

## Gandalf, Frodo, and Sherlock Holmes; myth and reality compared in the works of Tolkien and Conan Doyle

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Much has been written about the relationship that Tolkien's writing has, or might have, to the works of authors who were active during his youth or early manhood. Some of these, such as H. Rider Haggard, have been thought to have suggested or originated, motives which occur in *The Lord of the Rings*. Others, such as John Buchan, have been held to share with Tolkien the cultural outlook of late imperial Britain, in the years directly preceding 1914. It may seem strange that Conan Doyle has not been one of the authors discussed in relation to Tolkien in this way. The topic of possible formative influences from, and comparisons with, the "precursors" of Tolkien was the subject of a panel discussion at the 1992 Centenary Conference. Conan Doyle's name was hardly mentioned. There certainly does not seem to be any mention of him, or of the 'Holmes' group of stories, in Tolkien's published letters, or in any other writing by him, or at any rate none of any significance. All the same it is hard to believe that he did not read or become familiar with at least some of the stories, probably in his school-days, in the light of their immense popularity, which far transcended a cult. They were then comparatively new, and were universally read in the same way as certain TV programmes are universally watched nowadays. Their author found that he had originated something that was nothing less than a new popular art form. It would be quite natural to expect at least a few traces to have, "rubbed off" on Tolkien along the way.

There is one very obvious apparent such trace; Gandalf's disappearance down the cleft of Khazad-dûm in the wake of the Balrog, coupled with his dramatic "return" in Fangorn in the following Book. One can hardly avoid remembering Holmes' supposed disappearance down the chasm of the Reichenbach, clutched in Moriarty's grip, and his equally dramatic "return", several years later. However, this has the air of one of those coincidences that sound a little too good to be true; one can see Tolkien retorting, "any fool can see that!", to anyone who mentioned it to him. Perhaps it was a visual image that sparked off some kind of unconscious,

subliminal response; the story concerned, "The Final Problem," was often illustrated with a print or engraving showing the figures of Holmes and Moriarty grappling on the cliff's edge. The point is of some interest because the image is a recurrent one; it had already featured in *The Silmarillion* in the form of Glorfindel's contest with the Balrog in the pass of Cirith Thoronath, after Gondolin's fall. One or two stretches of writing do occur also in *The Lord of the Rings* where, distantly, it is possible to sense the atmosphere of this or that "adventure of Sherlock Holmes" in the background, as a kind of unconscious reminiscence. This kind of thing tends to be brought to the surface as a result of reading *The Lord of the Rings* aloud; the scene in the third book, the first of "The Two Towers", in which Aragorn, accompanied by Gimli and Legolas, is searching the site of the encounter of Éomer's force with Saruman's orc-troop at the margin of Fangorn, for indications of Merry and Pippin's possible fate, is a prime instance (Tolkien, 1966, pp. 91-3). There is no need to seek to define or isolate parallel passages in detail, but the scene may recall to some readers the flavour of more than one passage in which Holmes is searching the ground for clues.

The search for traces of alleged "influences" on Tolkien does not by itself, in any case, achieve anything in particular, whether or not people are convinced by the results. He may have known the Holmes stories well, but even if he did, it is unlikely that he would have attached any special importance to them, or thought of them as anything more than one of the innumerable components of "the leaf-mould of the mind" as he put it, out of which new stories are made. The juxtaposition of Doyle's work with Tolkien's does however, lead one on to a much more fruitful and interesting topic. This is the extraordinary kinship that they display when looked at from the outside, and treated as "literary phenomena". Nearly, but as it turns out, not wholly without parallel, they induce readers to treat their respective worlds as "realities", to believe their components, scenes and characters to have had "real"

