

# “Queer, exciting and debatable”

## *Tolkien and Shorthouse's John Inglesant*

*Dale Nelson*

Writing to Christopher Bretherton in 1964, Tolkien remembered living, as a teenager, in the Edgbaston, Birmingham, neighbourhood where Joseph Henry Shorthouse (1834-1903) had once resided. Tolkien saw something of himself in the author of *John Inglesant* that

went well beyond the circumstance of neighbourhood. Shorthouse, Tolkien noted, was by vocation “a manufacturer of acids,” and so, as regards literature, not a professional but “a mere amateur (like myself).” *John Inglesant*, his “long book”, Tolkien commented, “was queer, exciting, and debatable” (Tolkien *Letters* 348) – sentiments that might have been entertained by some of the early reviewers of Tolkien’s own “long book.”

In an article published in 1975, Norman Power said he’d “had a year, now, to reflect on Tolkien’s last letter” to him, and that “it must have been one of the last he ever wrote, if not the last” (1247). With it, Tolkien had enclosed a book with an essay, by Morchard Bishop, on Shorthouse and *John Inglesant*.

In addition to the matter of neighbourhood and “amateur” authorship, Tolkien could have seen other resemblances between Shorthouse and himself. Tolkien was conscious of the fact that his own “swift speech,” which he believed was “congenital and incurable,” caused difficulty for listeners at times (Tolkien *Letters* 372), so perhaps the fact that Shorthouse had a “dreadful stammer” would have intrigued him (Bishop 73). Bishop suggests that Inglesant is an idealised self-portrait of the author (82), while Tolkien wrote on one occasion, “I am in fact a Hobbit” (Tolkien *Letters* 288).

In writing *Inglesant* Shorthouse had been gratifying a private interest that, Bishop surmises, was endured by a “patient and seemingly quite uncritical wife” (78). Tolkien, similarly, could refer to his passion for invented languages as his “secret vice,” and, according to Carpenter’s biography, Edith Tolkien was supportive of her husband’s imaginative writing, but without finding the books absorbingly interesting (158).

*John Inglesant* and *The Lord of the Rings* were the products of years of labour that was sometimes stymied for a time. While Tolkien would recall being stuck in his writing, with the Fellowship at Moria (Tolkien, *LOR* xv), Bishop relates that there was “one period of nearly two years” in which Shorthouse gave up work on the book (77). If Tolkien ever looked into Shorthouse’s biography, he could have seen that Shorthouse “was long delayed in *John Inglesant*,” as a friend recalled him saying, “by his characters having ‘got into a castle

*A memorandum on the rarely noted relationship between Tolkien and the Victorian novelist J H Shorthouse, author of John Inglesant.*

and absolutely refusing to come out” (vol. 1 p. 405)

Morchard Bishop argues (77) that *John Inglesant*, which took its author, in fact, “ten years of evening toil” to complete (about the same time as *The Lord of the Rings* took Tolkien), is the “creation of a new world” (82) – words

especially applicable, of course, to Tolkien’s achievement. The pages of *Inglesant*, Bishop says, contain “triumphant evocations” of a Gothic-romantic seventeenth-century Italy that – like the locales of Tolkien’s Middle-earth – are “utterly consistent with themselves” (81). Shorthouse’s imagination provided for its author a “refuge” from the banal and tedious routine of chemical manufacture, and may be called self-indulgent (79). Tolkien’s “On Fairy-Stories” responds to the charge, to which the writer of faerian fantasy is liable, of unwholesome escapism (*The Tolkien Reader*, 79), and discusses the “kind of elvish craft” that will be necessary if a “Secondary World” is to be convincing (70). Bishop points out that Shorthouse’s imagination was a disciplined one, and was much nourished by immersion in seventeenth-century sources such as John Evelyn’s diary (85). Tolkien’s imagination, similarly, was nourished by the medieval literature of Northern Europe and disciplined by the habits of scholarship. It’s likely that Tolkien consciously considered the long works of Shorthouse and himself to be expressions, wrought by much labour, of their love and knowledge of English literature of former times.

Tolkien would have been interested in the account, in Bishop’s essay, of how Shorthouse did not, himself, find a publisher. (F. J. Wagner’s 1979 study would have it that Shorthouse decided to print the book for private circulation without having even tried to interest a publisher [52].) Shorthouse had one hundred copies of *John Inglesant* printed solely for personal distribution, in 1880. Without Shorthouse’s knowledge, one of these copies was shown to the publisher Macmillan, which was willing to take it on under its imprint despite doubts about its popularity (Bishop 74). In the same letter to Christopher Bretherton in which Tolkien commented on Shorthouse, he told the story of how the manuscript of *The Hobbit*, which he had lent to a nun, was taken at the initiative of a “young woman” to the office of Allen and Unwin (Tolkien *Letters* 346). Just as Macmillan had been doubtful about *John Inglesant* as a financial investment, Allen and Unwin, as Tolkien knew, had been doubtful that *The Lord of the Rings* would sell well (Tolkien *Letters* 140). Shorthouse agreed that Macmillan should

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publish his book only if it were published “‘exactly as it had been written’” (Bishop 74), while Tolkien’s anxieties about the texts of his books (and the illustrations for *The Hobbit* and *Farmer Giles of Ham*) are evident in numerous letters (for example, that of 30 December 1961 to Rayner Unwin).

