



## on illustrating tolkien

by TED NASMITH



In *Amon Hen 72*, Kathleen Jones wrote very interestingly on the question of Hobbits' ages, their relationship to our ages, and the difficulties this brings to the illustrator. This has prompted me to present some of my own thoughts on this subject, which originally I thought would add only a little to Ms. Jones article. It has grown somewhat though, taking rather longer than expected consequently. In the first part I'll explore the tendency to portray hobbits like children, and then go on to examine just what information is provided on hobbits, as well as what isn't. Lastly I'll take a look at the challenges presented by other characters and some of my solutions to those problems.

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In defence of some of the less careful renderings of hobbits, I can point out that since hobbits are equivalent in size to our small children, that is, anywhere from two to four feet in height, it's all too easy to portray them as child-like. Consider that their beardless rosy-cheeked jollity and curly headedness is so easily associated with healthy, rosy-cheeked children, who historically would often have long curly locks of hair, whether boy or girl. The distinctions between a hobbit and a child become somewhat subtle, demanding certain intuitive and technical powers of the artist who would overcome these difficulties. Thus it is that the artist, before more carefully reading the text, may easily form an erroneous initial impression of hobbits, which certainly was the case with me. Drawing them at this stage was based mostly on this 'impression' having not as yet absorbed the specific information available. Eventually I had to work consciously to correct this problem, and do even still. And I may have persisted in it somewhat longer had I not sent some photos of my early work to Tolkien himself (during the summer of 1972). He thanked me for my interest and complimented me on the work. But he also remarked that my Bilbo (from 'The Unexpected Party', 1972) was too child-like, causing me, naturally, to review my concept of Bilbo, and by extension, hobbits in general.

Unfortunately, it seems that even among the most widely published interpretations of Tolkien there is this persistent tendency to misconceive hobbitry. This includes the hobbits of Ralph Bakshi's 'Lord of the Rings' film; the Bilbo of the new edition of 'The Hobbit' illustrated by Michael Hague; and, most notorious for me, the hobbits of the Brothers Hildebrandt, particularly Merry and Pippin. But here is a case in point. These two hobbits in particular give, I think, the strongest childish impression, though it's easy to see why:

Both their names sound somewhat juvenile compared to 'Sam' or the purely hobbitish 'Frodo' or 'Bilbo'. Both characters are significantly younger than Sam and Frodo. At the start of

the quest in September of 1418, the respective ages of the four companions were: Frodo 50, Sam 45, Merry 36, and Pippin 28. By hobbit standards then, Pippin is a virtual adolescent, and Merry has not long come of age. Pippin is 22 years the junior of Frodo while Merry is 14 years younger than Frodo. Pippin, in particular, displays somewhat immature behaviour, and despite all that happens, these two never quite seem to 'grow up' in our minds. Somehow, because of their nonchalance and pluck in the face of the terrors they survive (with but a few exceptions) they come away with their unsober youthfulness intact. Consider that when they are met at the ruined gate of Isengard, Gandalf, when he sees Merry about to wax eloquent on the origins of pipe weed to Théoden, interrupts, "You do not know your danger, Théoden. These hobbits will sit on the edge of ruin and discuss the pleasures of the table, or the small doings of their fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers, and remote cousins to the ninth degree, if you encourage them with undue patience." Here perhaps is the nub of it. Merry and Pippin really typify the comic parochialism of hobbits, and it is Frodo, and to a lesser extent Sam, who are uncharacteristic, though this risks oversimplification. Even poor old Bilbo remains hopelessly but endearingly absurd when all is said and done. This I'm sure is a key factor in why the image of hobbits as juvenile is so powerful. And maybe there's another factor, speaking of Bilbo; the fact that 'The Hobbit', which sets the tone as far as the nature of hobbits is concerned, was written for children. It has often been one of the criticisms of 'The Lord of the Rings' that the transition from the opening chapters set in the Shire to the rest of the tale is unnatural, the lightness of Bilbo's party giving way to the weight of the Ring. For others, of course, this is exactly what constitutes the genius of the book, being quite essential to its appeal and its inner meaning.

