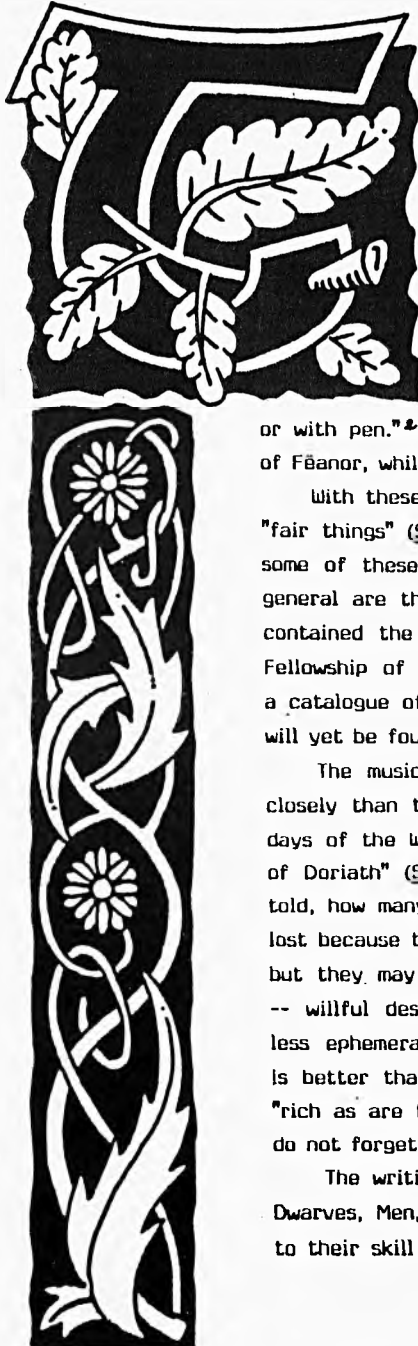




books, literature and literacy in middle - earth

by WAYNE HAMMOND



The history of books and reading, in the works of J.R.R. Tolkien as in our own culture, must begin with an account of writing, that "wond'rous mystic art... of painting Speech, and speaking to the eyes."⁴ In Arda it was an Elvish invention, no surprise from a people who named themselves *Quendi*, "the Speakers". We are told in *The Silmarillion* that in the Noontide of the Blessed Realm, when Melkor was enchained, "the Noldor advanced ever in skill and knowledge; and the long years were filled with their joyful labours, in which many new things fair and wonderful were devised. Then it was that the Noldor first bethought themselves of letters," and Rúmil of Tirion "achieved fitting signs for the recording of speech and song, some for graving upon metal and stone, others for drawing with brush or with pen."² The written forms (*tengwar*) were bettered, or largely re-invented, by the craft of Fëanor, while the inscriptional letters (*cirth*) were improved by Daeron of the Sindar.³

With these alphabets the Noldor made "poems and histories and books of lore" among many "fair things" (*Silm*, QS13, V, 2). At least, we may assume from the Noldorin love of craft that some of these were written works, and no doubt were beautiful to see. But how annoyingly general are the terms with which Tolkien describes them! Elrond's collection in Rivendell also contained the ubiquitous "books of lore", as well as "storied and figured maps", which the Fellowship of the Ring pondered before setting out (*LotR*, Bk.II, Ch.3, V, 2). If only we had a catalogue of some Elves' library, we could analyse their literature and lore; and maybe one will yet be found hidden inside an old exam-book somewhere in the Tolkien archive.

The music-loving Sindar made less use of writing than they did of song, adhering more closely than the Noldor to an oral tradition. The Sindar kept few written records "until the days of the War" against Morgoth, and "much that was held in memory perished in the ruins of Doriath" (*Silm*, QS10, III, 2).⁴ "Only in memory" is implied here. How many tales have been told, how many songs sung, how many languages spoken since the world began which have been lost because they were not preserved in writing?⁵ Books and documents are far from permanent, but they may be copied and re-copied, and so their contents take on a kind of immortality -- willful destruction, apathy and neglect notwithstanding. Under ideal conditions writing is less ephemeral than speech (or speakers), and the Chinese proverb applies: "The palest ink is better than the most retentive memory." Even for the Elves: as we read in *The Lhammas*, "rich as are the minds of the Elves in memory, they are not as the Valar, who wrote not and do not forget."⁶

The writing systems of the Elves were also a force for the civilisation of other peoples. Dwarves, Men, even Orcs adopted the *cirth*, altering it "to suit their purposes and according to their skill or lack of it" (*LotR*, Bk.VI, Ap.E, II, 4). We can only guess at what use Orcs made

of writing; for enlistment records? Maybe clerical Orcs were specially trained.

