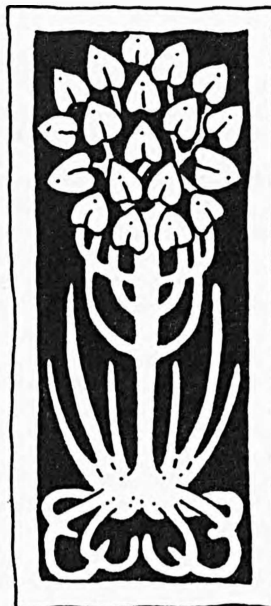


# Mr BLISS: The Precursor of a Precursor?

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**M**R. BLISS CAME AS A surprise in more than one way. Now of course it isn't possible to go into all aspects of the book in one fairly short article, but among other things I think most readers were struck by the numerous parallels and points of resemblance to others of Tolkien's fictional works, primarily, perhaps, to *The Hobbit*, but also to *Farmer Giles of Ham*, *Leaf by Niggle* and *The Lord of the Rings*; and this seems to me to be interesting enough to warrant a few lines in *Mallorn*.

To start with *The Hobbit* (abbreviated hereafter to *TH*), Bilbo and Mr Bliss are in many ways very like each other. Both are independent, both live alone - not counting the Girabbit - in special houses just outside a village. Both are middle class, neither poor nor very rich, and are by their surroundings regarded as a little eccentric. And even though there aren't any hard facts to back up the feeling, the impression remains that Mr Bliss seems to be just as middle-aged as Bilbo. It could also be noted that both *TH* and *Mr. Bliss* (hereafter abbreviated to *MrB*) start with a description of the main character's house, with 'rows of pegs in the hall' for Mr Bliss and 'lots of pegs' for Bilbo.

Another of the more obvious parallels is that the three bears in *MrB* and Beorn in *TH* have a number of common features apart from just the name. They are 'uncertain' - presumably dangerous figures who turn out not to be so bad after all. Furthermore they are excellent hosts, though both Mr Bliss's company and Thorin's have their doubts about accepting their hospitality (*MrB* p.32, *TH* ch.7). And like Beorn's hall, the bears' house is "long and low, with no upstairs" (*MrB* p.32), but with a long central table and open fire. However, Mr Bliss isn't party to the first feast in the bears' house, because like Bilbo in the goblin-caves under the Misty Mountains, he is separated from his companions in confusion and darkness. Again like Bilbo, he has to straighten out a more or less undeserved economic mess and tidy up his house at the end of the story; Bilbo has his auction, but Mr Bliss has



to send for Mr Banks the builder. To top this, both gentlemen are accused - from their own point of view, wrongly accused - of stealing something valuable. Mr Bliss took back his silver bicycle, while Bilbo helped himself to what he fancied could count as his part of the dragon-treasure, the Arkenstone.

The parallels mentioned so far are probably the easiest to notice, but there are many smaller details that also deserve to be included. From *MrB* p.20 it can be seen that the Dorkinses are just as touchingly insincere as Bilbo in their handing out of invitations. Just as the Dorkinses aren't really pleased to meet Mr Day, Mrs Knight and the bears, and would have preferred to keep their lunch to themselves, Bilbo only asks Gandalf to tea to be rid of him for the moment (*TH*, ch.1). Incidentally, the estimable brothers Dorkins are much like hobbits in other respects too: they're rather short and thick-set, being fond of their food, and wearing breeches very much like the ones that Bilbo has in the illustrations to *TH*. In fact, their "disgusting" richness (*MrB* p.36) combined with their truly miserly attitude and the fact that "Mr. B. and they have not been particularly friendly since" (p.47), inevitably makes one think of the Sackville-Bagginses in *TH* and *LotR*. Otherwise their greed might be seen as quite dwarvish . . .



As in *TH* and *LotR*, ponies are important in *MrB*. In a society with cars and bicycles this trait would have been strange for any other author than Tolkien, but now we can only conclude that the Professor's anti-technological leanings are given rein once more. Neither cars nor bicycles are very practical, but at least bicycles are better than cars (and worth as much), which break down easily. Bicycles aren't so very complicated, so they can be accepted, much like the clock on the mantelpiece which could be fitted into the second chapter of *TH*. But an aeroplane would definitely not have been possible in Mr Bliss's world; the alternative is the balloon mentioned on p.19.

To return to earthbound matters, it is funny - and telling? - to see that the washing-up after the bears' supper couldn't wait till next morning any more than the soiled plates and cutlery after the Unexpected Party. A triviality, yes, but a clear parallel nevertheless (*MrB* p.31, *TH* ch.1). And if we throw our minds back to the scene immediately following

the washing-up in *TH*, Bilbo's rolling on the floor and shrieking 'struck by lightning' after being frightened by Thorin is strikingly similar to the way Fattie, Mr Day and Mrs Knight behave when they encountered the three luminescent bears in the wood (*MrB* p.30).

One last point to be made about the relationship of *MrB* to *TH*, is that the heroes of both stories live "up the 'ill" (*MrB* p.37).

That was *The Hobbit*, but our sources aren't exhausted for that matter. Other allusions abound.

The most obvious ones are the names. Boffin, Gaffer Gamgee, Fattie, and the Cross Roads may all be found in *LotR*, though the spelling is 'Fatty' there. Bruno, the youngest bear's name, does not appear in the published *LotR*, but it figures here and there in the unpublished manuscripts at Marquette University (3/9/-, for instance).