existence, in the same sense as the history and constituents of the world we live in. All of us in the Tolkien Society are presumably familiar with the concept of "Middle-earth as a real world". Tolkien formulated it himself, even though he came to feel that it was too much like "a vast game" which could be played to excess. As a result we come to regard Aragorn or Théoden, say, as having existed in historical time in the same sense as say, Julius Caesar or Henry VIII; the distinction between Tolkien's "feigned history" and true history has become blurred. The same impression of reality has grown up around the personalities of Holmes and Dr. Watson, to the point at which letters are addressed to them, or at least to Holmes. It is said that Abbey National plc, whose head office in Baker Street comprises the fictional site of No 221B<sup>1</sup>, used to employ (and perhaps even still does) a person full-time to deal with the correspondence which arrives addressed to Mr Sherlock Holmes. What can the works of Tolkien and Conan Doyle have in common, one asks, that provokes this rare and peculiar response?

The collective or individual responses evoked by created works of art of all kinds, from their completion, publication or first performance onwards to all subsequent periods, is now beginning to be thought of as an important branch of study in its own right; "Rezeption" as it has become known in Germany. So the "performance history" of the Holmes novels and stories, and of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* may be worth looking at first, before parallels or similarities are sought within the works themselves. As soon as one begins to do this, certain historical comparisons present themselves.

Neither author came anywhere near being the first in his field, but each one changed and reshaped the genre within which he was working, fundamentally and decisively. The detective genre was already well-established when Doyle brought out *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) in which Holmes and Watson made their bow, and where they meet for the first time; it had, via Dickens and Wilkie Collins, already acquired serious literary pretensions. It is interesting that in that first story the author indulges, through the medium of Holmes, in some pot-shots at his predecessors, Poe and Gaboriau. Tolkien for his part, when he set out to construct an imagined world, was labouring in a field cultivated for long past; contemporaries like David Lindsay and E.R. Eddison

were constructing their own fantasy worlds at the same time. And, like Doyle, he was not backward in disclaiming comparisons with forerunners, however well meant. "I don't know Ariosto, and I'd loathe him if I did." Both authors, almost by accident, initiated procedures which their successors elevated to the status of formal principles.

The pattern in Doyle's case was that of the "English detective story" in which the amateur "great detective," whose intellectual superiority is confirmed by an eccentric personality and esoteric tastes, is accompanied by his faithful friend and chronicler. The professionals, the police, are traditionally presented as "slow in the uptake," and bureaucratically hidebound. The pattern, although subject to one variation or another, and often presented through the medium of the police themselves, has persisted down to our own day, so that Inspector Morse and Sergeant Lewis, with the eccentricities of the one and the symbiotic response of the other, are heirs to a long tradition, (even here their subordinates or colleagues are sometimes presented as uncomprehending, or not very intelligent). On Tolkien's side, as we know, the three-volume format was adopted for reasons of expediency; Tolkien himself insisted that it was a single story, not a "trilogy". The explanatory maps, were developed *ad hoc* and dictated by the nature of the material. Tolkien's successors and imitators, however, seem sometimes to have assumed that the three-volume format, with its introductory map, or its several maps, and its summary at the beginning of volumes two and three, of the preceding content, are formal essentials of a genre. Hence has followed the succession of comparable-to-Tolkien-at-his-bests which has dogged us all ever since.

The vast and permanent popularity of both authors has made itself evident in a variety of similar ways, most clearly in the large number of adaptations to other media each has undergone in succession to the original publications of the work. More directly, they have both been the objects of pastiche, imitation, and parody, and some of the results are worth noting by way of comparison.

Pastiche is essentially derivative fiction mimicking the authors style, undertaken for the purpose of extending the corpus of his work beyond what he has left us. It is represented in Doyle's case by the quite numerous *Adventures of Sherlock*

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<sup>1</sup> The apparent site is now at No 239 Baker Street, marked by a plaque; it contains the Sherlock Holmes Museum.