The Dwarves adhered to an expanded Alphabet of Daeron for their own (secret) tongue, and from the basically inscripational cirth developed written pen-forms. Otherwise, they "made use of such scripts as were current and many wrote the Fëanorian letters skilfully..." (LotR, Bk.VI, Ap. E, II, 5). They were prodigious writers, it seems. Unfortunately, we have no evidence to show what they used writing for, if anything, besides inscriptions and the keeping of their history. Tolkien mentions only one of their books: the Book of Mazarbul, a record of the colony in Moria. Gandalf turns its leaves, so that it was indeed a book -- that is, a codex, which by the Third Age seems to have supplanted the scroll in Middle-earth even as it did in our Western civilisation.⁷ And since the leaves "crackled and broke" and did not "crumble" as they were laid upon Balin's tomb (LotR, Bk.II, 5, I, 2), we may guess that they were made of parchment or vellum. Animal skin is (usually) more durable than paper and therefore may have been preferred by the sturdy Dwarves.

The word mazarbul, "records", by itself suggests a Dwarvish system of archives management. Indeed, in Moria there was a chamber devoted to the care of records. "In the rock of the walls" of this chamber were cut "many recesses" in which "were large iron-bound chests of wood", evidently for storing documents (LotR, Bk.II, Ch.5, I, 2). The arrangement recalls archival systems of ancient Egypt, whose wooden boxes containing papyri have been found in tombs, and in Rome, whose chests (or scrinia) were handily portable when the imperial court moved from place to place. The niche, or pigeon-hole, method of filing survives to the present day.⁸

It is said in The Silmarillion that "the Edain of old learned swiftly of the Eldar such art and knowledge as they could receive, and their sons increased in wisdom and skill, until they far surpassed all others of Mankind..." (Silm, QS17, V, 13). Then, presumably, was the gift of letters given to Men; but it was not equally appreciated. Men were not (and are not) uniformly eager to learn, or of like ability.⁹ In Númenor probably few except the loremasters learned "the High Eldarin Tongue of the Blessed Realm, in which much story and song was preserved from the beginning of the world," or "made letters and scrolls and books, and wrote in them many things of wisdom and wonder in the high tide of their realm..." (Silm, Ak., I, 9). And as that tide turned and Men became enamoured of wealth and war, books, (as it seems) became valued more as possessions or objects of veneration than as keys to wisdom and knowledge. It is distressing to note that the only writings mentioned by Tolkien as having survived the destruction of Númenor, "scrolls of lore written in scarlet and black", are described in The Akallabêth as heirlooms of the Faithful together with their "vessels and [their] jewels" (Silm, Ak., II, 38).¹⁰

This attitude towards books and learning continued, at least among the Dúnedain of the South. It is best expressed in The Lord of the Rings in Faramir's description of the archives at Minas Tirith: "we in the house of Denethor," he tells Frodo, "know much ancient lore by long tradition, and there are moreover in our treasuries many things preserved: books and tablets writ on withered parchemnts, yea, and on stone, and on leaves of silver and gold, in divers characters. Some none can now read; and for the rest, few ever unlock them. I can read a little in them, for I have had teaching" (LotR, Bk.IV, Ch.5, IV, 12). Gandalf tells the Council of Elrond that at Minas Tirith he was grudgingly permitted by Lord Denethor "to search among the hoarded scrolls and books... many records that few now can read, even of the lore-masters, for their scripts and tongues have become dark to later Men" (LotR, Bk.II, Ch.2, X, 13).¹¹ Isildur left records of the Ring in Gondor "lest a time come when the memory of these great matters shall grow dim" (LotR, Bk.II, Ch.2, 16), but he did not foresee the waning ability of Men to read what he had left.

Faramir speaks of books as treasure, and Gandalf uses the word hoard: clearly, the Stewards of Gondor included in their charge even the writings of their past, to keep them until the King should come again. On the face of it, this is a noble aim; but by accomplishing their goal the Stewards defeated the original purpose of what they preserved. Though books may be prized as objects or for their antiquity, the worth of their contents is lost as long as they are unread. Barred from the use of books, whether by treasure-house gates

or by the belief that the writings cannot themselves be "unlocked", only an exceptional person will not be discouraged from exploring the path of intellectual growth that only books can provide.

