Farmer Giles of Ham Short Guide

Farmer Giles of Ham by J. R. R. Tolkien

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Overview

Farmer Giles of Ham is the most finely-crafted and delightful of Tolkien's minor works. Thoroughly suffused with sly wit and word-play, it is also a welltold mock-heroic tale. He revised it in July 1947, two-and-a-half years before completing the first draft of The Lord of the Rings. In Farmer Giles of Ham, Tolkien gently mocks the elements of heroic fairy tales—the plot; the fabulous creatures, such as giants, dragons, and talking dogs; the weapons; the people; and even the hero.

In its tone, themes, and characterization, Farmer Giles of Ham represents a return to the less complicated world of The Hobbit. For example, Farmer Giles behaves in much the same way as Bilbo Baggins, the hero of The Hobbit; the giant resembles Bert, William, and Tom, the stupid trolls in The Hobbit; and Chrysophylax the dragon is a sly, cowardly relative of Smaug, the dragon of The Hobbit. The tone is none too serious, and yet Tolkien stays close to the formula that he is most comfortable with—the perilous quest pursued by one of the least likely to succeed.

Farmer Giles of Ham is a parodic distillation of Tolkien's longer works, published as a celebration of being freed of The Lord of the Rings, which took him twelve years to complete. It complements the dark seriousness of The Lord of the Rings and The Silmarillion. In this work, Tolkien has fun with the plot, the themes, and the very language of heroic romance literature. Readers throughout the world have delighted in it, and it has been translated into fourteen languages, including Japanese.

About the Author

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born January 3, 1892, in Bloemfontein, South Africa, where his father had moved his family in order to take a position in a bank. However, life in South Africa proved too hard for his mother, who returned to the area of Birmingham, England, with her two sons. Both parents died before the boys reached their teens, and Tolkien and his brother were entrusted to the care of a Roman Catholic priest, who served as their guardian until they were of age. Tolkien graduated from Oxford in 1915 and subsequently served in World War I. In 1917 he began to write "The Book of Lost Tales," which served as the germ of the idea that bore fruit later in The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings and which was published sixty years later as The Silmarillion.

While the general public came to know Tolkien as the author of the hobbit books and the pleasant stories that grew out of his interest in ancient peoples and languages, they were surprised to learn that he had already carved out a niche in academia, as an Oxford University professor of Anglo-Saxon language and literature. His essay on Beowulf, written in 1936, renewed literary interest in that great Anglo-Saxon poem and still ranks as one of the major studies of the work.

He also published editions and studies of other Old and Middle English works during his career at Oxford, which lasted from 1925-1959.

Yet Tolkien is known to children and adults throughout the world as the author of The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings. The Hobbit, originally written to amuse his children, was published in 1937, while the latter books were urged to completion by his friends at Oxford, especially C. S. Lewis, and published in 1954-1955. The Hobbit was awarded the New York Herald Tribune prize as the "best juvenile book of the season" in 1938. Had both titles remained in hardback, his works would have been restricted to a small but enthusiastic, mostly college-educated audience. However, the publication of The Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit in paperback in 1965 greatly widened the reception of the books, which sold over a million copies a year for the next several years.

In the U.S., this conservative old Oxford professor, now in his seventies, had become the cult hero of college students of the late 1960s.

Tolkien's new-found fame made possible the publication of several of his old fairy stories, such as Farmer Giles of Ham, and his sprawling mythology of Middle-earth, The Silmarillion, which was published posthumously. In fact, in 1938 the first version of Farmer Giles of Ham was Tolkien's choice to follow the success of The Hobbit. However, his publisher wanted more about hobbits, so Tolkien began writing The Lord of the Rings as the sequel to the hobbit book.

In addition to minor works of fiction, such as Farmer Giles of Ham, "The Adventures of Tom Bombadil," "Leaf by Niggle," and Smith of Wooton Major, Tolkien also wrote an extended essay on fairy stories—titled "On Fairy Stories"— in which he defined the term fairy story and described the realm of Faerie and its power over children of all ages.

Originally written in 1939, it was collected with the story "Leaf by Niggle" and published in 1964 as Tree and Leaf.

Tolkien died peacefully in his sleep on September 2, 1973, and was mourned throughout the world as one of the mostgifted storytellers of the twentieth century.