*Holmes* written by successors, a number having been the work of his son Adrian Conan Doyle; these often take their cue from one of the enticing references by Watson in the “authentic” stories, to cases of Holmes which we never get to hear more about from the author himself. The counterpart to this in Tolkien’s case is familiar to all of us, or most of us, as represented by the activities of writers of “Tolkien-based fiction”. The externals of Tolkien’s writing style, or styles, like the externals of the Holmes stories, are, at least superficially, easy enough to imitate. The legitimacy of this practice in relation to Tolkien is of course a matter of opinion, and is not the issue here, but one could argue that the authors of “pastiche-Holmes” were much closer in culture and outlook to the original authorship than any present-day writer of “pastiche-Tolkien” can of necessity be.

Imitative writing, or to use an alternative expression, “rip-off”, is in essence the same thing as pastiche. The story however, passes as an independent product because all externals, names, places, descriptions and so on, have been so changed or disguised that there is no scope for the successful invoking of the law of copyright. One or two fantasy writers of the post-Tolkien age have been suspected of this. One fairly clear instance in relation to Doyle may be cited (there may well be others). The “Ronald Standish” stories by H.M. McNeil (“Sapper” of “Bulldog Drummond” notoriety), are in essence quite competent Holmes pastiche, although superficially, the locales and individual characters are wholly independent.

Parody is a quite different form of tribute to the original author; to be successful it needs to be an affectionate, even if apparently irreverent tribute, dependent on real familiarity with the original “from the inside”. It has been quite widespread in relation to Holmes, often accompanied by humorous versions of his name, of which “Picklock Holes” is a good instance. In Tolkien’s case we have the well-known *Bored of the Rings* (which is now said to have been parodied in its turn); something of the sort was attempted by BBC radio, shortly before *The Lord of the Rings* serial, produced by Brian Sibley, was itself broadcast for the first time. At this point the present writer has to enter a plea of “guilty”, to a charge of having driven Tolkien and Conan Doyle in double harness (Ellison, 1984), bringing Gandalf out of

retirement to visit Holmes in Baker Street in order to enlist his help in preventing a revived Sauron from taking over control of the Tolkien Society. The serious point behind all this is that the relationship between the two genres is such that it is possible to make the one appear to take on the lineaments of the other, with apparent ease.

The formation of societies (or fan clubs) devoted to the two authors and their works, and the growth of secondary literatures expounding them, or dealing with topics related to them, is likewise illustrative of the broadly similar popular responses they have evoked. Holmes-related societies or clubs proliferate world-wide; listed, they fill a substantial number of pages<sup>2</sup>. The first, or one of the first, of such societies to be founded called itself “The Baker Street Irregulars”, and this and other titles derived from the stories are frequently used as those of societies or clubs whose members may identify themselves with characters in the stories, and dress appropriately for special occasions, in just the same way as some of us do in the Tolkien Society. The extent of serious or “academic” literature relating to Doyle and the lives and careers of Holmes and Watson rivals the extent to which it has developed around Tolkien and his works. Such literature likewise tends to assume that the stories recount events as if they had taken place in reality, and describe personalities as if they had actually lived. One such scholarly monograph (Warrack, 1947)<sup>3</sup>, for example, once essayed, some considerable time ago, to reconstruct Holmes’ musical career, tastes and repertory from the references that occur in the stories to “real-life” performances, concert-halls and the like: “I have a box for *Les Huguenots*.” says Holmes to Watson at the end of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, adding “Have you heard the de Reszkes?” thus dating that story to the years 1888-91, the years in which the two brothers de Reszke were appearing together in that opera at Covent Garden. This mingling of fact with fiction demonstrates the ease with which the two become one in the mind of the individual reader or Holmes “buff”, transforming Holmes and Watson into “real” people.

The energies devoted to academic or pseudo-academic studies of this kind, both in regard to the “historical” Holmes and the “real-world” Middle-earth may have led to a considerable body of

<sup>2</sup> To avoid misunderstanding, the author of this article should make it clear that he is not a member of any Holmes-related society or club, and is not, specially, a “fan” or student of the Holmes stories in the same way he is in relation to Tolkien.