But none of this helps the artist who wishes to draw hobbits, unless, somehow he or she can reconcile these apparent opposites. When we see only the quaintness of hobbits it is easy to equate that with cuteness. And many, if not most artists, apparently don't see any need to bridge that 'cuteness' with the weight of the book's theme in their images of hobbits. But if we do want to find a more faithful artistic interpretation, with all the above in mind, how should it be achieved?

Unfortunately, it's more than merely following a detailed description, since despite Tolkien's penchant for minutiae, he isn't at all exhaustive about describing most of his characters' looks. (If he was, we'd all know whether or not Boromir was bearded!) One must assemble all information about, in this case, hobbits, and particular ones, and then interpret it in the light of an intuitive over-view. How well, or in what way, you understand the story, and even the story's roots in myth and literary tradition, will determine the result of this largely subjective task. Obviously, set on the scale it is, LotR means many things to many people, and artists. In my experience people seem to know what a hobbit should not look like, but can there be substantial agreement on what one should look like?

Earlier I mentioned Frodo and Sam as being atypical of much of hobbitry. In Frodo's case I think there's particular significance. If hobbits and the Shire are out of phase with the grand scale of the rest of Middle-earth, then it is Frodo who represents a bridge. He is deeper than the others, and being perhaps better educated, understands more quickly the nature of his relationship to the larger scheme of things. Frodo, we somehow know, can 'fill the shoes he will have to wear'. (figuratively!) The overwhelming image of Frodo is quite uncharacteristic of hobbits. He is a loner, greatly burdened with wisdom beyond his age. His lighter side is much less glimpsed or felt. He, whatever is true of hobbits generally, is 'big' enough for the role he must carry. And given this it wouldn't do to have just an average 'common or garden variety' hobbit as his companion: enter common gardener Samwise, whose image is more than a little rural British. He is Frodo's foil. Frodo is 'master', while Sam is his loyal companion and guardian. Frodo is, for a hobbit, high born, educated, refined, coming from a distinguished bloodline, whereas Sam is of a less illustrious lineage, down to earth (literally!) and unworldly.

But what Sam does have is a good measure of hobbit sense, an outstanding sense of loyalty, much quiet courage, and despite or perhaps because of his self-denial

and self-scolding at times, is a hobbit of great hidden dignity. But how to translate that visually?

Kathleen Jones, in her Amon Hen 72 article, questions the older looking Sam that I have drawn. Although it's a matter of degree and artistic license, I see Sam as necessarily appearing ruddier than Frodo or the others. He is a gardener and I would argue that he is regularly exposed to the elements. Combine that with the 'homely' image he evokes and I think the result would be a face that looks older than its years. Frodo, however, has particularly good looks for a hobbit, making him look younger than his 50 years.

Unfortunately it gets even more complicated, for surely we should consider also the effect of the Ring on him, and its arrest of aging. But how can that be shown while trying to show the wearying effect of it upon him? And does he remain youthful-looking always? Is it really desirable to render him without any apparent external changes from the time he inherits the Ring to the day he departs at the Grey Havens? I'd like to explore these questions and others in the next part of this essay. Just what does Tolkien have to say about his hobbits?

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Having consulted the Prologue in LotR, the following information is given regarding the general physical aspect of hobbits. (Forgive me for re-stating the obvious). Hobbits, it says, are "little people, smaller than dwarves, less stout and stocky... when they are not actually much shorter. Their height is variable reaching between two and four feet of our measure, though they seldom now reach three feet. Their hair is commonly brown." They "had skilful fingers... [and] could make many useful and comely things."

Their faces are "good-natured rather than beautiful, broad, bright-eyed, red-cheeked with mouths apt to laughter." Of course hobbits fall into three groups: Harfoots, Stoors, and Fallohides. The Harfoots comprised the majority of the Shire, to which Bilbo, Frodo and Sam belonged, and are described as: "browner of skin, shorter, beardless, bootless, with hands and feet neat and nimble."

The Stoors in turn were broader, heavier in build, feet and hands larger, and can grow beards (or at least "down... on their chins" Ed.). Gollum began his life as one, though few, if any traits survived his degeneration. Lastly are the Fallohides, considered fairer of skin and hair, taller, slimmer than their cousins, lovers of trees and woodlands. Merry and Pippin belonged to this group.

