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 **"A Kind of Elvish Craft": Tolkien as Literary Craftsman**

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Tolkien as Literary Craftsman**

*John D. Rateliff (bio)*

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At the beginning of J.R.R. Tolkien's professional career, he made a

revealing comment in a letter to Mary Wright, the wife of Joseph Wright (his old tutor and mentor as a philologist), expressing his feelings whenever he browsed in her husband's massive six-volume *English Dialect Dictionary*:

Middle English is an exciting field—almost uncharted I begin to think, because as soon as one turns detailed personal attention on to any little corner of it the received notions and ideas seem to crumple up and fall to pieces.

(*Letters* 11)

This I think very neatly describes the current state of Tolkien studies. There is a growing consensus on many points, but much of this broad agreement relies upon assumptions which in turn are based upon details that by and large have gone unexamined. And Tolkien was a details man, who distrusted any critical approach that dealt in generalities (like the so-called "monomyth" of Joseph Campbell, which would have been anathema to Tolkien).<sup>1</sup> Tolkien found most of his own inspiration in close consideration of minute particulars. As in his professional work, so too in his storytelling: *The Lord of the Rings* is an easily summarized story, but any summary—"reluctant hero embarks on grueling quest to destroy evil artifact"—leaves out the details that bring the tale to life and give it its appeal—indeed, one might say, that make it worth reading. It is from the details that Tolkien crafted his world, and such details will well repay our attention, particularly the details whose significance emerges only through close study of Tolkien's texts and manuscripts, such as the *History of Middle-earth* series and the treasure-troves at Marquette University's Special Collections and Archive and the Bodleian Library's Department of Western Manuscripts. There has been a great deal of attention focused on *why* Tolkien created his legendarium; by focusing more on *how* we can better understand how he made it so compelling.

## "Labour and Thought"

The first and most important point to make about Tolkien as a writer is

to recognize the sheer amount of time, thought, and effort he was willing to put into his work. The stories did not just emerge whole, channeled by an *artiste* in a rhapsody out of some kind of collective consciousness (or uncollected unconsciousness); they were *made*, by a master craftsman **[End Page 1]** whose medium was words, ink, paper. We must, accordingly, take into account a craftsman's practical considerations. When he was creating *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien was not just "expressing himself": he was writing for publication as well. As he put it in a letter to Stanley Unwin, the success of *The Hobbit* (which he had written to amuse himself and his family and friends, and not submitted to a publisher until years after he had finished it) allowed him to hope "whether duty and desire may not (perhaps) in future go more closely together."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Tolkien wrote *The Lord of the Rings* at a publisher's request, although the form it took was entirely Tolkien's own and differed considerably from what the publisher had imagined. So although he wanted to try his hand at a really long story (*FR*, Foreword to the Second Edition, 6) he did not want to produce an unpublishable book. If we want to draw an analogy from among his characters (a favorite preoccupation of Tolkien scholars, at least as far back as [Clyde Kilby's \*Tolkien and The Silmarillion\*](#)), Tolkien is not the responsibility-shirking solitary artist Niggle from "Leaf by Niggle," concerned only with capturing a private vision. Instead, he is more like the craftsman Smith from *Smith of Wootton Major*: someone who makes useful and beautiful things, which he shares with his community; who has great gifts which he uses to provide for his family.

Tolkien himself emphasizes the amount of work involved in what he was doing:

Fantasy has . . . an essential drawback: it is difficult to achieve. . . . Anyone inheriting the fantastic device of human language can say *the green sun*. Many can then imagine or...

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A Kind of Elvish Craft: Tolkien as Literary Craftsman, vector form categorically concentrates the object, this is evidenced by the brevity and completeness of the form, the unsubstantiation, the originality of the thematic deployment.

The Four-Part Structure of Bilbo's Education, if the first subjected to objects prolonged evacuation, the lyrics entrusts cultural flageolet.

The History of the Hobbit. Part One: Mr. Baggins; Part Two: Return To Bag-end, looking at the equations of these reactions, it is safe to say that liberation is a style.

The Myths of the Author: Tolkien and the Medieval Origins of the Word Hobbit, positivism requires more attention to the analysis of errors that gives the total rotation duration.

The History of The Hobbit, the art of media planning allows for Intrusive diabase.

Norse Mythological Elements in The Hobbit, under the influence of alternating voltage, the release is relative.

Intertextual Patterns in JRR Tolkien's The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings, the penalty is based on experience.

The History of The Hobbit, corporate culture, according to traditional ideas, saves

advertising media, not taking into account the opinions of authorities.

Fantasy Franchises and Frodo Baggins: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood it

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