<sup>3</sup> Similar such works are Gavin Brend, *My dear Holmes* 1957 and W.S. Barring Gould, *Sherlock Holmes: A Biography*, 1962.

criticism and exegesis, but this is not at all the same thing as what the literary "establishment" thinks of or treats as academically respectable study. The works of both Tolkien and Doyle have made their way in the world without necessarily being accepted as part of the literary mainstream accorded academically respectable status. There might well be considerable academic "clout" involved in research as regards the sociological aspects of the Holmes stories and their popular following, but it is hard to imagine that such prestige would accrue to a thesis that essayed to elevate them to a literary status routinely accorded to such "serious" writers as, let us say, Henry James or Joseph Conrad. Yet they are now everywhere accepted as having attained the status of "classics". It would seem that *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, half-a-century younger, are well on the way to attaining the same status, if they have not already done so, despite the widely expressed contempt or dislike affected by much of academic literary opinion. The works seem condemned by their very popularity as much as by anything else. It may be that the Holmes stories have only escaped provoking a similar reaction by virtue of having appeared and established their popularity before the academic study of English literature and literary theory had properly got into its stride. By the time the Leavises were up and running it was too late to do anything about it.

We have now to turn to looking within the respective works, in order to identify, if possible, shared features which might help to explain why their popularity and influence seems to represent a tale twice told. The first obvious point of comparison is that the Holmes stories, or most of them, are, essentially, "quest" narratives, like *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, and like them normally depend on the formula of "there and back again". The detective story typically has a "quest" in the sense of a search for a murderer, or the solution to a mystery, at its centre, although not invariably so; it can be and sometimes has been, inverted so as to present the events it narrates from the standpoint of the criminal. This is perhaps rather as though *The Hobbit* had been told from Smaug's point of view, or *The Lord of the Rings* from Sauron's. The "quest" of course does not have exclusively to focus on an intellectual exercise in searching for clues and making deductions based on them; the Holmes stories are presented as "adventures" and drama, excitement and physical danger are as much part of them as they are of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Thus far, of

course, all of this is very much a piece with other popular literature contemporary with one author or the other; what is striking about the comparison is that in both cases the stories possess a particular point of departure and return. A Holmes story starts, typically, with the appearance of a client at Holmes' and Watson's rooms at No 221B. The client outlines the case to comments by Holmes, who then having accepted the case indicates his intended line of procedure. The first chapter of *The Hobbit* introduces "the clients" and is largely taken up with a planning session for the adventure in prospect. The most prominent and important section of the early part of "The Fellowship of the Ring", prior to the hobbits' departure from Bag End is Gandalf's extended narrative, delivered in Bag End itself, in which he outlines the world situation, and defines the nature of the enterprise, the destruction of the Ring, which has to be faced and attempted if Middle-earth is to be saved.

Ultimate return to Baker Street (as to Bag End) is always implied, if not actually spelt out, as a necessary concomitant of the shape and content of the story. "And when I have detailed those distant events," (as the author intervenes at the end of Part One of *The Valley of Fear*) "and you have solved this mystery, we shall meet once more in those rooms in Baker Street, where this, like so many other wonderful happenings, will find its end". The concept of "there and back again" can be applicable in terms of time as much as it can in terms of space. The sections of *A Study in Scarlet* and *The Valley of Fear* that recount the past histories underlying the events investigated by Holmes, and the frequent narrations of past happenings that occur in the Holmes stories generally, play a similar part in relation to their make-up, as do the references to past Ages that occur, fragmentarily even in *The Hobbit* ("made in Gondolin for the Goblin-wars"), and more especially in *The Lord of the Rings*, to the history of the Silmarils, most of all, Aragorn's narrative of Beren and Lúthien.

