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'Written in a Fair Hand': The Living Tradition of Medieval Scripts in J.R.R. Tolkien's Calligraphy

Eduardo B. Kumamoto

Independent scholar, eduardo.kumamoto@gmail.com

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'Written in a Fair Hand': The Living Tradition of Medieval Scripts in J.R.R. Tolkien's Calligraphy

Cover Page Footnote

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INTRODUCTION

In his *Liner notes*, W.H. Auden (2015: 1) confessed that among Tolkien's 'many gifts, the three which astound me most are his gift for inventing Proper Names, his gift for describing landscape, and (how I envy him this) his gift for calligraphy.' It is not hard to see why Auden envied Tolkien's calligraphic skills: despite the haste and illegibility of many drafts, Tolkien could and did produce several impressively accomplished manuscripts. Some of the most famous calligraphic pieces were revealed to a wide audience early in his career as a writer, with the publication of *The Hobbit*. Many others came to light in posthumously published books dedicated to his art, such as *Pictures by J.R.R. Tolkien* (1979), with text by Christopher Tolkien; *Tolkien: Life and Legend* (1992), by Judith Priestman; *J.R.R. Tolkien: Artist and Illustrator* (1995/2004); *The Art of the Hobbit* and *The Art of the Lord of the Rings* (2011 and 2015) — the three of them by Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull — and, more recently, *Tolkien: Maker of Middle-earth* (2018), by Catherine McIlwaine. Their contribution to the study of Tolkien's art cannot be overstated, and the work of Hammond and Scull in elucidating crucial points of his calligraphy will be duly emphasized in this article by the copious references to their books, which have become essential in Tolkienian scholarship.

But Tolkien's calligraphy remains a side topic within the study of his art, perhaps overshadowed by the greatness of his illustrations, and while some scholars (e.g. Holmes 2006; Lee 2014) have considered the relationship between Tolkien's profession and his calligraphy, there is a large unexplored area that awaits examination. The present work aims to study Tolkien's calligraphy taking into consideration the historical scripts and manuscripts that may have served as models for his ornamental writing in Latin script. The runes and his invented writing systems will not be the center of attention here.

The first section focuses on the genesis of Tolkien's aptitude for calligraphy according to what has been said in biographical works, which will be briefly reviewed. This section also addresses the subject of paleography, that is, the study of ancient scripts, which connects Tolkien's profession as a philologist and editor of medieval texts to his calligraphic art.

The second part of the article deals with specific scripts that informed Tolkien's calligraphic production, namely the Insular scripts used in manuscripts he was certainly familiar with and the twentieth-century Foundational Hand, developed by Edward Johnston having the tenth-century English Carolingian Minuscule as a model.

The third and last section focuses on the Uncial and Insular Half-uncial scripts observable in two of the best-known calligraphic pieces made by Tolkien, namely *Thror's Map* and the *Wilderland* map. The hypothesis that Tolkien was not only the pseudo-translator, but also the pseudo-scribe of the *Red Book of Westmarch* is put forward in that section.

The samples of Tolkien's handwriting that appear throughout this paper have been selected because they are representative of many characteristics that deserve highlighting, but they are not always calligraphic in nature, that is, they do not always show aesthetic preoccupation. It is also important to clarify that Tolkien did not actually produce ancient scripts in that he did not use actual Uncial, or Insular scripts, since these systems are no longer productive in the Primary World, each of them being restricted to their historical period. He did, however, use the *letterforms* that were characteristic of those scripts.

Given that Tolkien's works, literary or not, cannot be wholly extricated from their manuscript nature, and that many of his manuscripts were calligraphic, the underlying purpose of this article is to add to an incipient conversation about an important subject in Tolkienian studies and to suggest ways through which this conversation can be continued in future studies.

THE GENESIS OF A CALLIGRAPHIC SKILL

Tolkien's aptitude for calligraphy has been consistently traced back to his ancestors. His biographer Humphrey Carpenter, for instance, claims that John Suffield, Tolkien's grandfather, would sometimes

take a sheet of paper and a pen with an extra fine nib. Then he would draw a circle around a six-pence, and in this little space he would write in fine copperplate the words of the entire Lord's Prayer. His ancestors had been engravers and plate-makers, which was perhaps why he had inherited this skill [...].

(Carpenter 2002: 33)

A little further, he remarks:

[Tolkien's] mother's own handwriting was delightfully unconventional. Having acquired the skill of penmanship from her father, she chose an upright and elaborate style, ornamenting her capitals with delicate curls. Ronald soon began to practise a hand that was, though different from his mother's, to become equally elegant and idiosyncratic.

(Carpenter 2002: 38)

Mabel Tolkien's influence was acknowledged by Tolkien himself in one of his letters: 'She was also interested in etymology, and aroused my interest in this; and also in alphabets and handwriting' (Carpenter and Tolkien 2006: 377).

Accordingly, John and Priscilla Tolkien, in *The Tolkien Family Album* (1992: 17 and 22), also attribute their father's calligraphic skills to Mabel, when they say that her 'elegant and decorative handwriting [...] almost certainly influenced Ronald's interest in design and calligraphy later in his life', and that it was around 1900 that Tolkien started learning calligraphy.

Similar claims are made by other authors (Garth 2004: 13; Fimi 2010: 105; McIlwaine 2018: 186), who have possibly drawn from previous assertions, such as Hammond and Scull's in their *J.R.R. Tolkien: Artist and Illustrator* (2004: 201) and *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide: Reader's Guide* (2017b: 204–05). In the latter book, the authors affirm that 'Tolkien's own early handwriting resembled his mother's in its eccentricities of form'. That is suggested by Figure 1, for instance:¹

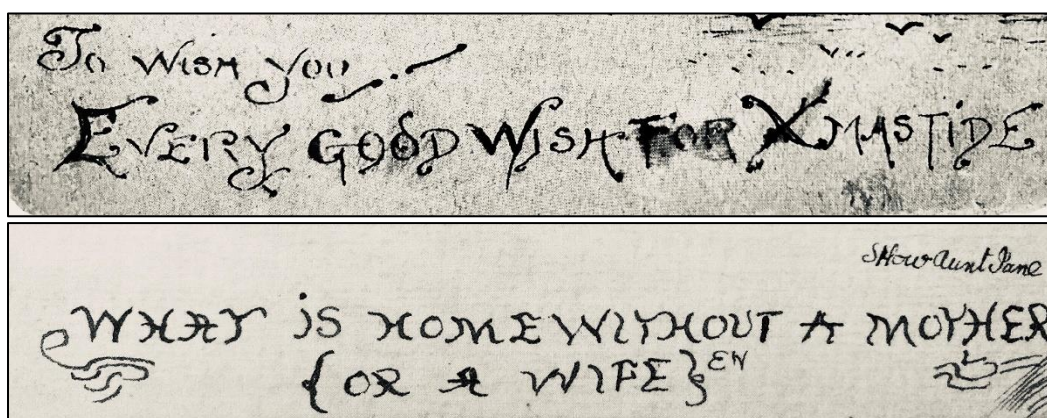


Figure 1. Detail of Mabel Tolkien's hand (above), dated 1892, and Ronald Tolkien's (below), dated 1904. Reproduced from McIlwaine 2018: 115 and 133, respectively.

The lower inscription, showing Tolkien's handwriting, comes from a 1904 drawing, and the letterforms made when he was twelve are indeed very similar to his mother's, in the upper inscription, particularly in the curly aspect of the strokes in most letters, notably *E* and *H*. This early piece, with undeniable hints of calligraphic experimentation, anticipates the accomplishment of his later works.

Apart from his ancestry, scholars also agree in considering Tolkien's profession as a catalyst that influenced his calligraphic skills. John R. Holmes, for instance, claims:

¹ The images have been cropped, and their color and size have been altered to highlight faint and small letters, while preserving their forms.

The philological nature of Tolkien's professional training as a medievalist, with its emphasis on the word, particularly its sound, can hide how very visual medieval studies were in Tolkien's lifetime. Tolkien certainly availed himself of the best editions, but he also knew Old English classics from their manuscripts (though he considered himself a dilettante at paleography), admiring them as artifacts and imitating those artifacts in his own calligraphy.

(Holmes 2006: 28)

Similarly, Lee (2014: 57–8) affirms that 'Tolkien was engaged with manuscript studies throughout his career', and he names manuscripts with which Tolkien would have had contact, either directly or through facsimiles and microfilm.

Lee draws from — and adds to — the entry 'Manuscripts, Medieval' in the *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia*, where Drout (2006: 404–05) concisely lists manuscripts that, to a greater or lesser extent, would have influenced Tolkien. Likewise, McIlwaine (2018: 186) stresses the importance of medieval manuscripts in Tolkien's formation, such as the Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS. 402, containing the Middle English *Ancrene Wisse*, and the Bodleian Library MS. Junius 11, containing the Old English *Exodus*. Hammond and Scull, in turn, remark that

[as] a philologist and scholar of Old and Middle English [...], Tolkien had many occasions to look at early manuscripts in the original; and he brought his own substantial visual imagination to the creation of letters as well as pictures.

(Hammond and Scull 2017b: 205)

Elsewhere, the authors claim that 'philologists must look at manuscripts, but not all learn to appreciate the beauty of the scripts and decoration they see, or themselves take up the pen' (Hammond and Scull 2004: 201).

In sum, the general message one gets from these accounts is that Tolkien precociously started his wanderings in the calligraphic realm, owing his skills to an

early exposition fostered by his mother. Later, his abilities were honed and informed by the academic dimension, because his profession involved close study of scripts and manuscripts. As Lee (2014: 57) explains, being ‘a medievalist of considerable note’, Tolkien was armed with a training in paleography and codicology.

The reference to paleography, defined by Roberts and Robinson (2020: 51) as the ‘study and interpretation of writing and writing systems’, invites further consideration, especially in view of Hammond and Scull’s claim that many philologists, despite close contact with manuscripts, never actually practice the scripts they study. Such an imbalance between the science and the art was also noticed by Albert Derolez:²

[...] Finally, we should consider *the unfortunate gap that exists between palaeography and calligraphy*. The last century witnessed an ever-increasing flood of superbly illustrated publications by modern practitioners of handwriting, starting with Edward Johnston [...]. *[The] mutual misunderstandings between palaeographers and calligraphers, between historians and practitioners, each with their own distinctive goals, are not likely to be easily removed*, despite the growing interest among some palaeographers in the work of calligraphers and vice versa.

(Derolez 2003: 26–7, emphasis added)

Even though Tolkien considered himself a ‘dilettante at paleography’, according to John R. Holmes’s quotation above, it is safe to assume that his profession, particularly his editorial projects, demanded more than a superficial acquaintance with that science.

² For a discussion of the scientific status of paleography, see Stokes 2014: 1, and Treharne 2011: 264–66.

In his edition of the Old English *Exodus*, for instance, Tolkien avails himself of some paleographical description: he dates the script, acknowledges the majuscules, ornamental initials, and large capitals, and even finds occasion to assess the quality of the scribe's hand: 'It is written with care — *as far as calligraphy goes*' and 'If [the scribe] frequently preserves (*in a fair hand*) the unintelligible, he was quite capable of doctoring' (Tolkien 1981: 33–4, emphasis added).

Similarly, in the 1929 article 'Ancrone Wisse and Hali Meiðhad', Tolkien claims that the manuscript is 'well known to be in a *fair hand* of excellent regularity and precision' (1929: 106, emphasis added). 'Fair hand' is also the chosen expression to qualify the scribe's handwriting in the 1947 article 'MS. Bodley 34: A re-collation of a collation', written in collaboration with Simonne d'Ardenne. Conforming to the general acerbity of the text, the authors claim that the 'scribe of the manuscript had a *fair hand*, but he (or she) was hasty, often absentminded (or bored), and sometimes a blunderer' (d'Ardenne and Tolkien 1947: 66, emphasis added).³

Joan Turville-Petre, who prepared Tolkien's *Exodus* for publication, remarks that she removed some paleographical description that was by then 'irrelevant or mistaken' (Tolkien 1981: 33–4). Still, the description that remained in the published work hints that Tolkien's paleographical skills were above the amateur level, even if not immune to the development of scholarship: allusions to the scribes' 'fair hand', 'excellent regularity', and 'precision' may seem exceedingly subjective in present-day paleography.

³ In Tolkien and Gordon's edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Gordon and Tolkien 1967: xi), the hand in the manuscript is described as 'small and sharp', but that would probably be Gordon's description, if we accept Shippey's view that the introductory section was Gordon's (Shippey 2014: 45). See also Celia Sisam's claim: 'I gathered from my father [Kenneth Sisam] that that edition [of *Sir Gawain*] was almost entirely the work of his co-editor E.V. Gordon, as Tolkien was so dilatory and didn't produce his share' (quoted in Bowers 2019: 54–5n).

