a historical novel; in *The Historical Novel*, Lukács states that the inclusion of "necessary anachronisms" are essential to the realism of a text as they allow it to "step outside of itself and present something like a social totality" (Tally 36).

Much like the hobbit central to Tolkien's tale, Robert T. Tally Jr's *J.R.R. Tolkien's The Hobbit: Realizing History Through Fantasy* is diminutive in size, yet takes readers on a fantastic journey through Middle-earth, providing both casual readers with a primer that summarizes much of Tolkien's personal history and the novel itself and novice and seasoned Tolkien scholars with an introduction and roadmap into new areas of Tolkien studies. Using a blend of Marxism and narrative theory along with historicism, Tally presents a compelling case for *The Hobbit* as a historical novel in the tradition of *Waverley*, beautifully embodying the historical truth of our history being shaped by

everyday people, and also propelling us forward through forces unseen. While some may argue that Tally's book provides only a brief introduction into these topics, one can see this as a meaningful choice on the part of this Tolkien scholar, leaving the door open for others to take up this work and themselves contribute to Tolkien studies and our ever-evolving literary history.

— Bianca Beronio

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**HISTORICAL DICTIONARY OF FANTASY LITERATURE: SECOND EDITION**, Allen Stroud. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023. xxxiv, 543 pp. Hardcover 9781538166062, \$200. Epub 9781538166079 \$190. Also Kindle.

IN 2004, THE SCARECROW PRESS (a division of Rowman & Littlefield) commenced a series of "Historical Dictionaries of Literature and the Arts." The first volume was a *Historical Dictionary of Science Fiction Literature* (2004) by Brian Stableford, and it was supposed to be followed soon after by one on horror literature by John Clute, and one on fantasy literature, also by Brian Stableford. The *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literature* duly appeared in 2005, but the Clute volume on horror literature never appeared (and its non-appearance helps to explain the limited coverage of horror writers in the fantasy volume). Both Stableford volumes are copyrighted to Brian Stableford, and both were reissued by the same publisher as *The A to Z of Science Fiction Literature* (2005) and *The A to Z of Fantasy Literature* (2009).

Now comes a *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literature: Second Edition* (2023), from the parent company Rowman & Littlefield, credited to Allen Stroud, with barely a mention of Stableford. I will address the problem of authorial credit below. The series of "Historical Dictionaries of Literature and the Arts" has now grown to around one hundred volumes, some already in