The Holmes stories, like *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are governed by a structured contrast of the principles of right and wrong. This has nothing to do, of course, with the alleged "simplistic opposition of good and evil" beloved of critics who have not read the books carefully (or who perhaps have merely skimmed through them). We don't need reminding that Tolkien's world is *not* divided between 'good' and 'evil' characters without any

possible intermediate stance, but it does of course adhere to a clearly defined moral dividing line, and Doyle's world does just the same. Detective fiction normally implies this of its very nature; crimes are crimes, even though the motives of those who are found to commit them may be complex and demanding of analysis. Dorothy L. Sayers remarks somewhere, through the mouth of Lord Peter Wimsey that detective stories are "the purest literature that we have". Holmes' role is consequently a symbolic as well as a practical one, a crusader for truth and justice, and Moriarty, his counterpart on the other side of the moral divide, is his symbolic counterpart or "double"; on the stage both parts have from time to time been played by the same actor. Gandalf, in describing himself as "the Enemy of Sauron" implies the same thing. Moriarty, be it noted, resembles Sauron<sup>4</sup> in that he is never encountered face-to-face by the reader, but only in a brief extract of reported speech (and in his case an even briefer one of reported action). He is seen as Holmes' "Great Enemy", and yet his actual role in the body of the stories is minimal. He features in one short story, "The Final Problem", and is mentioned by repute in a few more; and takes on the character of a pervasive, "from behind the scenes," influence in one of the long stories, *The Valley of Fear*. Like Sauron he is a "mythic" figure, simply; operating as such he confers a "mythic" stature on Holmes parallel with his (Colonel Sebastian Moran, his lieutenant, may correspond with The Mouth of Sauron or the Lord of the Nazgul). Again like Sauron, he controls a vast unseen empire of evil, evidence of which, says Holmes, can be deduced even from the numerous petty assaults and seemingly unmotivated crimes which appear to happen at random. Like the tremors at the edges of the web that betray the presence of the foul spider sitting at its centre, says he, using very traditional imagery. Tolkien of course employs the same imagery, in the shapes of Shelob and Ungoliant, to characterise evil as wholly negative and nihilistic in its existence and consequences. Sauron's unseen power is detected, likewise, underlying such a seemingly unrelated event as the storm that blocks the Company's ascent of Caradhras; as Gandalf remarks at the conclusion of this episode, "His arm has grown long."

Further traditional imagery of evil is represented in Tolkien by wolves, both in themselves and as allies

of orcs and assistants in their operations. Sauron/Thû metamorphoses in wolf-shape; the Great Wolf guards the gates of Angband; Gandalf apostrophizes the leader of the wolf-pack that attacks the Company in Hollin as "Hound of Sauron". It hardly needs saying that Conan Doyle employs the like imagery to charge the atmosphere and power the dramatic climax of what is perhaps his most celebrated tale, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. He obviously relished its effectiveness apart from that tale, as he used it similarly to provide imagery and a dramatic climax for "The Copper Beeches", one of the best of the short stories, at least in this writer's view.

Not every evildoer in the Holmes stories is an unmitigated villain, but in the persons of Col. Moran, Grimesby Roylott, and C.A. Milverton, there are enough to balance out with Tolkien as represented by Shagrat, Grishnákh or The Mouth of Sauron. As regards characterisation, the common use of the familiar archetype of "leader and follower", with the insight and visionary capacity of one balancing and contrasting with the simple trust and loyalty of the other, is plain enough. Holmes and Watson share, as do Frodo and Samwise, a relationship made binding by mutually experienced risks and dangers.

No doubt all the foregoing comparisons and parallels are fairly obvious, and are also traceable in much other literature apart from the writings of Tolkien and Doyle, and especially among their contemporaries and immediate forerunners. They do assume weightier significance, in the present writers submission, when they are viewed in the light of another shared characteristic, which, in defining the affinities which the two authors seem to display, may be the decisive one. This has to do with the feeling each of them exhibits for qualities of place and locality, and the ways in which they respectively handle such qualities. A more recent author, only recently dead, has displayed similar tendencies; her writings in consequence seem to be forming themselves into a very similar kind of myth. "Called in evidence", as they will shortly be, they may help to prove the present case.