Elaine Treharne, in her article ‘The Good, the Bad, the Ugly’, raises the issue of subjectivity in paleographical description, hardly desirable in scientific language. Her study focuses on the value judgments made by twentieth-century paleographers, especially a colleague of Tolkien’s at Oxford: Neil Ripley Ker.⁴

According to Treharne, Ker’s *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Old English* has several instances of ambiguous or unclear descriptive expressions, either condemnatory or complimentary: ‘the less good hand’; ‘a rough ugly hand’; ‘ill-formed’; ‘attractive’; ‘graceful’, etc. Treharne urges scholars, particularly paleographers, ‘to employ Ker’s *Catalogue* with a keen sense of the man in his time’ (2011: 281), and her portrayal of that scholar might be used for Tolkien:

[...] a scholar with a highly developed eye for detail, a sure and impressive visual perspective, a connoisseurship and erudition that very few can achieve today, and the time to examine manuscripts at first hand in a manner that the strictures of present-day academic life do not permit.

(Treharne 2011: 281–82)

Still, she claims, Ker’s deservedly praised qualities come along with ‘an unwavering aesthetic authority that is subjective’, and that paleography as a science requires a ‘clear, unambiguous set of definitions’ (Treharne 2011: 282).

As we have seen, Tolkien, who after all was Ker’s contemporary, also described the handwriting in the *Exodus* and the *Katherine Group* manuscripts in a subjective way, though not condemnatory. If this mode of expression is outdated in present-day paleography, from a calligraphic point of view it shows that Tolkien was clearly attentive to the aesthetics of scripts. Moreover, his own calligraphic skill — and presumably a keen eye to detect it in others — had, as of the publication of his 1929 essay, already ripened, as evidenced by early pieces among his series

⁴ On the relationship between Tolkien and Ker, see Hammond and Scull 2017b: 599.

of Father Christmas letters (see Figure 12). In other words, Tolkien's description of the medieval scribes' handwriting reveals the calligrapher behind the philologist. And he had himself a fair hand.

In agreement with W.H. Auden's opinion, we consider Tolkien's calligraphic work as highly accomplished,⁵ not least because his knowledge of paleography enabled him to understand and reproduce the ductus of scripts,⁶ to evaluate the suitability of a script for a given purpose, and consider the historical aspects involved in the choice, among other elements.

Therefore, since Tolkien was both a historian and practitioner, it is possible to affirm that the 'unfortunate gap' between paleography and calligraphy was negligible in Tolkien's case. The present study, though not strictly concerned with paleography, assumes that when Tolkien chose to write using a given script he did so consciously and informed by his academic expertise.

THE MEDIEVAL MODELS OF TOLKIEN'S LETTERFORMS

THE ANGLO-SAXON SQUARE MINUSCULE

Judith Priestman (1992: 26) remarks that, while at Oxford, Tolkien started learning scribal handwriting, and a sheet of minutes reproduced in her book (Figure 2), though hardly calligraphic, may be helpful if we are to look for the scripts that Tolkien favored in his artistic pieces. The manuscript is dated 1939, two years, therefore, after *The Hobbit* was first published, and is closely related to it in content.

⁵ Mark Atherton, on the other hand, considers that 'Tolkien was a *moderately gifted* cartographer, illustrator, painter and calligrapher' (2012: 108, emphasis added).

⁶ The *ductus* comprises 'all aspects of the writing of letter forms such as the angle at which the pen is held against the base line of script, the direction and tilt of the script, the number of strokes that make up a letter, and the order in which they are made' (Roberts and Robinson 2020: 52).

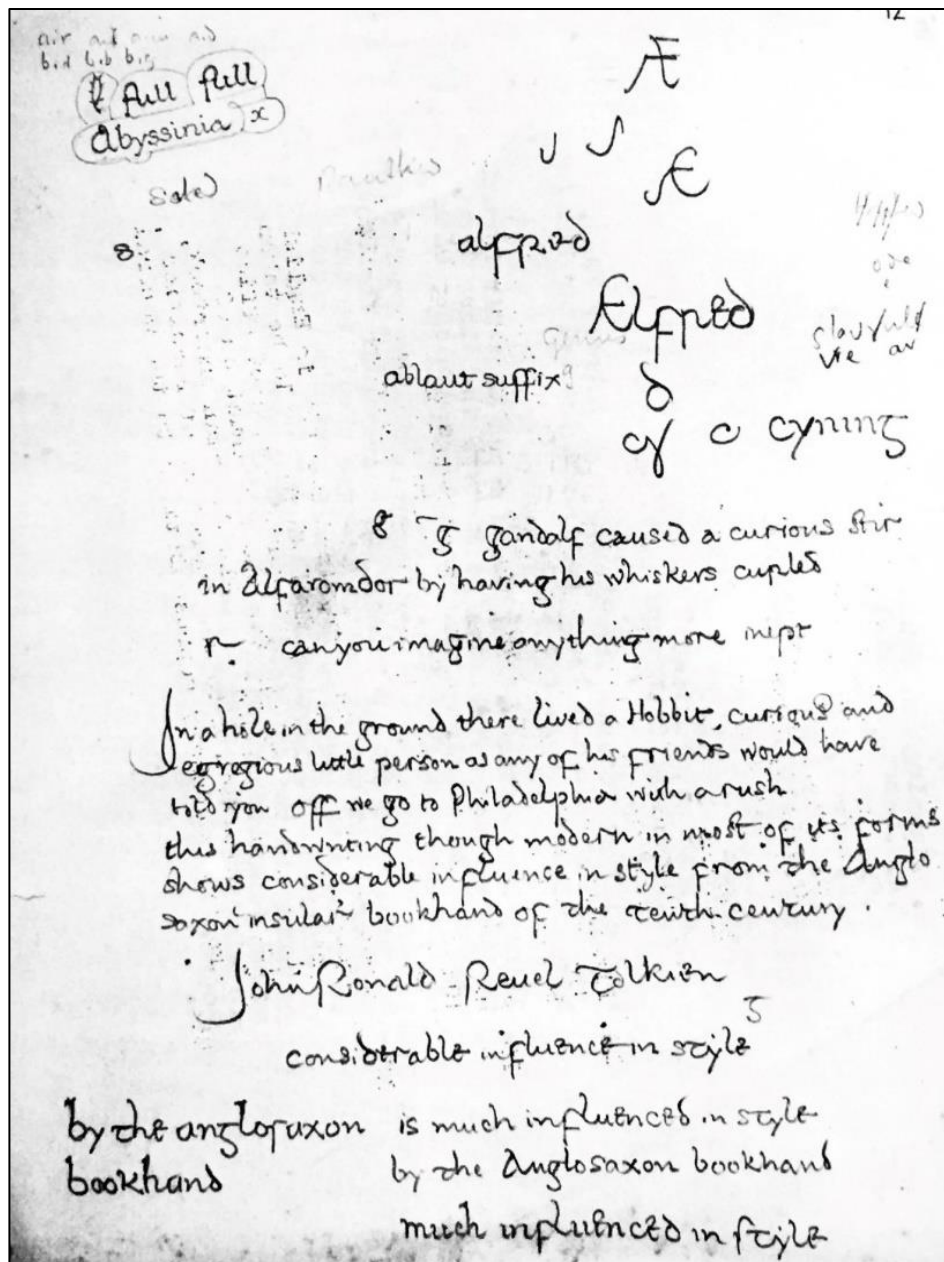


Figure 2. 1939 sheet of minutes written by Tolkien. Reproduced from Priestman 1992: 46.

Tolkien's humorous remarks will be forgone in this essay, as the focus is on the following lines: 'this handwriting though modern in most of its forms shows considerable influence in style from the Anglo-Saxon "insular" bookhand of the tenth century'.

The story of the Anglo-Saxon bookhand of the tenth century, or *Anglo-Saxon Square Minuscule*, must begin with the Insular system of scripts, as Tolkien suggests in the 1939 manuscript. Extremely complex in its hierarchy,⁷ this system of scripts comprises the majuscule alphabet introduced to Ireland by Christian missionaries in the fifth century (Bischoff 1990: 83), and which developed into a very rounded and prestigious script called *Insular Half-uncial*. In the seventh century, the Irish downgraded the Half-uncial into the *Insular Minuscule*, which was used for more general purposes alongside the Half-uncial for many centuries (Bischoff 1990: 84–8 and Brown 2012: 148–49).

Both the Insular Half-uncial and the Insular Minuscule were taken by missionaries from Ireland to the northern Anglo-Saxons in the seventh century, with the founding of the monastery of Lindisfarne. The Anglo-Saxons, in turn, 'further developed the range of scripts, under renewed influence from Rome via centers such as Canterbury and Wearmouth/Jarrow, adding capitals and uncials, perfecting half-uncials, and evolving several grades of minuscule' (Brown 2020: 206). The Insular system of scripts lasted up to the half of the ninth century, according to Roberts and Robinson (2020: 54).

This is the background of what Tolkien called 'the Anglo-Saxon "insular" bookhand' — or Square Minuscule — which was developed and used in England during the tenth century (Ganz 2012: 188). According to Dumville (1987: 148), 'the Square minuscule represents but a phase [...] in the complex development of the Insular script system [...]. [Its] sources lay within the Insular system and its

⁷ For a concise and enlightening overview of the whole hierarchy of the Insular system of scripts, see Brown 2012.

descendants themselves represent another phase in that continuum of script development'. On the other hand, Stokes (2014: 8) considers it incorrect to call *Insular* any of the post-ninth century scripts, because 'scribal practices in England diverged significantly after this date and so there was no consistent scribal practice across the Insular world'. However, according to him, the letterforms that are peculiar to the Insular scripts continued to be used even after that system collapsed, and therefore it is 'useful and consistent with observed phenomena' to refer to them as *Insular letterforms* (Stokes 2014: 8–9). This expression is adopted here.

It is not hard to see why Tolkien was interested in the Insular letterforms: they are employed in manuscripts where important texts he studied are preserved. Even though he might not have handled the artefacts themselves (cf. Lee 2009: 195 and Lee 2014: 58), he may have seen the facsimiles of the *Beowulf* manuscript⁸ and the *Exeter Book*,⁹ containing the poems *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*,¹⁰ and the riddles that inspired the ones in *The Hobbit*. Tolkien might also have had access to the actual *Exodus* manuscript, kept at Oxford, and Lee (2014: 58) puts forward the possibility that Tolkien would have seen the facsimile of the Lindisfarne Gospels,¹¹ with its majestic Insular Half-uncial and interlinear gloss in Insular Minuscule.

The Insular letterforms were, thus, close to Tolkien's occupation as a philologist, and the doodles in the 1939 manuscript show some peculiarly Insular features and letterforms that Tolkien was trying to imitate, some of which will be singled out now.

On the bottom left side of the manuscript, it is possible to spot one of these characteristics, namely the triangular serif in the *l* of *Anglosaxon*, and the *b* and *h* of *bookhand* (Figure 3):

⁸ London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A.xv.

⁹ Exeter Cathedral Library, 3501.

¹⁰ See Shippey 2014: 47.

¹¹ London, British Library, Cotton Nero D.iv.

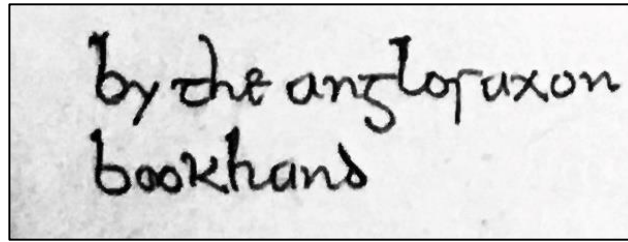


Figure 3. Detail of the 1939 sheet of minutes showing insular letterforms.

By including such a serif, Tolkien was reproducing what Bischoff (1990: 86) called the ‘most noticeable stylistic peculiarity of almost all Insular scripts, whether Half-uncial or minuscule’. Likewise, Morison (1972: 147) claims that the wedged serif ‘is a calligraphical phenomenon, so curious and so persistent and so geographically limited in its use that it deserves investigation for these reasons alone’.

Also noticeable in Figure 3 is the letter *s* in *Anglosaxon*, diving deep under the base line. This form is called by Lockett (2002: 164) “low *s*” and, according to her, it is conspicuous in the *Exodus* manuscript because of its consistent use, that is, the scribe did not employ any variation of the letter. In other manuscripts, the low form of letter *s* coexisted with other ones, such as the “long *s*”, which was often ligatured with the following letter, as it happens in the *Exeter Book* (Conner 2015: 309). Tolkien also imitated the long *s* in the last line of the 1939 manuscript, in the word *style* (Figure 4):

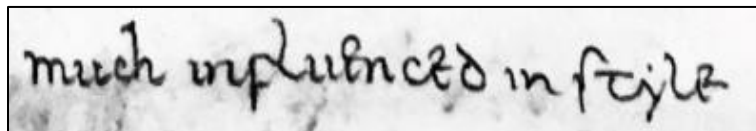


Figure 4. Detail of the 1939 sheet of minutes showing the “long *s*” and “tall *e*”.