The long tradition Faramir mentions is evidently an oral one, or mostly oral, and the status quo. Beregon of the Guard tells Pippin, "in these days men are slow to believe that a captain can be wise and learned in the scrolls of lore and song, as he [Faramir] is, and yet a man of hardihood and swift judgement in the field" (LotR, Bk.V, Ch.1, XII, 4). Faramir himself remarks, "though we still hold that a warrior should have more skills and knowledge than only the craft of weapons and slaying, we esteem a warrior, nonetheless, above men of other crafts. Such is the need of our days" (LotR, Bk.IV, Ch.5, X, 18). It is not going too far to say that Faramir was one of the few men of Gondor who could, or would, make such an apology: a warrior himself, but with the soul of a scholar. As a Steward's son, no doubt he had a greater opportunity for what we would call "formal" education. He was taught by loremasters (including Gandalf) and had easy access to such books as he could read. Ultimately he developed an uncommon perspective: in rejecting their "scrolls of lore and song", in failing to retain even the knowledge of how to decipher them, his people had become less than they were: though their forebears were "the High, or Men of the West, which were Númenóreans", the people of Gondor (Faramir believes) have become like the Rohirrim, "the Middle Peoples, Men of the Twilight", who love "war and valour" more than "arts and gentleness" and who for the most part are unlettered.¹² This is not to say uneducated, or ignorant, or socially inferior (though Faramir's description of the Rohirrim is slightly condescending). We should not underestimate the heights that an oral culture can attain or the degree to which it can cultivate creative (or destructive) powers. Nevertheless, without writing (and a climate in which it can thrive), intellectual growth can proceed only so far. Unless fed by intellectual curiosity, a civilisation will stagnate if it does not fade and die.

We are not told outright if Gondor and Rohan escaped this dead end of anti-intellectualism and bibliophobia. I like to think that they did, in the years of "great glory and bliss" (LotR, Bk.VI, Ap.A, (v), V, 10) under Aragorn's rule, through the marriage of Faramir of Gondor and Éowyn of Rohan, and inspired by the education of the King, which was surpassed by that of no man. We may imagine, in a fit of romanticism, that King Elessar was a patron of books and learning no less than King Alfred or Emperor Charlemagne. But in truth we have little evidence to point that way other than a confident appraisal of Aragorn's character and the knowledge that even after his death there was a King's Writer at work -- Findegil, whose copy of the Red Book was the "most important" (LotR, Bk.I, Pr. Note 3-4).

* * *

Happily, we have much evidence with which to discuss our subject as it pertains to the Shire. The inhabitants of that pleasant corner appear to have been a mix of the literate and the semi-literate. On the one hand there were Hobbits who "wrote constantly to all their friends (and a selection of their relations) who lived further off than an afternoon's walk" (LotR, Bk.I, Pr.3, 5); who sent invitation cards written in gold ink (Bk.I, Ch.1, VI, 13); who had the leisure to keep diaries (Bk.II, Ch.3, VIII, 6; Bk.VI, Ap.D, Cal.IV, 2; etc.); who owned enough books to require a bookcase, and who would have them borrowed (and sometimes not returned) by the likes of Hugo Bracegirdle (Bk.I, Ch.1, X, 9). On the other hand, Hobbits "begin to learn the art" of cooking "before their letters (which many never reach)" (Bk.IV, Ch.4, VII, 4). How many are "many"? Hobbit-children knew (or thought they knew) what Gandalf's G-rune on his fireworks boxes stood for: "G for Grand!" (Bk.I, Ch.1, IV, 2). And there must have been some expectation that Bilbo's notice NO ADMITTANCE EXCEPT ON PARTY BUSINESS would be read and obeyed (Bk.I, Ch.1, VI, 3), and that the Shire-hobbits would know what was ordered in the lists of Rules Frodo and company found posted when they returned from their journeys (Bk.VI, Ch.8, II, 1).

Literate at least to a degree, then -- but as in Gondor, intellectually unambitious. In Bilbo's day "a love of learning (other than genealogical lore) was far from general among them (Hobbits), but there remained still a few in the older families who studied their own

books and even gathered reports of old times and distant lands from Elves, Dwarves, and Men" (LotR, Bk.I, Pr.1; III, 1). The words remained still tantalisingly look back to when a love of learning was indeed general among Hobbits: when they had learned their letters from the Dúnedain (Bk.I, Pr.1, III, 7) and the world was new. In time their curiosity waned. By the end of the Third Age a little learning was not only a dangerous thing but the common state of affairs.