To go on, the Dorkinses' wrath over being robbed of their cabbages (*MrB* p.21) is reminiscent of Farmer Maggot's feelings about mushroom-thieves in Book 1, ch.4 of *LotR*. Both situations include the owner's angry dogs. The Dorkinses' angry dogs, by the way, are in themselves a parallel to the dog Garm in *Farmer Giles of Ham* in the way they think: "It is one thing to chase bears out of the garden in the afternoon, and quite a different thing to hunt them in their own wood after dark. Where are our nice comfy kennels?" (*MrB* p.27 compared to pp.33-34 of *FGoH*). All the dogs immediately run away at the first sight of danger (*MrB* p.29, *FGoH* p.34). The Dorkinses' dogs could also remind one of the proud knights in *FGoH*, very brave and bold at court, but steadily less so the nearer they get to danger (*FGoH* pp. 46-49).

The last example I wish to put forward is the way that Mr Bliss has to let Mr Day ride in his motor-car because Mr Day "said he was too bruised to walk" (*MrB* p.11, my italics) can make the reader think about Parish's rather sulky demand for Niggle's assistance in *Leaf by Niggle*. However, this point shouldn't, perhaps, be stressed.

The list could be made longer, but with the reference to *Leaf by Niggle* I think we have reached the limit of the reasonably objective. Any further examples would almost necessarily be more vague, speculative and subjective: indeed, some may think the last few were a bit dubious. In any case I think enough material remains to make my point sufficiently clear: surprisingly many motifs and details from the very short text of *Mr. Bliss* are taken up and used

again in Tolkien's later fictional works, particularly *The Hobbit*.

Now, can we learn something from this? Does it tell us something? Does it, for instance, say that Tolkien's imagination was so limited that he wrote about the same things in all his stories? It does not. Tolkien has been accused of many things, but seldom of lacking imaginative powers. A man who had to recycle his motifs couldn't have written *LotR*. Besides, the question misses the point: *MrB* is definitely its own story, the plot itself is unique. So it isn't the plot, but rather the strange overlapping of types, of attitudes and of the handling of situations and persons that is interesting in this context. At least some of the motifs mentioned above must have been firmly entrenched in Tolkien's mind in such a way that he could use them more or less as defined 'units' to fit into a story (for example, the Beorn-figure and -house). And by their nature some of the motifs are likely to have been based on personal experience (like the insincere invitations and Mr Day/Parish), while others may be more aesthetic (ponies, Gaffer Gamgee).

The title of this article suggests a connection between *Mr. Bliss* and *The Hobbit*, the book that has so frequently, rightly or no, been named as the "precursor" of *The Lord of the Rings*. And as we have seen, the points of resemblance between the two works are many and in some instances striking. Many, that is, for such a very short book as *Mr. Bliss*. This isn't surprising. If it is correct that *MrB* was written in 1928, *TH* was written only a few years later, and Tolkien's mental furniture may be supposed to have been much the same. And both stories were told to the same children. But what is surprising is that there are no clear links to the earlier, and in the 1920's steadily developing *QS*. Was it that Tolkien kept those two strands of his imagination so widely apart that it was impossible for motifs to cross over? That is possible, even probable. When we see how carefully Tolkien wove elements from *QS* into *TH* - Light-elves and Sea-elves and Deep-elves, Gondolin, heroes from the North etc. - the thought becomes almost compelling. And then it becomes possible to regard *TH* as partly a synthesis between the whimsical *Mr. Bliss*-motifs and the far more serious *Silmarillion*-motifs, as the point where the two separate strands were first experimentally combined. At least *Mr. Bliss* can be seen as the start of the beginning of the writing of *The Hobbit*, that source of so much - can we call it - "bliss"?

#### References

- J.R.R. Tolkien: *Mr. Bliss*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1982.  
- *Farmer Giles of Ham*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1976 (hardback edition).

[THE GEOGRAPHY AND ECONOMY OF NÚMENOR,  
continued from p.15]

rapidly and there is some slight evidence of consequent social conflicts such as the growing influence of the ship-masters on political developments. It was the techniques of shipping, metal-working and public works associated with shipping and defence which changed. Most building in Númenor was of aesthetically pleasing stone and wood. There were no fortifications on the island itself. The great civil works were the docks and quays built to help the expansion to the mainland while on the mainland itself defensive walls, bridges and roads were also built, some being of impressive proportions. This was above all true of the later edifices.

In metal-working there were splendid achievements in the field of decorative arts and in special steel for personal weapons. The hollow steel bows of the Númenoreans were clearly considerable metallurgical achievements. Helmets and shields are mentioned in the *Chronicles* but no other types of armour, and while plenty of swords, spears and other individual arms are recorded the only types of team weapons referred to are siege engines at the taking of Barad-dûr.

Finally and most important of all there was the development of shipping. In the earliest period of settlement on the island boats were used for fishing and nothing else. It was only after about 700 years that the Númenorean vessels became capable of oceanic voyages and it is mentioned in the *Tale of Erendis* that a research effort was devoted to the improvement of rigging and hull shape. Two very important points must be made. First, all the Númenorean ships were of wood; and second all were propelled by sail or perhaps, at a pinch, oars. This sets clear limits to the size of the vessels despite mention in the *Chronicles* of their immense size. The biggest sailing ships ever at the end of the 19th century had iron or steel hulls and reached five or six thousand tons, but the maximum size of wooden vessels was about three thousand tons only and even then they tended to break their backs of foundry when under stress in storms. Such a fate indeed seems to have befallen some of the most ambitious of the Númenorean ships. The safest size for large wooden ships seems to have been about 200 feet long and around 1500-2000 tons, and such must have been the usual proportions of the Great Ships of Númenor.

I feel these few preliminary remarks on the society and technology of Númenor might be of interest to those who study Middle-earth.