The word *influenced* in Figure 4 also brings Tolkien's reproduction of the “tall *e*”, which raised above the headline when ligatured with the following letter (Dumville 1987: 154). This letterform is very prominent in the *Exeter Book* codex and the

Exodus manuscript. The word *style*, apart from the long *s*, also shows letter *t* with a curved shaft, a feature of Insular scripts since their beginning with the Irish Half-uncial, and a feature also of the English Caroline Minuscule which will be discussed later. Tolkien used this form of *t* very frequently, including in his famous signature.

From the Insular Minuscule inventory Tolkien also picked letter *r* which, just like the low *s*, descends below the baseline. It can be seen in the king's name *Ælfred*, and slightly modernized in *alfred* (Figure 5):

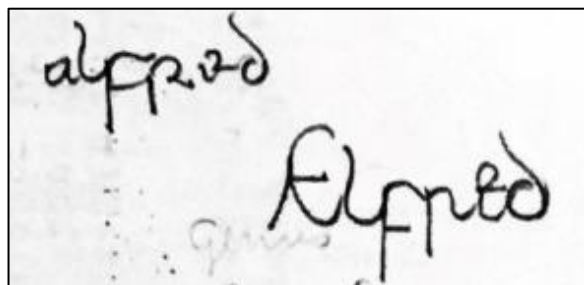


Figure 5. Detail of the 1939 sheet of minutes, showing the Insular Minuscule form of *r*.

The most visually interesting letter that Tolkien imitated in the 1939 manuscript is possibly the flat-topped *g* (i.e., \mathfrak{g}), visible in the word *Anglosaxon* in Figure 3. As it happened with *t*, the Insular Half-uncial \mathfrak{g} was a consolidation of the Roman Later Half-uncial form, a script that ‘rose to be a bookhand of late antiquity and of the early middle-ages’ (Bischoff 1990: 76). The flat-topped \mathfrak{g} , widespread among the Insular scripts, survived in the Anglo-Saxon Square Minuscule present in the *Exeter Book* and the *Exodus* manuscript.

Apart from the example in Figure 3, Tolkien reproduced this form of *g* in the Old English word *cyning* (Figure 6), and just below his signature, isolated (see Figure 2).

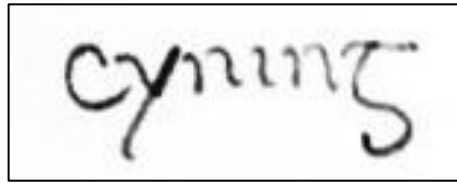


Figure 6. The flat-topped \bar{g} .

Most curious, however, is the experimentation reproduced in Figure 7. Tolkien seemed interested in the forms that letter *g* could assume, and four distinct ones are arguably found in the 1939 manuscript.

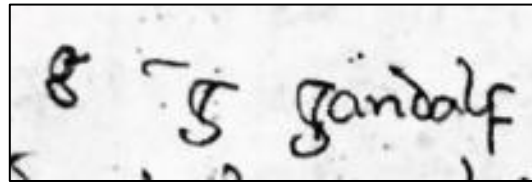


Figure 7. Tolkien's experimentation with letter *g*.

On the left, an 8-shaped *g*, similar in form to a Protogothic one (see Derolez 2003: 61); next to it, the horizontal stroke of the Insular \bar{g} , followed by a \bar{g} with the lobe closed to the left and an open bow, like the one in *Gandalf*. The evolution of Half-uncial (not directly from the *Insular* Half-uncial) \bar{g} into Carolingian *g*, which is itself the source of our modern form of lowercase *g*, is explained by Derolez:

The only letter in the Carolingian alphabet for which a definitively Precarolingian form was consciously retained is **g**: in early medieval scripts in general (with the exception of Insular script) [...] the custom had been introduced of extending the upper horizontal stroke of Half-uncial **g** (which itself was a consolidation of the Roman Cursive Minuscule one) [...] with a bow bending downward towards the left, rejoining the stem and forming a lobe.

(Derolez 2003: 50)

This was not the first time Tolkien showed his paleographical awareness by using the Insular *ȝ* in connection with Old English. As is well known, Tolkien worked as a lexicographer at the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) soon after the First World War, and because of his knowledge of Germanic languages, he was allocated to Henry Bradley's team, who were drafting the dictionary entries for letter *W* (Gilliver et al. 2009: 7). One of the words assigned to Tolkien was *wain*.

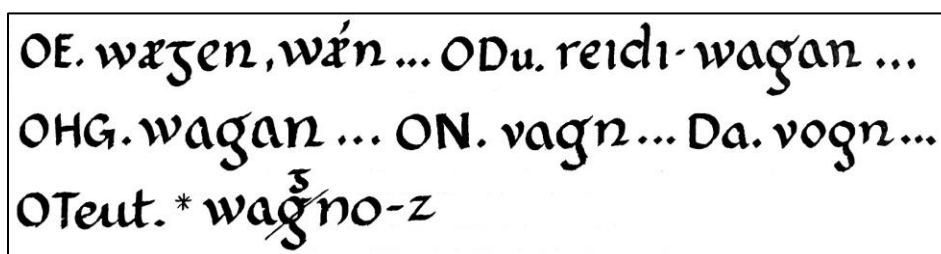


Figure 8. *ȝ* and *g* glyphs Tolkien used in his dictionary slip for *wain*. Reconceptualized by the author of this article after the original slip.

Figure 8 shows a representation of the different glyphs Tolkien used in the dictionary slip.¹² Notice the use of the flat-topped *ȝ* for Old English (OE) *wæȝen*, and the more common *g*, with a closed lobe and open bow, for other Germanic languages. Tolkien also corrected the Old Teutonic asterisk word **wagno-z*, striking out the ordinary *g* and writing the Insular *ȝ* above it. The distinction between *ȝ* and *g* shown in the handwritten dictionary slip was typographically kept in the first printed edition of the OED (see the reproduction in Gilliver et al. 2009: 17). In the current, updated online version of the dictionary, however, this distinction is no longer present.

¹² The original slip is reproduced in Gilliver et al. 2009: 16.

Tolkien's attention to Insular letterforms started even before his university years at Oxford. A 1910 impressive drawing of the ruins at Whitby Abbey bears a title whose letterforms are redolent of insularity (Figure 9), visible in the *t* with its characteristic curved shaft and, notably, the hints of triangularity in the terminals of *b*. Tolkien was using a thin, rather than broad nib.



Figure 9. Title piece of a 1910 drawing. Reproduced from Hammond and Scull 2004: 15.

Another drawing, dated August 1914, when Tolkien was already reading English at Oxford, shows his view of the Lion Rock, in Cornwall. *Caerthilian* in the title (Figure 10) displays unmistakable Insularity in many of its letterforms:¹³

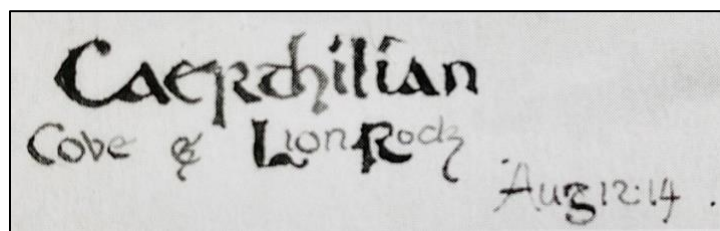


Figure 10. Title piece of a 1914 drawing. Reproduced from Hammond and Scull 2004: 24.

¹³ Hammond and Scull (2004: 25) remark that the Caerthilian Cove is not visible in the drawing and, therefore, the title is 'only half correct'.

Worthy of note in this title is letter *e*, connected to the low *r*, which was modernized, showing a prominent leg to the right; the *t* with a curved shaft, and the *ȝ* in *Auȝ*. Tolkien would sometimes taper curved strokes into a “spike”, such as he did in the uppercase *C* of *Caerthilian*. This is even more visible in a drawing Tolkien made the year before, 1913, on the remarkable cover of the “Exeter College Smoker” program (Figure 11), which also displays several Insular letterforms.

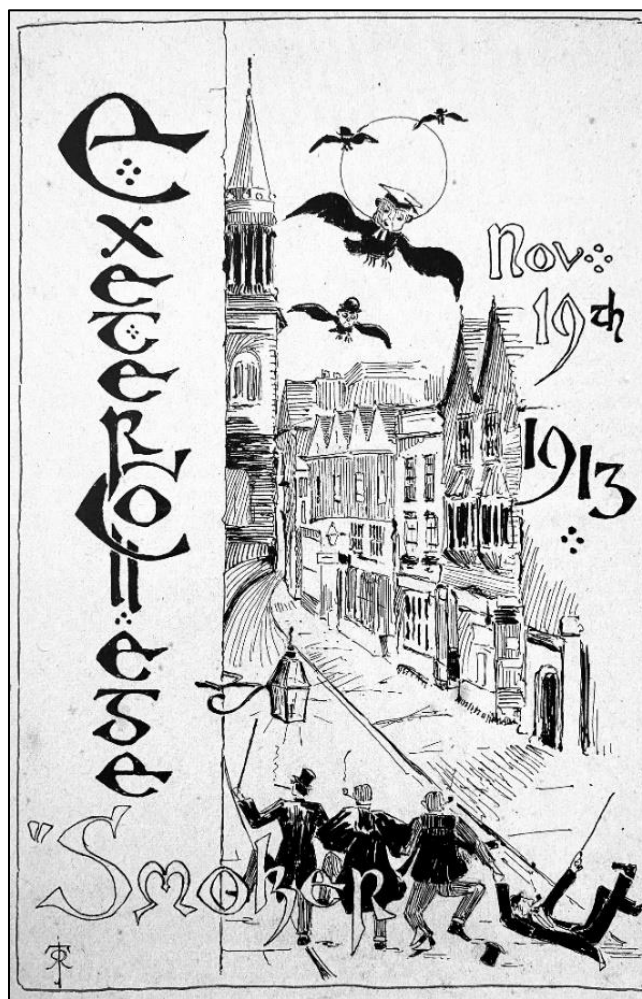


Figure 11. Exeter College “Smoker” program cover.
Reproduced from McIlwaine 2018: 143.

This pointy appearance can be found in very skillful later pieces, namely the 1926 and 1927 envelopes containing Father Christmas's letters (Tolkien 2012: 27 and 31), and the drawing Tolkien made for *Roverandom*, titled *The White Dragon Pursues Roverandom & The Moondog*, dated September 1927, according to Hammond and Scull (2017a: 151). The authors also affirm elsewhere (2004: 50) that Tolkien was 'extraordinarily productive' in 1927 and 1928, and that his skill had also increased.

While the *T* and the tall *e* in *Tolkiens*, in the 1927 envelope (Figure 12), and the *e* in *England* cannot hide their Insular overtones, such insularity is much more conspicuous in the *Roverandom* drawing (Figure 13), especially, once again, due to the exotic form of letter *ȝ*, but also the tall *e* and low *r*, not to mention *d* with its diagonal back.



Figure 12. Detail of the 1927 envelope from Father Christmas.
Reproduced from Tolkien 2012: 31.

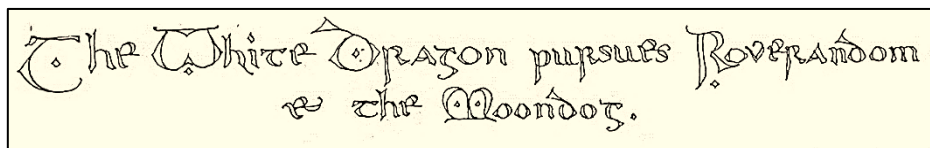


Figure 13. Title piece of a *Roverandom* drawing made in September 1927.
Reproduced from Hammond and Scull 2004: 81.

A few other pieces from 1927 and 1928 are also worthy of mention: two of them, dated September 1927, are *Glórund Sets Forth to Seek Túrin* and *Hringboga heorte gefysed*, the latter title reproduced in Figure 14. It was taken from line 2561 of *Beowulf*, as Christopher Tolkien remarks in the preface to the translation made by his father, who rendered the words as ‘the heart of the coiling beast stirred’ (Tolkien 2014: xiv). John R. Holmes asserts that both images ‘are lettered in a hand worthy of an eighth-century Mercian scribe’, and that it clearly is ‘a hand in love with the shape of the letter, as a thing of beauty apart from its role as a vehicle of meaning’ (Holmes 2006: 28). That letterforms could convey to Tolkien both beauty and meaning seems very likely, as if he somehow thought that Old English could be expressed more “genuinely” if written with Insular letterforms.