Along with a good deal of other information, including preferred colours (yellows and greens) and types of clothing, there is a brief discussion of hobbit dwellings. When these took the form of houses or cottages they are said to have been of wood, brick or stone, were long, low and comfortable. Some were smial-like, being bulgy and thatched. Of course the dislike of stairs and height is generally known, as is the preference for round windows and doors.

Also worth quoting is part of Letter #27 in Letters. Regarding hobbits and in part Bilbo, Tolkien says precisely: "I picture a fairly human figure, not some kind of fairy 'rabbit' as some of my British reviewers seem to fancy: fattish in the stomach, shortish in the leg. A round, jovial face, ears only slightly pointed and 'elvish', hair short and curling (brown). The feet from ankles down, covered with brown hairy fur. Clothing, green velvet breeches, red or yellow waistcoat, brown or green jacket; gold (or brass) buttons; a dark green hood and cloak (belonging to a dwarf). Actual size... about three feet or three feet six inches."

So there we are. There are, of course, several other clues to appearance, whether general or specific, spread throughout the book, but I don't feel it necessary to set out all of that here. Following the above carefully would provide all one needs to avoid the several misconceived sorts of hobbits. A key phrase like: faces "good natured rather than beautiful", is of enormous value in understanding Tolkien's vision of them, while individual interpretation is still given considerable leeway. (Two artists who for me 'see' hobbits clearly are Kay Woollard and Joan Wyatt, both of whose work I admire).

Returning a moment to hobbit attire, despite what is provided on this, it still is unclear to what certain articles would have looked like, and what variations there might be. I have, I admit, not had much success

when seeing books on costume which contain such clothes in detail. One minor mystery I would like to solve, is that it's not at all clear how a provisions pack can be worn with a hood and cloak. If worn externally then where do the straps fit? Beneath the cloak results in a bulge under it. I confess the solution has ever eluded me (and I'm fairly sure there is no clue to this in the books), though it is doubtless answerable.

Problems from minor ones like that to much more challenging ones confront the illustrator of Tolkien, whose very special brand of imagery we find so compelling. Certain of his characters in particular, and/or their circumstances, present considerable difficulty, and for my part, as I've continued to deal with Tolkien, I've arrived at many conclusions and solutions. The following are some examples.

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Earlier in this discussion some of the problems to do with Frodo's appearance as a Ring-bearer were posed. The Ring, as is clearly the case with Bilbo, arrests physical aging considerably, although the bearer, in time, wastes away in a peculiarly subtle fashion, as did Gollum and the Ringwraiths. (One might say it was a kind of damnation, reserved only for those under the corrupting influence of the Ring's power-lust.) But what would that look like?

To deal with Frodo, described as having particularly youthful good looks, what would be the results? During the quest, exhaustion, thirst, exposure, hunger and Frodo's own spiritual burden would combine to leave an obvious effect physically; a maturing worldly wise imprint. The Ring's effect would be to preserve him against such aging as a hobbit would normally go through during the years of possession. However, two things are important:

- A. The Ring was in Frodo's possession a matter of only 18 years (and seldom used) and
- B. It was he who succeeded in destroying the Ring, and therefore its continued influence on him (as well, I imagine, as on Bilbo?) (Sauron also was released in a sense, but to his doom!)

Therefore I think it's reasonable to assume that in any post-quest portrayal of Frodo, one would see him as bearing the 'scars' of his ordeal, but also aging as any hobbit would (i.e. at the slower hobbit rate).

What about Gollum though? He is particularly problematic, given that he was invented for The Hobbit as merely a creature Bilbo encounters, but then later was elaborated on; given a past with origins as a hobbit. It creates rather an uncomfortable situation for the artist trying to reconcile it all.

It would perhaps have been easier for us if, when revising parts of Ch.V Riddles in the Dark of The Hobbit, Tolkien had eliminated the physical traits one is hard put to it to accept that any former hobbit could possess, particularly the large webbed feet and lamp-like eyes, even after years of subterranean adaptation. The greenish skin is not really a problem, I suppose, since we can assume that the effect of the Ring and the damp conditions and dark could render it thus corpse-like.

Tolkien, (ref. Letters, #109, #128) of course realised that the Ring and Gollum's role in possessing it were going to be hard to reconcile with the rapidly expanding LoTR. "The weakness is Gollum...", he states to Sir Stanley Unwin in a letter prior to revising Ch.V of The Hobbit (where Gollum in fact intends to give Bilbo the Ring if he wins the Riddle game, and in the end they part civilly. See Footnote 1 to #128 and #109). But such a weakness is Gollum that, even after the revisions, (which dramatically improved the story, regardless of the motive) he remains something of a difficulty.