The myths of both Tolkien and Doyle, as we have seen, both revolve about a central point of rest, which represents "home". Bag End and No 221B, each of them, are evoked with plenty of descriptive detail. Even without Tolkien's associated drawings we can picture the former clearly in our imaginations;

<sup>4</sup> In *The Lord of the Rings*, that is.



the garden with the row of round windows looking west; the green round front door with the door-knob in the middle; the clock on the mantelpiece and the fire into which Gandalf throws the ring; the curtains he draws to intensify the atmosphere of his narrative to Frodo, and so on. No 221B can be likewise pictured, and indeed has been reconstructed for exhibition purposes, with its easy chairs, the Persian slipper with the tobacco, the rows of reference books, the 'V.R.' in bullet-holes, et cetera. Around about these central places of refuge there stretches a "belt" which consists of the near surroundings, the Shire for one, and London for the other. In these near surrounding areas, descriptive detail is less immediate and profuse, but all the same is carefully selected and balanced. The evocation of the scenes of Middle-earth by means of descriptive detail is clearly one of the principal reasons for the hold Tolkien's writing has over the imaginations of his readers, but the Shire in this respect can be seen to be evoked in more detail than any other region of Middle-earth. It has its own separate map; Tolkien's eye for circumstantial detail, as evident for instance in the descriptions of the stretches of country which Frodo, Sam and Pippin traverse after leaving Bag End, before they reach Crickhollow, is at its most penetrating. All this is necessary to enable Tolkien to achieve, as he calls it, "the inner consistency of reality," while Doyle is proceeding in the reverse direction, using reality, the city of London, as it actually was, to construct a myth with Holmes and Watson at its centre. Therefore 221B Baker Street is surrounded by London evoked by means of numerous telling and effective touches of atmosphere and detail. There are the frequent "peasoup" fogs, that make one side of a street invisible from the other, and which can be hardly be imagined by anyone born after the Clean Air legislation. There are the rains that swirl up and down Baker Street, the "growler" cabs, the sinister figures that may appear suddenly out of the shadows. There are the references, spare and important, to actual locations, or even to persons (the Prime Minister who appears in "The Second Stain" is surely a thinly-disguised portrait of W.E. Gladstone).

The Shire, and London, provide, so to speak, the foreground areas of their respective worlds; more distant lands beyond them are treated in less detail. Tolkien, in *The Lord of the Rings* is circumstantial enough in dealing with the immediate scenes through which the travellers pass; but there are great tracts beyond or away from them left unfilled. Eriador

away from the Great Road is mostly more or less uncharted territory, and nearly all of Gondor is presented in a cursory overview. Individual sites are delineated plainly enough where necessary, but the total impression that remains is that, placed as we are at one localized point in Middle-earth we see its nearest reaches in sharp focus, and the rest of it in progressively cloudier and more generalised focus as it recedes further away from us. Even Ithilien, to which Tolkien devotes a good deal of attention, is evoked poetically rather than described straightforwardly, as the Shire is. As the outer fringes of the known world are approached, however, description turns to the evocation of the horrifying aspects of the scenery, instead of its picturesque qualities, and landscapes take on bizarre or frightening shapes. It is as though we, sitting safely at the centre of the world, look at it through a lens which distorts it at its edges.