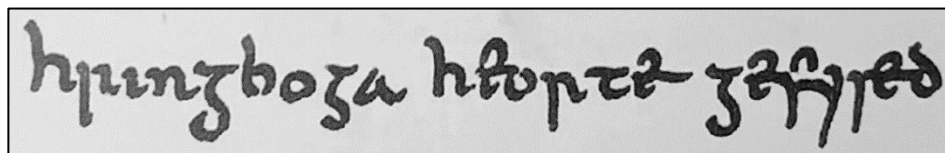


Figure 14. *Hringboga heorte gefysed*. Reproduced from McIlwaine 2018: 271.

Two other title pieces in Old English (Figure 15) are contemporary and, in light of the dating ‘Vivas July 1928’, Hammond and Scull (2004: 67) entertain the possibility that Tolkien might have been drawing *during* the viva voce examinations. Both drawings represent Grendel’s mere, and Tolkien gave them the title *wudu wyrtrum faest*, words taken from line 1364 of *Beowulf*, translated as ‘a wood clinging by its roots’ (Tolkien 2014: xiv). Neither is calligraphically executed, but they indicate that, in the examination context in which they were possibly made, Tolkien might have been pondering again about the extra layer of historical meaning that Insular letterforms could add to an Old English sentence, and how this effect contrasted with an inscription using everyday handwriting.

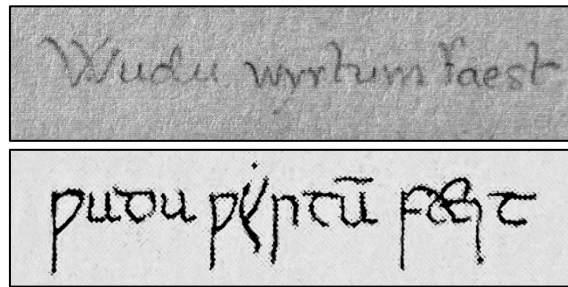


Figure 15. *Wudu Wyrthum Faest*.
Reproduced from McIlwaine 2018:
269 (above) and Hammond and Scull
2004: 55 (below).

Particularly noticeable in the lower title is the use of the rune wynn (*ƿ*), a letter added to the Anglo-Saxon inventory to represent the sound /w/. Other typically Insular letterforms include *d*, low *f*, *r* and *s*, the *æ* ligature, and *t*.

Figure 16 shows an early piece, but no earlier than 1924, in which we find Tolkien doodling again, writing out fragments of *Beowulf* and *The Wanderer*, a poem from the Old English *Exeter Book* which he knew well (see Lee 2009). He was using a script aptly called *Anglo-Saxon book-hand* by the editors (Gilson et al. 2004: 118).

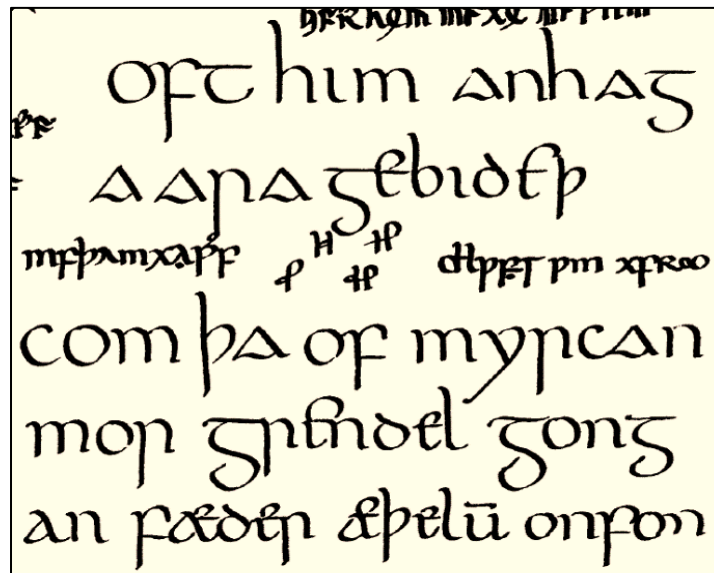


Figure 16. Tolkien's inscription with fragments from *Beowulf* and *The Wanderer*. Reproduced from Gilson et al 2004: 116.

In regard to the main script, one can see that Anglo-Saxon Insular letterforms abound, including the runic letter thorn (*þ*) which, like wynn (*ƿ*), was added to the vernacular alphabet in England (Bischoff 1990: 91). Throughout the inscription (except for the word *an* in the last line), the atypical letter *A* attracts our attention because of its angle and its wavy crossbar, touching the baseline. Tolkien used similar forms of *A* — but with rounded rather than wavy crossbars — as early as 1912 (Figure 17), and again in 1914, in the *Caerthilian* inscription (see Figure 10), not to mention a 1916-17 drawing (Figure 17) and the *Roverandom* one (see Figure 13). This shape of *A* appears in the very first letter from Father Christmas (1920), and in the 1925, 1932, 1933 and 1943 letters.

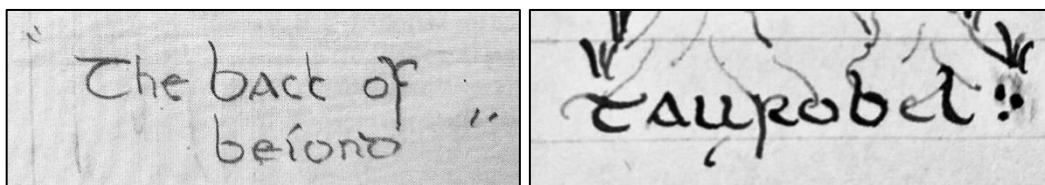


Figure 17. Inscriptions showing Insular letterforms from 1912 (left) and 1916-17 (right). Notice especially letter *A*. Reproduced from McIlwaine 2018: 41 and 213, respectively.

The most remarkable thing about this *A* with the unusual, rounded crossbar is its striking similarity to the one that first appeared in a successful typeface created in Ireland in 1857: the Newman Irish Type (see Figure 18). The typeface, formerly called ‘Keating Society type’, was renamed by Dermot McGuinne (2010: 120) after its commissioner, the then rector of the Catholic University of Ireland, John Henry Newman. The designer of the Newman Type was George Petrie, who was, back then, already well known for his other Gaelic typefaces, all of which ultimately derived from the Irish Insular scripts.¹⁴

¹⁴ Up until the 1960s, texts in the Irish language were printed using distinct Gaelic typefaces (McGuinne 2010: 2).

As McGuinne recounts (2010: 120–21), John Edward Pigott, Newman's associate, felt the need of a new Gaelic typeface that could be used in a potential press of the Catholic University of Ireland. The only Gaelic typeface he found suitable was one that George Petrie had designed years before, but which was the property of the publisher to Trinity College Dublin, a Protestant university, and only the printing office of the TCD had the permission to use it. In other words, the Catholic university commissioned a new typeface from Petrie because it could not use the typeface of the Protestant university. The Newman Type, however, was different from the ones previously created by Petrie because it was based on the Irish Insular *Minuscule*, and not on the Irish Insular *Half-uncial*, a majuscule.

It is hard to say whether Tolkien used that form of *A* because of the Newman Typeface, but he did own at least one book that employs it throughout: the 1904 *Irish-English Dictionary*, edited by Patrick Dinneen. A photograph of Tolkien's copy of this dictionary can be seen in McIlwaine 2018: 242. Phelpstead (2011: 27, quoted in Hammond and Scull 2017b: 619) claims that Tolkien attempted to learn Irish with vigor and determination, and it is possible that he had had contact with Gaelic typefaces during his undergraduate years, accounting for the employment of such a letterform in 1912 — many of Tolkien's books on Celtic languages were bought only in the 1920s (Hammond and Scull 2017b: 1062). In a draft to a 1967 letter to Mr. Rang (Carpenter and Tolkien 2006: 385), Tolkien famously confesses he studied Irish at various times with little success and says he had recently become aware of the Irish word *Nasc* when looking for something in a Gaelic dictionary. The meanings he gives for *Nasc* in that letter (*ring, bond, obligation*) are all in Dinneen's dictionary. Figure 18 shows the title piece of the dictionary in Irish script and language, and the entry for *Nasc* which Tolkien possibly consulted. Notice, in the title piece, the form of *A* with its wavy crossbar, similar to the one in Figure 16, and the rounded crossbar of the Newman type *a* in the entry:

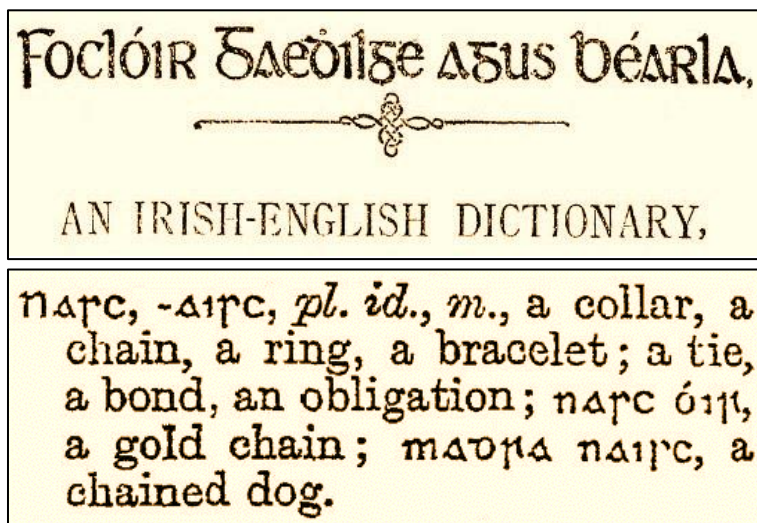


Figure 18. Dinneen's dictionary. Notice the wavy crossbar in A in the title piece and the distinct Newman type lowercase a in the dictionary entry.

It is tempting, though evidence is lacking, to think that his encounter with these distinct typefaces had happened even before, as a child in the community of the Birmingham Oratory, also established by John Henry Newman, in 1849, and which Tolkien frequented. John Garth described it as a 'priestly community with a library stocked for lifelong learning' (2020: 147). Fr. Francis Morgan, tutor of the Tolkien brothers, had been friends with Newman, whose 'spirit still presided over the high-ceilinged rooms of the Oratory House' (Carpenter 2002: 44). Future studies may elucidate whether there is further evidence to substantiate any of these theories.

Our last example of Insular letterforms is a later calligraphic piece. In the 1950s, Tolkien produced translations of Catholic prayers into Elvish, which were published and commented in detail by Hostetter, Smith and Wynne (2002). The final versions of the *Átaremma* (*Pater Noster*) and of *Aia Maríá* (*Ave Maria*) were calligraphically rendered by Tolkien on a personalized postcard (Figure 19):

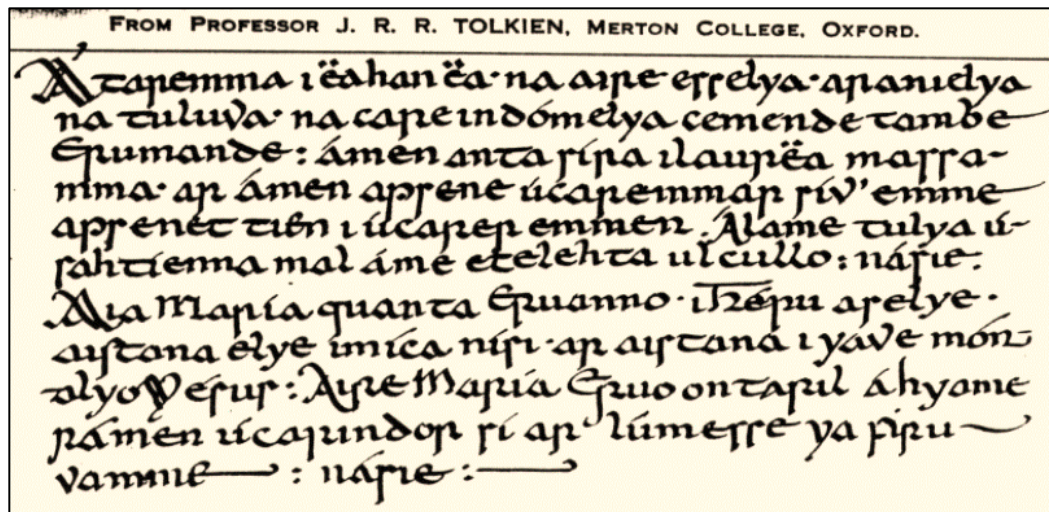


Figure 19. Tolkien's translation of the *Pater Noster* and the *Ave Maria* into Quenya. Reproduced from Hostetter et al. 2002: 4.