Hobbits liked books, if they read them at all, "filled with things that they already knew, set out fair and square with no contradictions" (Bk.I, Pr.1, IV, 5). Did they fear the unknown so much, or did they merely wish to avoid feeling ignorant? "Rumours of strange things" were dismissed as "fireside-tales and children's stories" (Bk.I, Ch.2, IV, 4) opposing (perceived) fact to fantasy.¹³ Even Merry Brandybuck once put down "old bogey-stories ... about goblins and wolves and things of that sort" (Bk.I, Ch.6, I, 12). (No doubt he later changed his mind). Bilbo and Frodo, and Sam Gamgee, were among few who saw truth in old tales (Bk.I, Ch.2, IV). The Hobbit who loved lore for its own sake, or who delved into matters outside common experience, risked being labelled "queer" (Bk.I, Ch.1, III) or "cracked" (Bk.I, Ch.2, IV, 20). When Gaffer Gamgee publicly remarked that "Mr. Bilbo" had "learned" Sam "his letters -- meaning no harm, mark you, and I hope no harm will come of it" (Bk.I, Ch.1, III, 15, italics mine), he uttered a caveat that his listeners surely approved without dissent.

Tolkien described the Hobbit condition as "a mental myopia which is proud of itself, a smugness (in varying degrees) and cocksureness, and a readiness to measure and sum up things from a limited experience, largely enshrined in sententious traditional 'wisdom'".¹⁴ In this respect the Shire was not unlike England between the 15th and 18th centuries as it is described in Richard D. Altick's The English Common Reader (if we substitute script for Altick's print and written for printed). Literacy, Altick observes,

made little headway among the humble in either town or country. Their life still was lived according to the immemorial pattern.... Songs and stories were handed down by word of mouth from generation to generation, with never a page of paper intervening. The life of the imagination and the feelings was still attuned to the ear rather than to the eye. The popular tradition, rich in folk heroes and broad humor and proverbial wisdom and memorable events, ... was part of the very soil, and there was as yet no need for the printed word to supplant it. (p.29)

But there were books in the Shire, and some of them contained stories. Tolkien suggests in his preface to The Adventures of Tom Bombadil that Hobbit literature prior to the Red Book was transmitted mainly by speech.¹⁵ Frodo's comment in Mordor, however -- "'Shut the book now, dad; we don't want to read any more.'"¹⁶ (Bk.IV, Ch.8, V, 15) -- indicates otherwise. Some young Hobbits, at least, were read to, and were read tales. The better-loved "grown-up" stories and songs might have been written down also, though they remained most popular in oral form.

The Shire had some 300,000 inhabitants (to accept Ted Crawford's estimate¹⁶), some only semi-literate and with no innate love of books. There was no public education that we know of to require textbooks, no university to foster scholarship, no church to promote reading for spiritual gain. The most the Shire economy would have supported, therefore, was a very minor trade in books on the most popular (i.e. marketable) subjects. Gardening advice and cooking tips would have been "strong sellers" -- as indeed they still are. (1,001 Ways to Cook Mushrooms, by Mrs. Maggot?). Books made for sale most likely were written out by Hobbits who made their principal living otherwise: as law clerks, or by selling stationary to those who wrote constantly to all their friends, etc. A Hobbit who wished to own a work not available in the trade, or something of a scholarly nature, would have to write his own book or copy a borrowed text. The well-to-do, of course, like our Renaissance Kings of Naples and Dukes of Ferrara, could afford to hire scribes to do their writing for them.¹⁷

With the end of the War of the Ring, the Hobbits were awakened to "a more widespread interest in their own history; and many of their traditions, up to that time still mainly oral, were collected and written down. The greater families were also concerned with events of the Kingdom at large, and many of their members

studied its ancient histories and legends. By the end of the first century of the Fourth Age there were already to be found in the Shire several libraries that contained many historical books and records", copied at and brought back from Rivendell and Minas Tirith (Bk.I, Pr., Note, 1). This is a notable advance; but here again, we are dealing with the "greater families" rather than in the Shire population in general. Merry Brandybuck's best-remembered writings -- his Herblore of the Shire, the Reckoning of the Years, and Old Words and Names in the Shire -- reflect perennial Hobbit interests in agriculture and local lore. In contrast, the books kept at Great Smials that concerned Gondor and Númenor "were of less interest to Shire-folk" (Bk.I, Pr., Note, 6). In the history of the book as, in everywhere else, the more things change, the more they remain the same.¹⁸