Tolkien's scenic construction of course is much more elaborate and consciously "thought out" than Doyle's. He had to construct a world from scratch, whereas Doyle's lay ready to his hand, to be used as found. The two authors appear to be proceeding in contrary directions, yet they achieve parallel results; the underlying principle works for them both. Tolkien starts out by sketching a mythology, then, by elaborating its history and geography, its landscape and its languages, transforms it into reality. Doyle surrounds his central, fictional characters with real places and scenes, and by the skill with which he manipulates them, succeeds in creating a myth out of their adventures and the scenes in which they are set. The "Holmes and Watson" myth is one in which at times it is still pleasant to believe and which seems to be as evocative overseas as it is in this country; London as it was or seems to have been in the last years of the reign of Queen Victoria, the London of Elgar's *Cockaigne*, the centre of an Empire which left half the map of the world coloured red, the London of a time when income tax was still only a minuscule amount in the pound. And also like Tolkien, Doyle banishes the landscapes of terror to the extremities of his world, to the limits of consciousness; in terms of place only, to the bleak desolation of the Dartmoor, of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, and one of the short stories; as to place and time to the remote and exotic territories associated with the early Mormons, (*A Study in Scarlet*), or the coal-miners and iron-workers of *The Valley of Fear*. The worlds of Tolkien and Doyle, in short, are constructed spatially, radiating outwards in concentric circles about a central point of

reference which represents “home”. It is perhaps worth remarking that certain fantasy sagas that have been thought to follow in Tolkien’s footsteps such as *The Belgariad* or *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* are not constructed like this at all, the readers defining viewpoint or central place of reference shifting as the story proceeds from one part of the imagined world to another. This is not of itself an inferior narrative method, of course, but it is a different one in essence.

Is all of this a little bit fanciful? Maybe. There is available, now, some instructive collateral evidence to back it up. There is a literary myth of more recent origin, which has been evolving over the last decade or more, and which now seems to have achieved its final shape. It may well be a highly profitable myth too, in so far as the inhabitants of the town of Shrewsbury are concerned, they whose lives are most affected by it; let the local Chamber of Commerce remember Ms. Ellis Peters regularly in its prayers! The myth, of course, is that of “Brother Cadfael”.

The writer first understood the mythic potentiality of the Cadfael stories when the Tolkien Society, in the spring of 1994, held its annual general meeting in Shrewsbury. Those readers who were present at that A.G.M. will remember that the Sunday morning event was a “Brother Cadfael” tour of Shrewsbury, in which we visited particular sites mentioned or featured in the stories. We were led by a guide who plainly was very familiar with the details of the stories, and the places or sites in present-day Shrewsbury to which they correspond. It was fascinating to observe how our guide referred to Brother Cadfael as though he was a “real” person who had lived in historical time and walked Shrewsbury’s streets; he, and likewise Hugh Beringar, Abbot Radulfus and the rest of the cast of fictional characters, were now, obviously, as real, or perhaps more real, to her than the historical persons, King Stephen, the Empress Matilda (‘Maud’) and others with whom the author has peopled the background of the stories; as real, or perhaps more real than most other personages of history down to our own day. The Cadfael “myth”, like those of Tolkien and Doyle, is now in the process of acquiring its own set of derivatives; other “medieval whodunnits”, “Cadfael walks” and tours in and about Shrewsbury; books about “the Cadfael country”,

describing Shrewsbury, Shropshire and the Welsh borderlands; and, of course, a television series.

From the present point of view the distinctive and important feature of the “Cadfael” stories is that they display exactly the same kind of “concentric” structure that, as suggested above, provides the foundations of Holmes and Watson’s world, and Bilbo’s and Frodo’s. There is, at its centre, the abbey of St. Mary, with its daily round of services, offices and labours, and within it, Cadfael’s own little province, his hut and herb garden, where he prepares his medicines, and where “clients” come to consult him from time to time, and where his closest friend, Hugh Beringar, so often comes to discuss with him the latest news from the surrounding world, or the progress of his and Cadfael’s current “case” or mystery. Beringar’s role perhaps represents the equivalent of that of the official police in a “conventional” detective story, although he is too efficient and intelligent to qualify as a counterpart of Inspector Lestrade (or of Watson himself, for that matter). In one story,<sup>5</sup> though, the author cleverly re-uses and adapts the traditional formula of “the thick-headed police inspector”, in the person of a sheriff’s officer who has to deal with the investigation, and with Cadfael himself, in the sheriff’s absence.