The editors remark that the translations 'are fair copies, written very carefully [...] with a nib pen in a type of simplified blackletter with archaic letter-forms for lowercase *r* and *s*' (Hostetter et al. 2002: 5). While the angular, broken aspect of letter *M* in *Maria* (lines 7 and 9) is redolent of blackletter script — broadly understood here as "gothic" —, it is an isolated letter which seems to disagree with the rest of the manuscript, whose aspect is more rounded than it would be if it had been entirely written in angular blackletter. Some letterforms are Insular, including the lowercase *r* and *s* singled out by the editors. Insofar as the low *r* is concerned, Tolkien was inconsistent: in the words *Átaremme* (line 1) and *María* (line 7), for instance, he used the "truly" archaic form of it. A modernized form, with a pronounced leg to the right, is found in most of the manuscript, such as in *aire* (line 1) and *care* (line 2). Other letters of arguably Insular lineage are *a*, *d*, *e*, *f*, *l* and *t*.

These are but some of the calligraphic works in which Tolkien paid tribute to the heritage of Insular scripts. Others can be found in Tolkien's *Letters from Father Christmas*, including the already mentioned 1932 letter, called by Hammond and Scull (2004: 71) the 'most beautiful and interesting art' of the series, with

‘brightly coloured and more elaborate lettering’. Early drawings also display Insular letterforms, such as the one made at Phoenix Farm in Gedling, perhaps in 1913, reproduced in McIlwaine 2018: 202. An inscription in *Parma Eldalamberon XVI* (Gilson et al. 2006: 38) shows Latin fragments of the *Aeneid* written in a rounded script of which the tall *e* is curiously the only Insular letter.

It must be pointed out that, while the Insular letterforms were frequently used by Tolkien, he also availed himself of other scripts, often in combination. The most important one is perhaps the formal hand put forward by the scribe Edward Johnston, which will be considered in the following section.

THE CAROLINGIAN MINUSCULE AND THE FOUNDATIONAL HAND

Hammond and Scull (2004: 201) were, as customary, very enlightening in saying that Tolkien learned calligraphy

from Edward Johnston’s indispensable manual *Writing & Illuminating, & Lettering*, first published in 1906. No doubt it was Johnston’s “foundational hand”, based on tenth- and eleventh-century models, that was the basis for the formal script Tolkien sometimes used in writing out his fiction.

In their *Reader’s Guide*, the authors complement that piece of information claiming that Tolkien might also have learned ‘by one of the other writing manuals that appeared from Johnston or his students and imitators’ (Hammond and Scull 2017b: 205). Similar claims acknowledging Johnston’s influence — possibly or explicitly derived from Hammond and Scull’s — can be found in Holmes (2006: 28), Fimi (2010: 105), and Garth (2006: 36). In *Tolkien and the Great War*, John Garth (2004: 13) says that for ‘formal purposes, Tolkien came to favour a script based on the medieval “foundational hand”’, a minor inaccuracy in an otherwise impeccable

book, since the Foundational Hand itself is not medieval, although based on a medieval script.

Edward Johnston (Uruguay, 1872 – England, 1944), called by Stanley Morison (1972: 47) ‘the greatest scribe of our time’, was the most important figure of the calligraphic revival that took place in the twentieth century. According to Paul Freeman (1989: xiii), Johnston ‘reestablished calligraphy as a viable endeavor, returning it to its highest form, the manuscript book. Going to the archives of London’s libraries and museums, he sought the historic manuscripts necessary as exemplars’, modernizing the scripts he observed and adopting them for practical use. As is widely known, Edward Johnston was very much informed by the Arts and Crafts movement, whose leading figure had been William Morris.¹⁵ Morris himself was interested in medieval manuscripts, having studied them at the Bodleian Library and at the British Museum (Hammond and Scull 2017b: 797). It was his former secretary, Sidney Cockerell, who introduced Edward Johnston to a tenth-century manuscript known as the *Ramsey Psalter*¹⁶ (Harris 1995: 43), and the English Carolingian minuscule script of that psalter was the main one that inspired Johnston to devise his Foundational Hand.

According to Rebecca Rushforth (2012: 197), the Carolingian (or Caroline, or Carlovingian) Minuscule script, so called because of its association with the court of Charlemagne, was ‘developed in Francia in the late eighth and ninth centuries’, and its ‘clarity and relative simplicity [...] led to its rapid adoption across a wide area of Continental Europe’, but its implementation in England was relatively slower. Rushforth claims that during Alfred the Great’s reign, despite the opportunity to introduce the Carolingian Minuscule to the country, they instead revived the Insular script, which led to the creation of the Square Minuscule, already

¹⁵ On William Morris and his influence on Tolkien, see, for instance, Hammond and Scull 2017b: 796–803; Garth 2020: 177–79 and 188, and McNelis 2006.

¹⁶ London, British Library, Harley MS. 2904.

discussed in this work. The adoption of Carolingian minuscule script in England happened in the middle of the tenth century, connected with the revival of monasticism in the country (Rushforth 2012: 198).

The script as it was practiced in England was not immune to the influence of Insular letterforms: Michelle P. Brown (2020: 213) affirms that, in England, the Carolingian minuscule assumed a rounded style probably due to the Insular Half-uncial influence.¹⁷ Both the Square and Carolingian minuscules were used side by side in England, the former for vernacular writing, the latter for texts in Latin, but the Carolingian Minuscule eventually supplanted the autochthonous script by the end of the tenth century (Rushforth 2012: 203).

The Carolingian script, which eventually evolved into the Gothic systems after a Protogothic stage, was rediscovered by the Italian Humanists, and is the ultimate source of our present-day lowercase letters used in print (Derolez 2003: 47). This helps explain why Edward Johnston praised the qualities of that script in his 1906 book *Writing & Illuminating, & Lettering*.

Johnston's objective was to teach the reader how to acquire a "formal hand" using letters that could achieve such qualities as *legibility*, *beauty*, and *character*. 'The problem before us', he writes in the preface, 'is fairly simple — *To make good letters and to arrange them well*' (1917: xix, emphasis by the author). Johnston thoroughly explains the methods to achieve that, and among his most important points is a discussion on the advantage of holding the pen 'slanted away from the right shoulder', hence the name *Slanted-pen* or *Tilted* writing (1917: 43), which produced letters of great strength and legibility. Further on in his book, Johnston (1917: 305) claims that Carolingian manuscripts are 'an excellent model for a free "formal hand"', and he selects four manuscripts, spanning from the ninth to the

¹⁷ See also Bishop 1971: xii–xiii and xxi–xxiv.

twelfth century, which could serve as models for slanted-pen small-letters.¹⁸ The fourth example Johnston provided, a twelfth-century Italian homiliary, is even described by him as 'the most perfect and satisfactory penmanship which I have seen' (Johnston 1917: 418).¹⁹ However, it is the tenth-century manuscript, the *Ramsey Psalter*, that the calligrapher singles out as the best example to observe the effects of the slanted-pen, and he describes that particular script as an 'almost perfect model for a modern formal hand' (Johnston 1917: 416).

The stability of the Carolingian script of the *Ramsey Psalter* through the centuries was, for him, compatible with the penman's intention of making the work readable by selecting and copying 'the simple forms which have remained essentially the same, leaving the complex forms which have passed out of use' (Johnston 1917: 323). In other words, most letterforms of that script were excellent in that they were still recognizable, widely used, and, therefore, permanent. The complex forms that should be replaced included the long *s* and the *t* with a curved shaft, Carolingian letterforms similar in appearance to the Insular ones (see Figure 4). The formal Foundational Hand, then, was a very legible alphabet devised to be written with a slanted, broad-nib pen. In 1909, in partnership with his student Eric Gill, who was to become a well-known typographer,²⁰ Edward Johnston launched *Manuscript & Inscription Letters*, with sixteen plates intended as a supplement to *Writing & Illuminating, & Lettering*. In Plate n.6, he systematized the slanted-pen small letters of his Foundational Hand, once again explicitly drawing inspiration from Harley MS. 2904, the *Ramsey Psalter*, slightly modifying some features of the original letters, and modernizing the outdated ones (Figure 20):

¹⁸ All of them kept in London, at the British Library, respectively under the following shelfmarks: Harley MS. 2790; Harley MS. 2904; Stowe Charter 38, and Harley MS. 7183.

¹⁹ Harris (1995: 42) incorrectly attributes this description to the *Ramsey Psalter*. Furthermore, on the *Detailed record for Harley 7183* (Catalogue of Illuminated Manuscripts) of the British Library website, the script of that Italian manuscript is given as Protogothic, rather than Carolingian.

²⁰ Incidentally, the dust-jacket of the first edition of *The Lord of the Rings* was printed in Perpetua (Hammond and Scull 2015: 217), a typeface designed by Eric Gill.

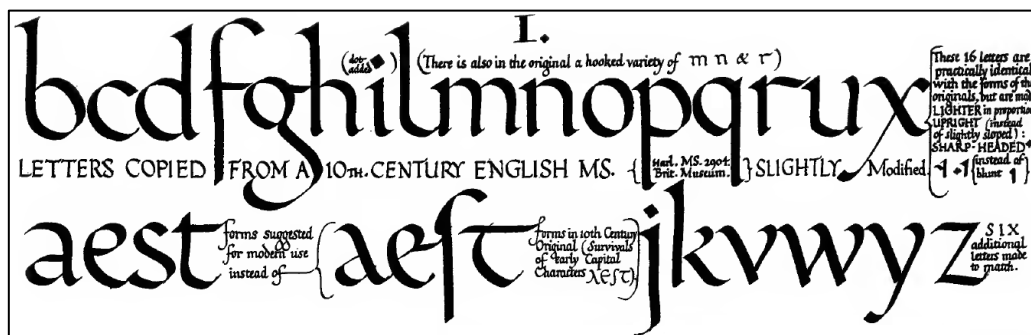


Figure 20. Edward Johnston's small-letter "Foundational Hand".
Reproduced from Gill and Johnston 1909: Plate 6.

According to Hammond and Scull's quotation in the beginning of this section, this was the script upon which Tolkien based the formal hand he used in some manuscripts of his own fiction. It will be seen in the examples that, while Tolkien did produce the very legible effect of the Foundational Hand, he was not at all fettered by its principles. Indeed, Johnston encourages students to search for good models and look at them critically: 'all *Rules* must give way to Truth and Freedom' (Edward Johnston, quoted in Gill and Johnston 1909: 1). The first example (Figure 21) is a manuscript dated 1930–37 titled *Of Beren and Lúthien*. Tolkien's script does not refer back to Johnston's Foundational Hand in all its forms: the sharp serifs are observed in very few words (e.g. *the tales*, line 1 and *days*, line 2) and some letters (notably letter *o*) were written with unconnected strokes, evidencing speed in writing. Other letterforms are actually at odds with Johnston's Foundational Hand, such as the single-story lowercase *a*, letter *k* (e.g. *darkness*, line 2), and the rounded letter *n*, with its dash of insularity.