I would like to conclude with a few remarks on physical aspects of the book as it was found in the Shire. Tolkien describes only one book of Hobbit make: the chief of ultimately five volumes of the Red Book of Westmarch. This was "a big book with plain red leather covers; its tall pages were now almost filled [when it was presented to Sam]. At the beginning there were many leaves covered with Bilbo's thin wandering hand; but most of it was written in Frodo's firm flowing script. It was divided into chapters, but Chapter 80 was unfinished, and after that were some blank leaves". Originally Bilbo's account of his journey to the Lonely Mountain, it had been expanded to include "the memoirs of Bilbo and Frodo of the Shire, supplemented by the accounts of their friends and the learning of the Wise, together with extracts from Books of Lore translated by Bilbo in Rivendell" -- so its title page informs us in fullsome detail (Bk.VI, Ch.9, VIII).

This description does not seem remarkable. Except that the Red Book is hand-written and leather-bound, in its physical form it is the ordinary sort of book with which we are all familiar. But if we read the passages more critically, it is very revealing. The words red leather covers indicate (among other things) a knowledge of dyes and of the binding of books in codex form. Tall pages suggests papermaking or the skill of preparing skins for writing. Most interesting of all, the book has a title page, an innovation not known in manuscripts in our history and in printed books only from 1476.¹⁹

We do not know if the leather covers were made by Hobbits or by Elves. Bilbo's diary was leather-bound before he left the Shire (Bk.I, Ch.1, VIII, 2, no colour specified), but it was given to Frodo at Rivendell with three other volumes also bound in red leather (Bk.I, Pr., Note, 2; Bk.VI, Ch.6, XII, 5). The latter three certainly were of Elvish make: their contents were compiled by Bilbo at Rivendell. The diary may have been re-bound there to match its companions, or maybe was originally a red-leather bound "blank book" given to Bilbo among Elrond's "small gifts" mentioned in The Hobbit.²⁰ In any case, we cannot be sure that there was no bindery in the Shire. Indeed, where there are books there are almost always bookbinders. "The only craft little practised among" Hobbits, Tolkien remarks, "was shoe-making; but they had long and skilful fingers and could make many other useful and comely things" (Bk.I, Pr.1, II, 3). Tolkien does not exclude other work in leather. Hobbits also could have bound simply in wrappers, or in cloth, or in uncovered wooden boards.

I am confident that the Red Book's "tall pages" were of paper. Paper of all sorts is mentioned by Tolkien so often that its manufacture must have been extensive. Hobbits could have prepared parchment, or possibly it could have been obtained from the Dwarves with whom the Shire traded (at least in boots for the Eastfarthing, Bk.I, Pr.1, IV, 2). But if our history is any guide, paper would have been by far the less expensive product and the most easily made.²¹

As for the Red Book's remarkable title page, lacking other evidence we may chalk that up to Baggins ingenuity.

I do not believe that Hobbits printed from movable type. Printing requires four elements: letter-casting, a press, ink, and some material on which to print. Paper, as already noted, was available in seeming abundance. Good black printing ink can be made from linseed oil (from flaxseed), turpentine (from pines or firs), and lampblack (soot), all substances within the Hobbits' ability to manufacture.²² A screw press for printing could have been adapted from the standing press used to squeeze out excess water in papermaking, or from the winemaker's press. The most difficult technological hurdle for the

Hobbits in printing from moveable type would have been letter casting, which involves the careful cutting of galleys, the making of a matrix for each character, the use of an adaptable mould for the casting of type in a mixture of lead, tin, and antimony, and various finishing operations. This is the sticking point. Even if we assume that a knowledge from metallurgy and metal-crafting came from the Elves, and metals themselves from trade with the Dwarves (entering that grey area Fred Crawford has discussed in relation to coins), the operation seems more complicated than Hobbits are said to have preferred (Bk.I, Pr.1, II, 1).

On the other hand, there is (slim) evidence for printing to have existed in the Shire, though it was not a Hobbit invention. When Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin returned to the Shire after the destruction of the Ring, they found "a notice and a list of Rules" on every wall in the guard-house at the Brandywine gate. If we infer that such notices were posted throughout the Shire, we may infer also some method of making multiple copies. Of course, these could have been reduced in manuscript by a few "lettered" Hobbits pressed into duty. But Saruman had "a mind of metal and wheels" (Bk.III, Ch.4, VII, 15). Could he have introduced printing into the Shire as a means to his authoritarian ends? Did his presses flood that country with proclamations and propaganda as his new mill fouled the water and the air? So we can easily imagine; and if so, the "Black Art" was then made very black indeed.