Unexpectedly, *John Inglesant* became a surprise best-seller in its day. Shorthouse sometimes found the correspondence from admirers of the book and autograph seekers, “very tiresome,” according to his wife, and declined to give interviews: “he could never see why a man should cease to retain the privacy of his home because he had written a good book” (*Life* 110). Writing in 1964, Tolkien didn’t know that his own masterpiece was just on the verge of becoming enormously popular and would provoke overwhelming correspondence and annoying attention from the popular press. Tolkien had already identified with Shorthouse in 1964, but he could not have known yet that a further parallel was going to develop. *John Inglesant*, first launched publically in 1881, was reprinted many times in the succeeding fifty years: it would be misleading to dismiss it as a peculiarly Victorian literary sensation. (In fact, an allusion to Shorthouse’s book, by way of Thomas Hardy, seems to appear in poet Philip Larkin’s 1974 collection *High Windows* [Jackson 15].)

Expressly regarded by Shorthouse as a “Philosophical Romance” akin to the tales of Hawthorne (Shorthouse vii), *Inglesant* has an idealised hero who, after a precocious boyhood among teachers with Platonist, Rosicrucian, or mystical Roman Catholic leanings, becomes a political agent for Jesuitical intrigue in England at the time of Charles I. The schemes of Father Sancta Clara come undone thanks to the English civil war, in which Inglesant serves as a soldier on the royalist side at the Battle of Edgehill (1642) at about twenty years of age. Inglesant encounters materialist philosopher Thomas Hobbes, visits Nicholar Farrar’s “Protestant nunnery” at Little Gidding in one of the book’s most-praised episodes, and falls in love with one of the residents, Mary Collet, who dies young. His brother, the more worldly of the two, is murdered by a rather operative character, the wicked Malvolti. Inglesant seeks vengeance on the Continent – intermittently; he also has leisure to consider the attractions of Renaissance neopaganism and of the quietism of Molinos. The crass politicking during a papal election that Inglesant observes in Italy discourages his Romeward inclinations. He marries

an alluring woman, Laretta, but she and their son die in an epidemic, and Inglesant eventually returns to England, to become a contented latitudinarian communicant of the Anglican Church. Before his return to England, he has come upon Malvolti and forgiven him, and Malvolti in turn has forgiven his own enemy, Guardino. Shorthouse regarded the scene in which Inglesant refrains from killing Malvolti and instead places his sword upon the altar, leaving judgment to God, as the chief incident of the book.

Shorthouse, then, wrote a tale that exhibits moral seriousness, as does *The Lord of the Rings*. The religious beliefs of the two authors were very different, but their respective major works tempted readers to allegorical interpretations. Tolkien’s 1964 letter reproaches Shorthouse for wasting time “trying to explain what he had and what he had not meant in *John Inglesant*”. Hence, Tolkien added, he has “always tried to take him as a melancholy warning”: it was all too easy for Tolkien to write long letters – like this very one to Bretherton, he might have added! – to inquirers who had read *The Lord of the Rings* when he might have been working on *The Silmarillion* (Tolkien Letters 348).

A few possible connections between elements of the content of *Inglesant* and Tolkien’s fiction may be mentioned. In chapter 15, an astrologer invites Inglesant to look into a stone of divination, and he sees a murdered figure – that of his brother or himself. This incident might have influenced Tolkien’s scene with the Mirror of Galadriel, and/or the conception of the palantír. One of the two chief villains of Shorthouse’s novel, the Cavaliere di Guardino, only “very imperfectly” grasps the character of Inglesant, although the latter is an intimate of the family and in love with Guardino’s sister (328); perhaps Shorthouse, like Tolkien, held that minds given over to evil, such as that of Sauron, cannot really understand the possibilities of the good. Norman Power records Tolkien’s gift to him of the volume of *Essays by Divers Hands* quoted above, and suggests that the theme of renunciation that he perceives in *Inglesant* – the hero forgives his brother’s killer when the latter is unexpectedly wholly in his power – influenced Tolkien’s account of Frodo’s renunciation of the Ring of Power. However, whatever we might say of the authors, there is little resemblance between *Inglesant*, a story of religious and political intrigue, and Tolkien’s fictional canon.

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