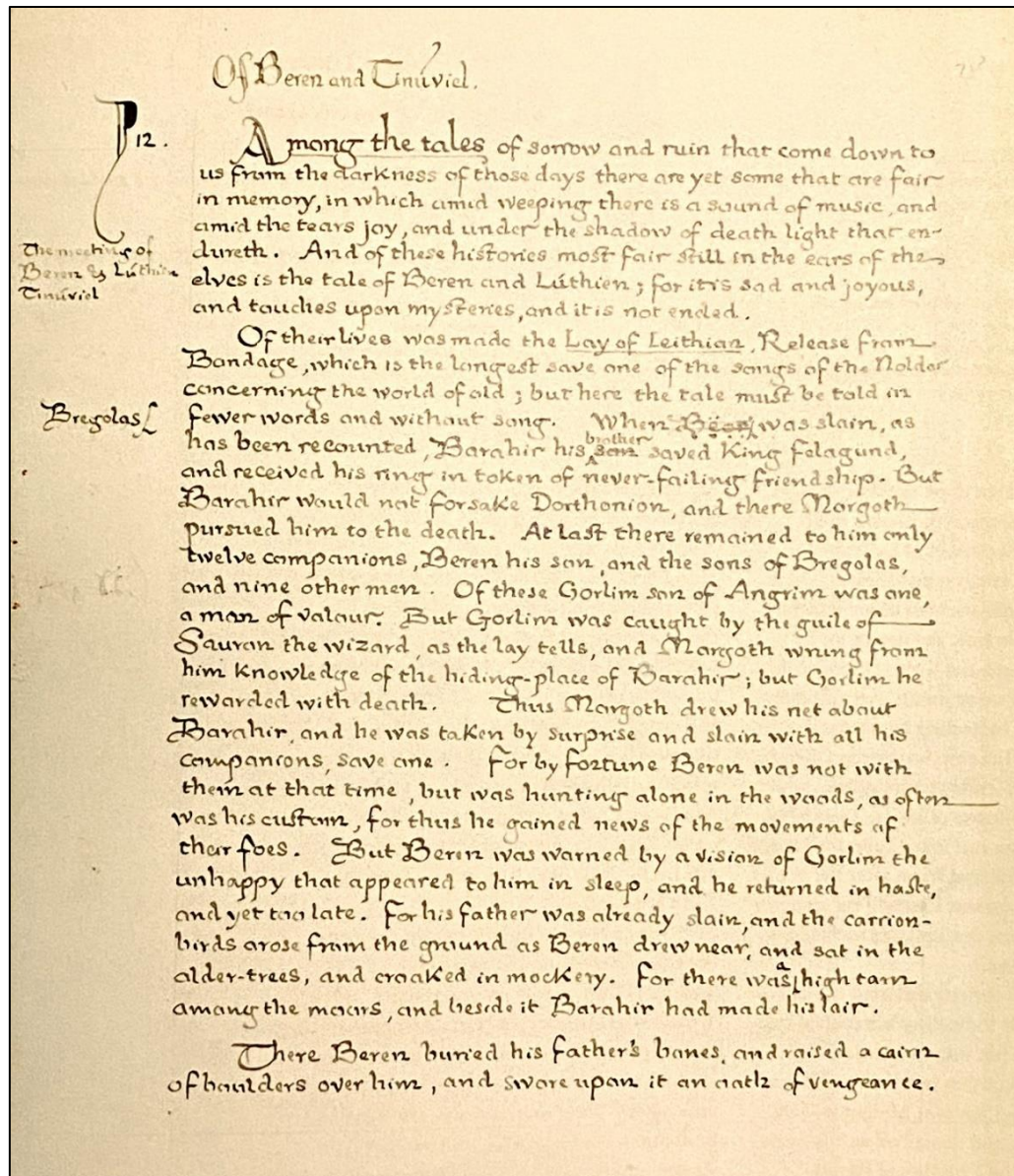


Figure 21. *Of Beren and Lúthien*. Reproduced from Mellwaine 2018: 235.

Still, the qualities of good lettering (*readableness*, *beauty*, and *character*) constantly promoted by Johnston are visible in the general aspect of the manuscript.²¹ Specifically, Tolkien seemed to be very much observant of the “Beauty of Arrangement”, insofar as his lettering is well-disposed in the available space of the page (Johnston 1917: 329). In Johnston’s nomenclature (1917: 262–63), the mode of arrangement chosen was the “Massed Writing”, because the page is set close, ‘so that the letters support and enforce one another’. The calligrapher also points out that the “Massed Writing” mode saves time and space, being suited for long inscriptions; its lines are ‘generally of equal length, or if some fall short, end-fillings may be used’.

One kind of end-filling suggested by Johnston (1917: 205–06) is the elongated final strokes in the last letter of the last word in shorter lines (i.e., line-finishings). Tolkien used this technique abundantly in several manuscripts, including the one at stake. Letter *f* in line 18, for instance, was elongated to keep the overall uniformity of the right margin. The *n* in line 24 disagrees with this rational exaggeration, though it is by no means damaging to the beauty of the work.

Finally, there are three instances of scribal correction in this manuscript. Johnston (1917: 344) defends ‘simple, unostentatious correction’ such as the traditional caret, instead of erasures. The word *Bëor* (line 11) is expuncted and struck out, while the caret mark refers the reader to the margin, where *Bregolas* is added. Less discreetly, in line 12 Tolkien did not expunct the word *son*, but simply struck it out, adding *brother* above. In line 30, there is no correction, only the addition of the caret and the definite article above it. Because these correction techniques are common in medieval manuscripts and not something that Johnston

²¹ One exception to the legibility of Tolkien’s script is his tendency to write *a* and *o* very similarly, while Johnston’s principle (1917: 239) defends the *distinctiveness* of each letter.

himself came up with (see Wakelin 2014), it is not possible to affirm that Tolkien, in these instances, had his handbook in mind.²²

The concept of “Massed Writing” in Johnston’s theory was linked to another one, the “Fine Writing” (1917: 262–63), used for shorter inscriptions, being more spaced, producing unequal, elegant lines. Tolkien also resorted to that mode, as seen in Figure 22, dated 1937–38 by McIlwaine (2018: 216):

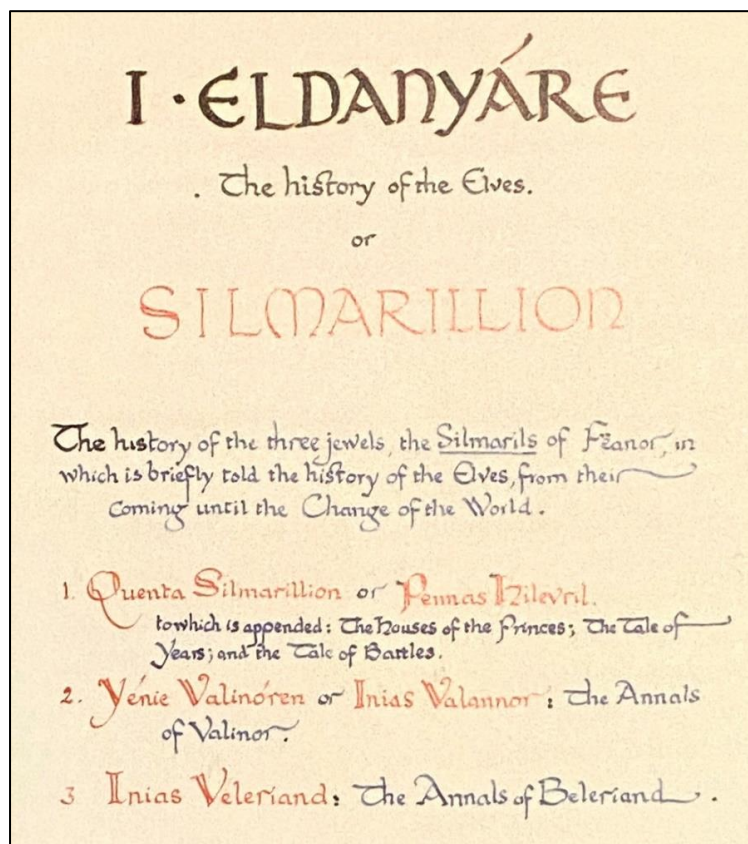


Figure 22. *I Eldanyáre*. Reproduced from McIlwaine 2018: 217.

²² In fact, Tolkien did use the caret mark in wholly un-calligraphic contexts, presumably devoid of Johnston’s influence. Such is the case of the minutes of an English Faculty Library Committee meeting held in 1940. Tolkien, who chaired the meeting, added the time, 2:30pm, using a caret mark, and struck out the word October, replacing it with November 28th. The minute book was exhibited during the Tolkien Spring School at Oxford, in 2013.

Again, Tolkien makes use of line-finishings to create a uniform, centralized effect on the page. At times, he would also combine “Fine” and “Massed” writings, the former for titles and subtitles, and the latter for the main text. This is the case of a 1950s manuscript titled *Dangweth Pengoloð* (Figure 23) which Hammond and Scull (2004: 202) singled out because of its great beauty.

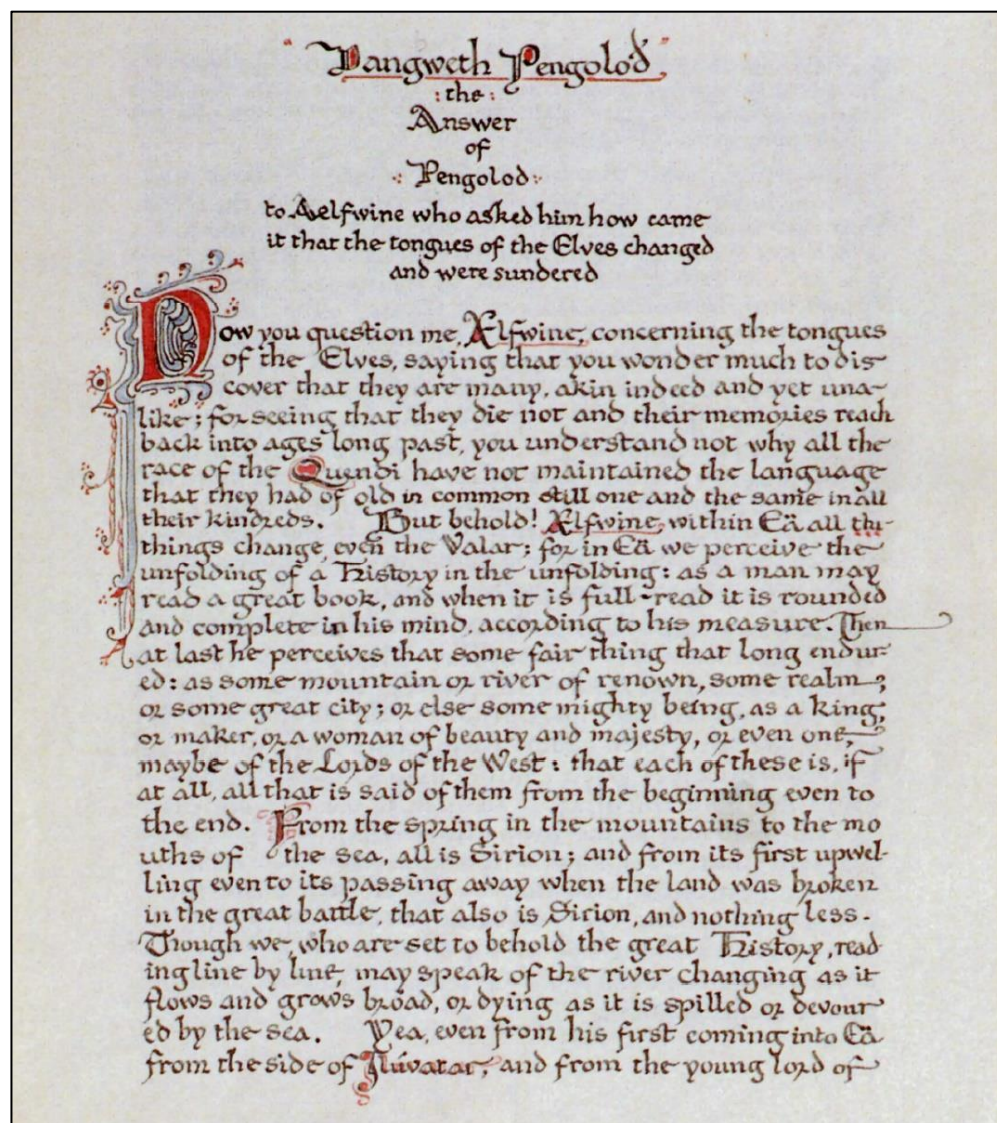


Figure 23. *Dangweth Pengoloð*. Reproduced from Tolkien 2010: frontispiece.

Notice the difference in weight between “Fine” and “Massed” writings, the unostentatious expunction in line 8 of the main text, and the great care with which Tolkien treated most serifs in the ascenders of *h* and *l*, indicating a higher degree of calligraphic impulse if compared with *Of Beren and Lúthien* (Figure 21).

Worthy of mention, once more, are Tolkien's deviations from Johnston's Foundational Hand principles, such as the round-backed *d* (compare with Figure 21) and, more notably, the consistent use of ligatures, mainly the *st* ligature (e.g. *question*, line 1), still common in typography, and the 2-shaped *r* used after *o* (e.g. *memories*, line 4). Both ligatures were part of the few that survived in the Carolingian Minuscule script, even though the Carolingian *st* ligature was always made with the long, rather than rounded *s* (Derolez 2003: 53). Tolkien also uses the 2-shaped *r* after rounded letters other than *o*, such as *d* and *p* (e.g. *kindreds*, line 8, and *spring*, line 19), a feature that first appeared in English manuscripts in the middle of the thirteenth century (Parkes 2008: 124).

Since a principle in Johnston's *Writing & Illuminating, & Lettering* is the modernization of elements that may hamper legibility, he does not use ligatures of these kinds in the book's many figures, and merely notes the *br*, *or*, and *pr* ligatures as a common feature of Gothic writing (Johnston 1917: 417). As it has been said, Tolkien felt free to reinterpret Johnston's directions.

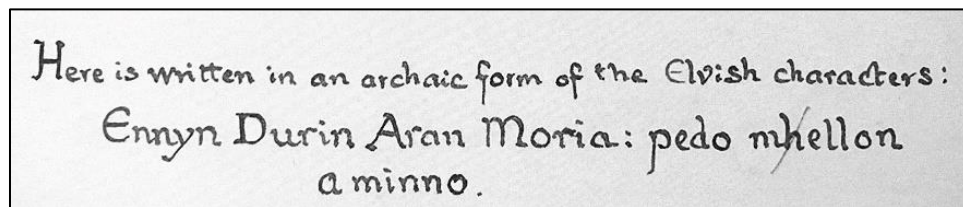


Figure 24. Early inscription on the Doors of Durin showing the *ct* ligature in the word *characters*. Reproduced from McIlwaine 2018: 340.