Notes

- 1: Uncredited verse, quoted in Fairbanks, A Book of Scripts, p.9.
- 2: The Silmarillion, QS6, I, 1.
- 3: Lord of the Rings, BK.VI, Ap.E, II, 3-4). References are to the corrected printing of the rev. 2nd ed.
- 4: In the Narn i Hîn Hûrin we read that in Doriath Túrin "learned much lore, hearing eagerly the histories of ancient days" (Unfinished Tales, Pt.1, II, 3, ii, italics mine).
- 5: The High-elven tongue, Quenya, disappeared from everyday use until it was no longer a "birth-tongue", but fixed in script it survived as a language of ceremony and learning (LotR, Bk.VI, Ap.F1, II, 2; UT, Pt.2, II, N.19). In The Lhammas it is said that the speech of the Laiquendi, though it has vanished from the earth, "was recorded in Gondolin, and ... is not wholly forgotten ..." (The Lost Road, Pt.2, V, a, 7, ii); and that "in Tol-eressëa are kept records of the ancient tongue of Ossiriand, which is no more; and also the tongue of the Western Men, the Elf-friends ... [which also] is no more" (ibid., Pt.2, V, b, 6).
- 6: LR, Pt.2, Va, 4, iii).
- 7: The codex, or book made up of gatherings (folded sheets), was invented circa 1st century B.C. and was the dominant format by the 4th century A.D. Its advantages over the scroll are that both sides of a sheet (or skin) may be written on, and long works can be accommodated in a space more compact than a scroll or series of scrolls can offer. The codex has always been the preferred format for Christian works; the Torah, however, remains by tradition a scroll.
- 8: See Posner, Archives of the Ancient World, pp. 86, 197.
- 9: Cf. the description of the Three Houses of Men, (Silm., QS17, V, 10).
- 10: "It is said that Aldarion ... wrote records of all his journeys to Middle-earth, and they were long preserved in Rómenna, though all were afterwards lost" (UT, 194).
- 11: In Appendix A of the 1st ed. of LotR (1954-55) is the remark (omitted in the rev. ed.) that Aragorn opened the records of Gondor to Frodo and Peregrin, who read in The Book of the Kings and The Book of the Stewards and The Akallabêth.
- 12: Faramir says of the Rohirrim that "of our [Gondor's] lore and manners they have learned what they would, and their lords speak our speech at need; yet for the most part they hold by the ways of their own fathers and to their own memories ..." (LotR, Bk.IV, Ch.5, X, 16). Théoden, and Éomer and Éowyn, were probably literate; possibly more of the Rohirrim could read and write than was revealed to outsiders. Runes were incised in the stone floor of Meduseld (LotR, Bk.III, Ch.6, VI, 1).

- 13: Cf. LotR, Bk.III, Ch.2, XIII, 33: "'Halfings! But they are only a little people in old songs and children's tales out of the North.'"
- 14: The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien, L.246, II, 1.
- 15: The Adventures of Tom Bombadil, Pr., 2. References are to the 1st ed., 1962 (ATB).
- 16: Some Light on Middle-earth, p.1.
- 17: Cf. comments in Goldschmidt, The Printed Book in the Renaissance, pp.1-3.
- 18: "Distrust of all Elvish lore" marked "the prevailing mood in the Shire at the end of the Third Age, and that mood was certainly not entirely dispelled by the events and changes with which that Age ended" (ATB, Pr., 7).
- 19: The Kalendarium of Regiomontanus (Venice: Erhard Ratdolt, 1476) includes a separate page giving title, author, place, printer, and date of publication. The papal bull of Aeneas Sylvius (Mainz: Fust and Schoeffer, 1463) earlier devoted a separate page to its title but without other details. Publication data in 15th-century printed books usually was given, if at all, only in a colophon at the end of the volume.
- 20: The Hobbit, Ch. XIX, 18.
- 21: See my "Papermaking in the Shire", Amon Hen 94, November 1988, pp.17-18.
- 22: It is easy to imagine Hobbits acting in the festive manner of the Germans, who even in the late 19th century ate bread roll fried in the very linseed oil being boiled for the making of ink! See Bloy, A History of Printing Ink, Balls and Rollers, p.8.
- 23: Crawford, pp.2-3.

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