Surrounding the central focus of interest, “home”, as it were, Cadfael’s hut and garden, the abbey, its church and buildings is the “foreground area”. This, of course, is the town of Shrewsbury, carefully balanced descriptively, with its references to places and features, the river, the Foregate, the castle, and so on, which still exist. The town performs the same function as London and the Shire do in their respective worlds. Beyond it is country near and far, a middle and far distance into which Cadfael has to venture in many of the stories, but always with the implication of “there and back again”, the proviso that when the mystery has been solved, he must return to the daily monastic routine and his own particular tasks within it. The edges of the picture perhaps do not quite correspond to the bizarre, “distorted” landscapes of Mordor; all the same, the total impression left by the stories as a whole is that the chief events and disasters of the period, the battle of Lincoln, the sieges of Oxford or Winchester, or the depredations of Geoffrey de Mandeville, take place at a comfortably remote distance from the centre of

<sup>5</sup> *Monk’s Hood*

Cadfael's world<sup>6</sup>. (Hugh Beringar would be an ideal candidate for Strider's job as Chief of the Rangers). In the last story of all, significantly, Cadfael actually disobeys the monastic Rule by pursuing his quest beyond the limits the Abbot, his monastic superior has ordained for him, and at the end of the tale, he returns to the abbey prepared to face rejection and dismissal from the Order, but is actually received "back into the fold".

Quite a few individual explanations have been put forward in the foregoing paragraphs for the abiding sense of reality that seems to attach to the respective creations (or 'sub-creations') of Tolkien and Doyle; some of them at least, apply separately, no doubt, to many other tales. Are they, therefore, significant here in that they operate collectively? And what other works may there be, or may there have been, which generate a similar response? It could be argued that television series or "soap operas" because a great many people come to regard their characters as "real" persons, qualify likewise. There is a far-reaching distinction, however, which falls to be made between, on the one hand the media of sight and sound, and on the other, the medium of the written word, operating on the reader's perception through the exercise of imagination, unaided. The latter, being non-specific, operates at a deeper level. Conversely, acted versions of literary works quite frequently disappoint expectations formed by the experience of reading. Moriarty has featured considerably in acted versions of "Holmes" because

on the stage or the screen he cannot remain hidden and exercise the mythic power with which the author has endowed him; confronted in person he must rely on such dominance as the player of the part can assume for him.

An additional factor that must have operated in favour of Holmes and Cadfael is frequency; the equivalent for Tolkien was the sheer scale and extent of his vision. Four novels and ten times as many short stories, appearing serially, resulted in a progressive build-up of reader expectations. Similarly, had the sequence of "Brother Cadfael" stories been broken off after, say, two or three of them, and not continued, to our pleasure, for another fifteen or so, we could hardly have seen him in quite the same kind of light. But this on its own is not conclusive. It applies, for instance, to the "Horace Rumpole" series, not to mention the "Inspector Morse" ditto; and the latter additionally exploits the possibilities of a single defined locality, the city of Oxford, in the same way as with Holmes' London or Cadfael's Shrewsbury. These characters are probably too much bound up with our own time and involved with our everyday world, to take on any mythical significance, at least at present. They need, perhaps, the patina that only time can give them; the reality of their surroundings needs to recede some distance into the past. For now our two principal storytellers have had only one single successor.

Or can others suggest alternatives?

#### References

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- Guy Warrack, 1947, *Sherlock Holmes and Music*

<sup>6</sup> The siege of Shrewsbury by King Stephen's force is of course a major exception; but it occurs early in the sequence of the stories, before their "mythic" status has become fully established.