Other ligatures to which Tolkien resorted are *sk*, in the *Dangweth Pengoloð* manuscript (Figure 23, *asked*, in the subtitle); *ft* (e.g. in *The Tale of The Years*, reproduced in the frontispiece of *The History of Middle-earth X: Morgoth's Ring*, and the watercolor *Bilbo comes to the Huts of the Raft-elves*, in *The Hobbit*); *sp* (Figure 26, line 5, *spring*), and *ct*, also a common typographic ligature (e.g. Figure 24; Father Christmas's 1938 letter, and *Quenya: Outline of Phonology*, reproduced on the cover of *Parma Eldalamberon XIX*).²³

Tolkien's formal hand, exemplified in Figures 21–4, remained relatively stable in many of his calligraphic works and, according to Hammond and Scull (2004: 202), he adapted the Foundational Hand 'for his everyday handwriting and for what might be called "semiformal" manuscripts such as *Mr. Bliss*'. While the hand in *Mr. Bliss* can be described as semiformal in that it is more legible and careful than Tolkien's drafts normally were, it does not fit Johnston's concept of 'semiformal writing' (1917: 322), which combines rapidity, freedom, beauty, and legibility. However, he warns that there is a danger of semiformal writing becoming informal and degenerate. In *Mr. Bliss*, Tolkien's handwriting at times downgrades into a muddy cursive, or displays disconnected strokes that attest the speed with which he was writing, even if it never degenerates into complete illegibility.

As for Father Christmas's shaky writing, at times it assumed a cursive shape (e.g. 1923 envelope), but he mostly wrote in a script that can be regarded as a creative adaptation of Tolkien's formal hand (e.g. 1933 letter). From 1936, Father Christmas's secretary Ilbereth started helping with the letters, showing his 'thin and slanting' writing (Tolkien 2012: 140) which resembles a copperplate cursive and bears witness to the large inventory of scripts to which Tolkien could resort. In 1937, the North Polar found a 'thick pen' — i.e., a broad nib pen — to practice

²³ Christopher Tolkien's manuscripts made after his father's, in *Sauron Defeated* (2002b: 322–27), include ligatures such as *st*, *ct*, and a rare *nt*. Whether these and other stylistic features are Christopher's own or a reproduction of his father's preferences could not be determined.

(Figure 25). With such an implement, Tolkien briefly gave the Polar Bear a round script reminiscent of the Foundational Hand, but in 1938 the Polar Bear resumed his former habit of writing angular, rune-like letterforms.

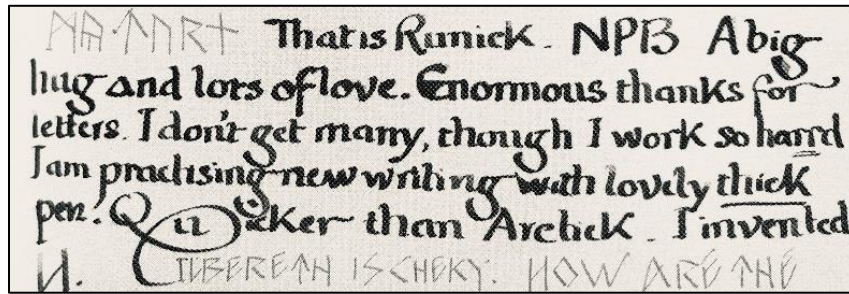


Figure 25. North Polar Bear uses a thick pen. Reproduced from Tolkien 2012: 143.

The North Polar Bear's thick script leads us to the last example, roughly contemporary with *I Eldanyáre* in Figure 22. It is a fine 1939 manuscript with one of the earliest appearances of Treebeard, an evil giant back then (Figure 26).

Catherine McIlwaine (2018: 354) describes the hand in this manuscript as a 'beautiful copperplate', but it bears no resemblance to what is normally called *Copperplate script*, a cursive letter written with a pointed nib (see, for instance, Harris 1995: 102–03). It is probably more precise to place the script under the influence of Johnston's Foundational Hand as well.

The greatest difference between this manuscript and the ones shown in Figures 21–4 is the use of a pen with a broader nib, also held at a slant, which naturally produces thick and thin strokes, more evident here than in the other examples. Tolkien did not construct the sharp serifs of the Foundational Hand, and the text contains many ligatures, including the unusually archaic one in *spring* (line 5), and *sh* (*pushed*, line 5). The letterforms, however, follow Johnston's principles in their legibility and careful construction, displaying elongated finishing strokes towards the end of the text. Also notice the insular *F* in *Frodo* (line 1). On the left margin, a beautiful inscription — perhaps even more beautiful than the main text

— with two lines from Chaucer’s *The Reeve’s Tale*. Worthy of mention in it are the archaic long *s*; letter *p*, resembling Tolkien’s Tengwar which also abound in the manuscript, and the Tironian nota for *et* (the 7-shaped symbol), which first appeared with a crossbar in English manuscripts at the end of the twelfth century (Parkes 2008: 117).²⁴

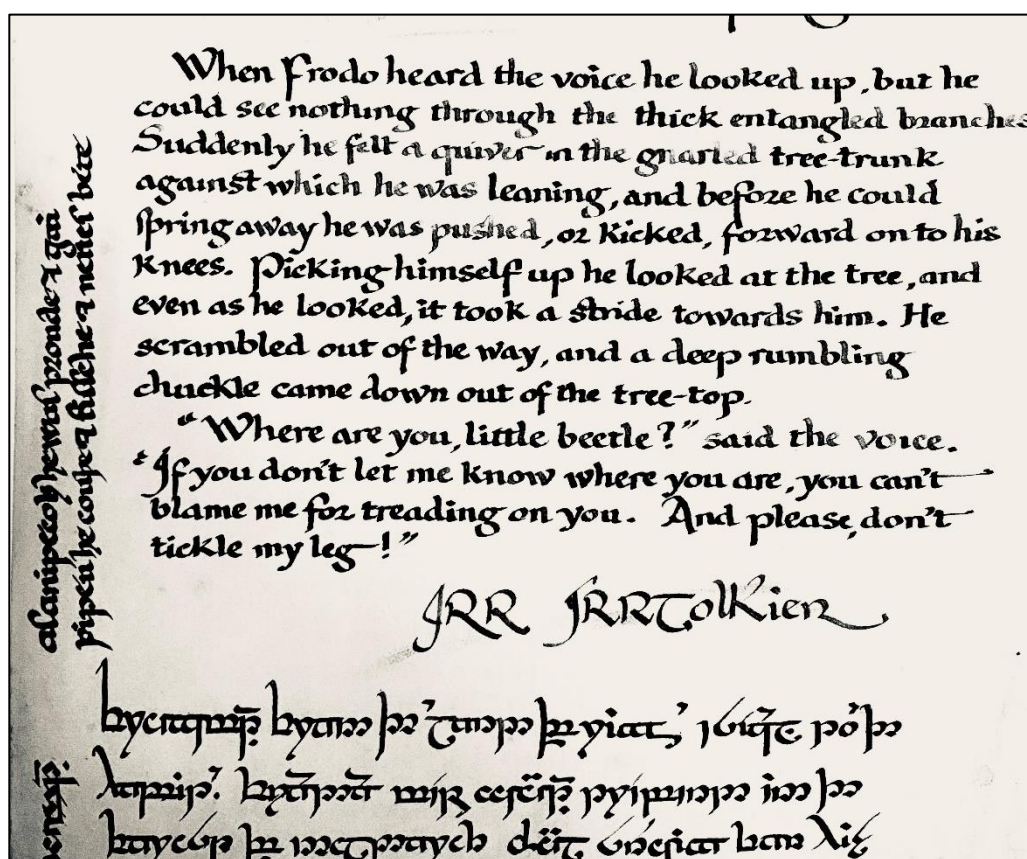


Figure 26. Treebeard manuscript. Reproduced from McIlwaine 2018: 355.

²⁴ For further information on this inscription, see Bowers 2019: 215–16 and Christopher Tolkien's comments in Tolkien 2002a: 382.

Other works in which the influence of Johnston's Foundational Hand can be felt in Tolkien's handwriting, but with varying degrees of formality, legibility, and aesthetic preoccupation, are the frontispieces of *Sauron Defeated* (1992), *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún* (2009), *The Fall of Arthur* (2013), and *The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun* (2016). One should not forget the dust-jacket designs Tolkien made for *The Lord of the Rings*, particularly the one for *The Fellowship of the Ring* (cf. Hammond and Scull 2004: 179–83). The next section, however, will deal with a more calligraphically interesting book, namely *The Hobbit*.

THE MAPS OF *THE HOBBIT* AND THE PSEUDO-SCRIBE OF THE *RED BOOK*

The Hobbit is an amazing work of visual art not only for its illustrations and patterns: Tolkien was very careful with the lettering and, given the prominence of this book among his works, it is safe to assume that through Bilbo's story many readers are first introduced to Tolkien's calligraphic skills.

Especially interesting in this respect are the two maps Tolkien prepared, *Thror's Map* and the *Wilderland* map. Despite the similarities in their appearance, they perform different functions within the Primary and Secondary Worlds, as noted by Hammond and Scull (2004: 95):

[*Thror's Map*] is a painstakingly crafted 'facsimile' meant to give verisimilitude to Tolkien's fiction. It is supposed to be a reproduction of one of the old documents [...] that the narrator consulted before telling his tale [...].

Wilderland, in contrast, was meant to be no more than a general map, as Tolkien described it. There is no pretence of it being an old map drawn by Bilbo. It bears Tolkien's monogram, marking it as his own work, and he further distinguished it from *Thror's Map* with [...] small differences in the style of lettering. (The statement in chapter 3, that Bilbo 'liked runes and letters and cunning handwriting, though when he wrote himself it was a

bit thin and spidery', connects the hobbit with the deliberately shakier writing on *Thror's Map*.)²⁵

Alice Campbell (2006: 406–08) also talked about Tolkien's maps, saying that he 'used an upright "foundational hand"' and that the 'writing on [*Thror's Map*] is in English [...] some in a style of calligraphy resembling the Irish Half-uncials, and some in an English rune alphabet'. She also claimed that

Tolkien varied the lettering style on Thror's map according to the culture represented: rounder uncials for Elvish maps, thinner Roman letters for hobbits and men, and runes for Dwarves. Bilbo, we are told, wrote with a thin, spidery hand, which is seen on early versions of Thror's map.

Campbell's assertions require some commenting. Tolkien's use of *the* Foundational Hand (not *a* "foundational hand") is indeed clear in *Thror's Map*, what with its elongated final strokes; letter *g* with an open bowl and pronounced ear, and the general legibility of all letters, even if, once again, he did not employ all the letterforms proposed by Johnston, such as *a*, which irregularly appears in both single- and double-story forms. The claim that 'Tolkien varied the lettering style on Thror's map according to the culture represented' is slightly puzzling: even though the map can be seen as a calligraphic melting pot from the Primary World point of view, the style on the map seems to imitate, as per Hammond and Scull's quotation, the handwriting of only one character, Bilbo.

But Campbell's allusions to Uncial and Half-uncial scripts are enticing insofar as both were clearly used by Tolkien in *Thror's Map*. It does not seem, however, that the Uncial letterforms in this map are intended to imply Elvishness,

²⁵ See also *The Lord of the Rings*, Book VI, Chapter 9: '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.'

even though Tolkien's Tengwar in some measure resemble the Uncial script.²⁶ Also, while it is not incorrect to say that some letters resemble the Irish Half-uncials — since all Insular scripts ultimately refer back to the Irish Half-uncials —, it is more probable that Tolkien's models for the Insular Half-uncial would have been English rather than Irish manuscripts.

The Uncial script, a rounded, majuscule alphabet, was first attested in third-century North African inscriptions (Roberts and Robinson 2020: 53), and it held a high position in the hierarchy of scripts. It was brought to England by the Gregorian mission (Bischoff 1990: 71) and was consistently used in Romanophile English centers such as Monkwearmouth-Jarrow and Canterbury (Brown 2012: 141).

Edward Johnston, in his *Writing & Illuminating, & Lettering*, also discusses Uncial and Half-uncial scripts. He considers them unfit for many practical purposes, but their great beauty makes them 'worth practising, and even justifies their use (in a modernised form) for special [manuscripts], for the more romantic books — such as poetry and "fairy tales" — and generally where speed in writing *or reading* is not essential' (Johnston 1917: 304, emphasis by the author).