Otherwise, of course, he is a brilliant creation, and for me, as I have come to see him, is best shown exactly as described, while keeping in mind his origins. That would mean that his skull and bone structure would not change, save developing a stoop, etc. The eyes and feet I simply ignore or play down, and I've come to prefer longish, stringy and unkempt hair, somewhat like the Mr. Hyde of the original 1920's silent film of Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde.

Then there is Gandalf. Of course there is little to disagree over with him (despite a surprising array of versions). However, if Tolkien were still with us, I would ask him just what he meant when he said Gandalf had "long bushy eyebrows that stuck out further than the brim of his shady hat." (The Hobbit, I, 8). I have

to conclude that Tolkien meant to be more entertaining than exact. Maybe if he'd said 'seemed to stick out...' or 'stuck well out under the brim...', it would make sense, but there it is.

With Aragorn I have essentially kept to the image he first evoked for me, merely refining it somewhat. That is, an aristocratic, archetypal 'hero' with a brooding Northern European set to his face. At the time of the quest he was 87 years old, but went on to live to the age of 210 years, which, long as it is, is not as long as most of his ancestors. Still, if we assume he lived perhaps twice as long a life as a normal Middle-earth man, then in appearance he could look the early to mid-40-ish we tend to picture him as.

Boromir, conversely, is harder to pinpoint than you'd think. It seems natural to portray him as brawny, bearded, grim and in quasi-viking costume. But while I agree with the first and third points, I disagree with the second and last.

Boromir was a Gondorian noble, if also a proud warrior, from a land the geographic equivalent of Northern Italy, that is, a moderate, sunny climate. According to Letters, (#211, 14), the clothing of peoples in Middle-earth was "much diversified in the Third Age, according to climate and inherited custom." Tolkien accepts a somewhat medieval look for the more northern areas but to assume that this went for the south, too, is to misjudge. He goes on to say that "the Rohirrim were not 'medieval' in our sense", citing the Bayeux Tapestry as a guide, and then says that "the Númenóreans of Gondor were proud, peculiar and archaic, and I think they are best pictured in (say) Egyptian terms." Yes, he said Egyptian, leaving the stock image of Boromir far off the mark! (An interesting footnote to this is that Tolkien toyed with the idea of how Middle-earth's history might link up somehow with 'true' history, hazarding about a 6000 year gap between the end of the Third Age and the present. This does suggest that for the artist there is a case for treating costume more exotically than has been generally tried, and not automatically placing the Third Age parallel to, say, the Dark Ages.)

For the balrog, as can be seen from the published illustration, (1987 Tolkien Calendar) I have taken some licence. Balrogs, for me, are bothersome. It's hard to 'believe' in them, for one thing, with their alien properties. Enveloped in darkness, indistinct; at times aflame; much is left to the whim of the artist, who must interpret as best he can. I have elected to show it as ruthless, intensely violent, somewhat traditionally demon-like, and I hope, a worthy opponent for Gandalf. And though there has been confusion on this point, for me there is no question that the creature is wingless, the term 'wings' clearly intended as a metaphor. Its plunge into the abyss should indicate something about any flying abilities!

There are other creatures and characters worth discussing too, as well as myriad other aspects of Middle-earth, and I hope in future to deal with these as I feel moved. (If Treebeard appears to be missing, it is only that I wrote about him in a piece to be found in Lothlórien #2). Affecting all of this, though, is the fact that whatever the subject is within Tolkien, little can be 100% defined, and heed to 'accuracy' must at times yield some to being 'true to the spirit', and the inevitable personal stamp left by any artist; the way the art says something about him or her.

For some, the joy is in using Tolkien as a point of departure for their own visions, and aren't seriously attempting to be 'correct', whereas for others, myself included, the joy is in seeing how clearly I can create a window into Tolkien that rings true, while still maintaining artistic integrity. My aim, whether or not it succeeds, is to capture something of the sophistication, mystery and grandeur of Tolkien; to create images which can truly compliment their source, and thereby attempt to express some of the universal yearnings his writing evokes.