The models Johnston chose for Uncial letters are two continental manuscripts, but Tolkien may have had English models in mind, since the Uncial script was employed in exquisite Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, such as the *Codex Amiatinus* and the *Stockholm Codex Aureus*.²⁷ A possible candidate is the Kentish *Vespasian Psalter*,²⁸ 'a particularly impressive volume, written in a fine Uncial

²⁶ On the other hand, in his website *Amanye Tenceli* (n.d., 'Tengwar Calligraphy: The Formal Book-hand Style' section) Måns Björkman claims that the most common style of Tolkien's Tengwar is reminiscent of the Half-uncials used in works such as the *Book of Kells*. Concerning the drawing *The Doors of Durin*, in *The Lord of the Rings*, John R. Holmes (2006: 31) affirms that Tolkien's calligraphic translation 'imitates both the *insular characters of Old English manuscript* and the very Feānorian characters it translates' (emphasis added).

²⁷ Respectively Florence, Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana, Amiatino 1 and Stockholm, KB, A.135.

²⁸ London, British Library, Cotton Vespasian A.i.

script' (Brown 2012: 124), to which Tolkien referred several times in the first part of his essay *Sigelwara Land* (1932: 184 *et passim*).²⁹

Johnston's Half-uncial examples came from two codices: the *Book of Kells*, housed at Trinity College Dublin,³⁰ and the Northumbrian *Lindisfarne Gospels*.³¹ The latter was possibly the model Tolkien had in mind for English Half-uncials, considering Stuart D. Lee's supposition that, as a young academic, he saw E.G. Millar's 1923 facsimile (Lee 2014: 58).

Just as he had done with the English Carolingian minuscule, Johnston suggested modernized letterforms for Half-uncial and Uncial scripts to increase legibility and avoid forms that had passed out of common use. Half-uncial *T*, for instance, lost its curved shaft in Johnston's version (1917: 71), and although he did not change some characteristically round Uncial letterforms, he admonished that, even though Uncial *D*, *E*, *H*, *M*, and *U* 'are essentially legible, people generally are not accustomed to them, and may find them hard to read' (1917: 304).

Tolkien, however, seemed to aim exactly at the strangeness that such letterforms could cause. In *Thror's Map* he did not eschew all the historical forms in favor of modernized ones, as seen in the Uncial forms of *E*, *G*, and *M*, and Insular Half-uncial ones, like *F* and *T* (Figure 27). He did, however, use some Roman Capitals, more familiar to our eyes (e.g. *W* and *K*). Johnstonian line-finishings are a conspicuous decorative element in the map (e.g. *t*, *n*, and *r*).

²⁹ McNelis (2006:36) claims that while 'Tolkien's calligraphy derives largely from medieval influences, from runic inscriptions to *uncial Irish early medieval lettering* and the clear fluid lines of ninth-century Carolingian minuscule, Morris is a likely inspiration there as well' (emphasis added). Roberts and Robinson (2020: 53), however, contend that 'there are no Irish manuscripts in Uncials', while Brown (2012: 141) affirms that the Irish did not use Uncials consistently, but the script is found sporadically in early manuscripts and, occasionally, in epigraphic context. Even if that is the case, Tolkien's Uncial models, again, would more probably be English than Irish.

³⁰ Dublin, TCD MS. 58.

³¹ London, British Library, Cotton Nero D.iv. Johnston calls it "Durham Book", but the shelfmark reveals that he was referring to that which is nowadays commonly called the "Lindisfarne Gospels".

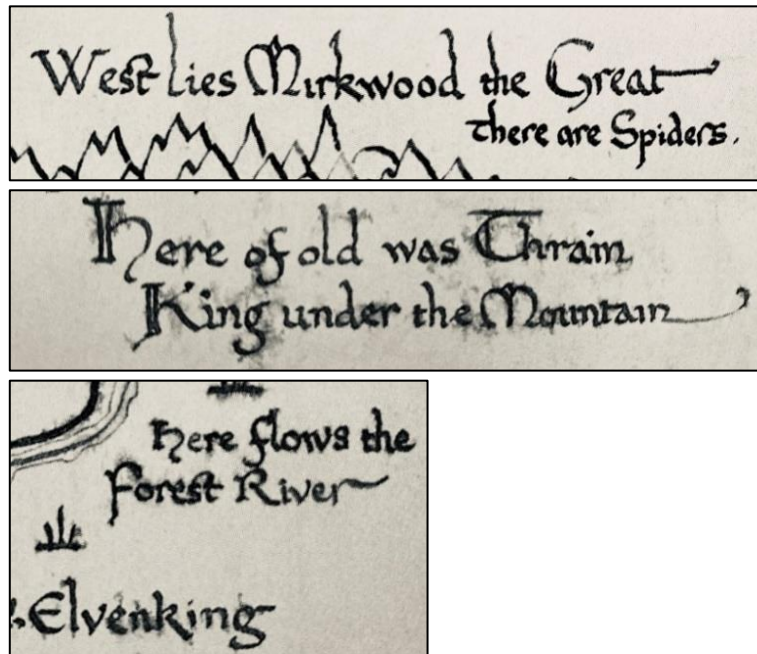


Figure 27. Inscriptions from *Thrór's Map*. Reproduced from Hammond and Scull 2011: 53.

Also decorative are the double-strokes in such letters as *H* and *T*, an element paralleled in Tolkien's later, 1940s 'Leaves from *The Notion Club Papers*' (Figure 28), where the rounded letterforms of seemingly Uncial and Half-uncial lineage are described by the fictional editor Mr. Howard Green as "Lombardic capitals" (Tolkien 2002b: 155).

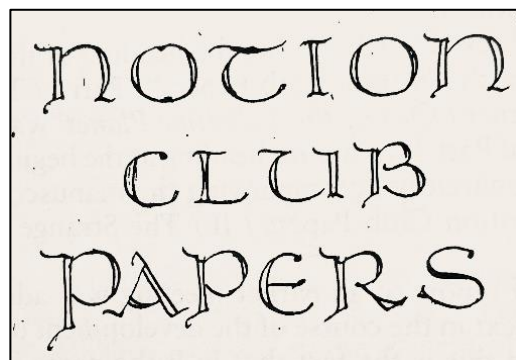


Figure 28. Lombardic capitals in the title piece of 'Leaves from *The Notion Club Paper*'. Reproduced from Tolkien 2002b: 154.

This kind of capital letter and its construction are also explained by Edward Johnston (1917: 210–11), who claims that most examples of Lombardic capitals are ‘often so unlike their originals, and so like one another, as to be scarcely readable’. Tolkien seems to have followed Johnston’s advice and made the letters more distinct and legible, even if he did not fill the outlined strokes in any of the cases.

In the *Wilderland* map, Tolkien employed the double-stroke decoration only once, in “Iron Hills”, but he used Uncial letterforms more consistently than in *Thror’s Map*, including the distinctive Uncial *A*, *E*, *G* and *M* (Figure 29).

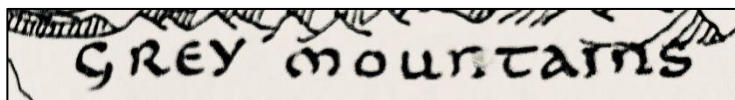


Figure 29. Fragment of the *Wilderland* map.
Reproduced from Hammond and Scull 2011: 125.

The coexistence of different kinds of script seems to reach a deeper level in *Thror’s Map*. By imitating Bilbo’s handwriting, Tolkien was giving verisimilitude to his work, as indicated by Hammond and Scull (2004: 95). Such verisimilitude comes about not only because he deliberately wrote with a shakier hand: Tolkien also chose to render Bilbo’s handwriting using scripts that are part of England’s manuscript heritage: Roman Capitals, Uncials, Half-uncials, and the Foundational Hand, based on the English Carolingian minuscule. It is not surprising that he envisaged such a connection between scripts and nation in the calligraphic project he had for *The Hobbit*, since his Shire was itself linked to England:

But, of course, if we drop the ‘fiction’ of long ago, ‘The Shire’ is based on rural England and not any other country in the world [...] The toponymy of *The Shire* [...] is a ‘parody’ of that of rural England, in much the same sense as are its inhabitants: they go

together and are meant to. After all the book is English, and by an Englishman [...]

(Carpenter and Tolkien 2006: 250)

Tom Shippey also discussed the connection between the Shire and England:

Thus historically the Shire is like/unlike England, the hobbits like/unlike English people. Hobbits live in the Shire as the English live in England, but like the English they come from somewhere else, indeed from the Angle [...]. Both emigrated in three tribes [...] all since then largely mingled. The English were led by two brothers, Hengest and Horsa, i.e. 'stallion' and 'horse', the hobbits by Marcho and Blanco, cp. Old English **marh*, 'horse', *blanca* (only in *Beowulf*) 'white horse'.

(Shippey 2005: 116)

By using scripts that thrived in England, therefore, Tolkien was adding another layer of Englishness to his Secondary World and introducing a mechanism of coherence in his carefully devised role of pseudo-translator.

It is well known from *The Lord of the Rings* (especially Appendix F.II) that Tolkien posed as the translator of the *Red Book of Westmarch*, which also contains the story told in *The Hobbit*. According to his pseudo-translation project, the Common Speech — or Westron — of the *Red Book*, was rendered as modern English, and languages related to the Common Speech were, likewise, translated into languages related to English.³²

It is sensible to think that the “translation” of scripts was also part of this project. In a prefatory text, for instance, Tolkien says that

[the hobbits'] language was like ours in manner and spirit; but if the face of the world has changed greatly since those days, so

³² Further explanation can be found in Tolkien's 1954 letter to Naomi Mitchison (Carpenter and Tolkien 2006: 175), and in Turner 2011: 14–22.

also has every detail of speech, and *even the letters and scripts then used have long been forgotten, and new ones invented.*

(Tolkien 2010: 20, emphasis added)

A little further in the text, Tolkien remarks (2010: 22):

Following the general lines of translation, to which these records have been submitted, as the names of the North have been given the forms of Northern tongues in our own time, so the Runes [i.e., *cirth*] were represented by the runes of ancient England.

Since the *cirth* of Tolkien's Secondary World were transliterated into English runes, is it possible that non-runic scripts used in the *Red Book* were rendered by the pseudo-translator employing typically English scripts? If that is the case, *Thror's Map*³³ evidences that Tolkien was not only the pseudo-translator of the *Red Book*, but also its *pseudo-scribe*, conscious that a relationship between the scripts used by the hobbits and the ones employed in English could be established, visually reflecting, in some measure, the complex linguistic fabric of his pseudo-translation.

FINAL REMARKS

Stuart Lee (2014: 68) concludes his article 'Manuscripts: Use, and Using' by expressing his confidence to have demonstrated 'Tolkien's engagement with manuscripts, how this experience filtered into his fiction, and how we, using the skills of manuscript studies, can begin to get further insight into his own creative processes'. The present article is founded upon a similar belief: that Tolkien's

³³ And other manuscripts in Tolkien's invented writing systems, such as the leaves of the 'Book of Mazarbul'. See Hammond and Scull 2015: 77 and 81.

works can be better understood in the light of his calligraphic pieces and the historical scripts he used as models. It is, as stated in the introduction, an incipient conversation about a subject which has much yet to reveal, especially if new manuscripts by Tolkien become available. Possible paths to be followed include the study of the relationship between the Primary World scripts and his invented writing systems; the “calligraphic translation” of maps and title pieces into other languages, and further developments of the philological dimension of his works. Another prolific field of inquiry is that of typography, since some typefaces have been widely used for Tolkien-related works that seem to be visually connected to the author's calligraphy. Finally, if and when Tolkien's *Doworst*,³⁴ a work of which we know so little, becomes available, studies on his calligraphy are sure to be given new lease of life, perhaps reinforcing and making it even clearer the way Tolkien combined scripts, creating a personal and unique style.

As of their article on the collation of MS. Bodley 34, d'Ardenne and Tolkien were undertaking a review of the manuscript aiming to publish an edition of it.³⁵ According to them (1947: 72), that edition ‘[would] doubtless contain many debatable points, and, alas! almost certainly it [would] still contain errors’. The same applies for this article. Yet, it is something well worth writing about if we are to continuously increase our understanding of Tolkien's works.

³⁴ Headed *Visio Petri Aratoris de Doworst*, this calligraphic work is an interesting case of manuscript transmission. Tolkien gave it to R.W. Chambers, and after Chamber's death it passed to his colleague Winifred Husbands. She, in turn, gave the manuscript to Arthur Brown, who had been Chambers's student (Hammond and Scull 2017b: 304). According to Anderson (2006: 144), the ‘location of this manuscript of “Doworst” since Brown's death in 1979 is unknown’. A revised typescript version of the work was given by Tolkien in 1953 to Kathleen Lea, according to Hammond and Scull (2017b: 305). On page 658, however, the authors claim that the revision was a ‘calligraphic manuscript’.

³⁵ This edition, however, was never published in collaboration with Tolkien (see Hammond and Scull 2017b: 599).

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