Setting

Tolkien takes pains in a prologue and epilogue to place the events of the story in the Little Kingdom, located in "the valley of the Thames, with an excursion north-west to the walls of Wales." However, the events take place during the dark period preceding the coming of the Anglo-Saxons and thus before the time of King Arthur. The events, then, are supposed to have occurred in the southeastern portion of Britain sometime between A.D. 100 and A.D. 400.

Ever the philologist, Tolkien tells the reader in the prologue that Farmer Giles of Ham is a translation of an ancient manuscript written in Latin and that the tale may throw some light on "the origin of some difficult place-names." In the epilogue, he provides some commentary on the origin of the place names "Thames" and "Wunnle," coincidentally found in the ancient legend of Farmer Giles of Ham. Thus, as he did in his hobbit books, whose supposed source is the "Red Book of Westmarch," Tolkien employs the fiction of editing an ancient manuscript rather than creating the story.

Social Sensitivity

This story should offend no one, except possibly at the point where Giles refuses to hand over his treasure to the king, an action which shows disrespect for authority. However, this king deserves no respect. Although they might be taken as symbolic of the police force, the king's lazy, cowardly knights certainly deserve little respect either. That Giles rewards a dozen of them, taking them into his service, should not go unnoticed, however.

Literary Qualities

Farmer Giles of Ham rewards readers of all ages. Tolkien keeps his tongue firmly in his cheek in telling it, and yet he never stoops to savage mockery. He loved the genre of the fairy story too well to sneer at it, and one of the tale's strengths is its fairy-tale atmosphere.

Tolkien develops the appropriate mood for a world in which animals talk and fabulous creatures roam into sleepy villages. The language is simple and yet not at all childish. Tolkien speaks directly to the reader only once, at the very beginning; after that he lets the story tell itself in an objective manner.

Tolkien derives humor from the ironic descriptions of his characters. Sunny Sam, the village blacksmith, a perennial prophet of gloom, never whistles while he works, unless, of course, something bad which he has foretold is about to occur. The king, who should be the most noble and courteous of all men, is greedy, petty, and arrogant. And even Chrysophylax is ironically humorous.

He clearly values his own health over wealth, and later he even aids Giles in defending his former treasure against the king and his knights. Smaug would never have given up his treasure so willingly, much less defend the man who won it from him against another claimant. In addition, even the fiction of the story as a translation of an ancient manuscript is a joke, complete with the ridiculous commentary on its origin and the suspect etymology of place names.

This fiction is at once a parody of the prologue to The Lord of the Rings and of the appeal to "authority" often found in medieval manuscripts.

Farmer Giles of Ham employs something of an envelope structure, ending the same way it begins. The story opens with a comic episode in which Giles, quaking with fear, fires his blunderbuss at the deaf and somewhat blind giant, who decides to leave such an inhospitable country. (The blunderbuss itself is a humorous anachronism, appearing in this story over a thousand years before the development of firearms in Europe.) This incident is the first step on the road to the kingship for Giles, and it is interesting that Tolkien returns to the giant and the topic of the blunderbuss on the last page of the story. The time is many years later, and Giles is now king.

Chrysophylax has just returned home after serving Giles for years, and he seeks out the giant to give him a piece of his mind. (It was the giant who had spurred on the dragon to raid the district of Ham in the first place.) When Chrysophylax explains to him about the blunderbuss, the giant responds, "A blunderbuss, was it? I thought it was horseflies!" Such is the humor of Farmer Giles of Ham.

Tolkien makes use of his wide knowledge of Old English and Old Norse myths. This work was written in the early 1930s, during the time when Tolkien was developing The Hobbit and his ever-deepening myth of the First Age of Middle-earth. It is therefore not

surprising to find in Farmer Giles of Ham elements taken from Old Norse and Old English sources, including talking animals, a dragon associated with a treasure, a renowned magic sword, and a reference to the skill of dwarves in fashioning metal.

Themes and Characters

Farmer Giles of Ham is a fairy tale, with appropriate fairy tale themes and characters. Its characters are therefore stereotypes. The village of Ham is populated by the wise and learned parson, the gloomy blacksmith, the menacing miller, and a troop of fickle village folk.

Far off is the pompous king, who speaks in first person plural (we, us, and our) and claims for himself everything that Giles wins from the dragon. Giles is the most human of the characters, a reluctant hero, a good and decent person blessed with a modicum of common sense, and he is a fierce protector of his possessions. He is thrust to the forefront as an unwilling hero, but because he is fundamentally good he is also blessed with luck and receives the help of those who are strong where he is weak. For example, the parson, the most educated man in the village, reads the inscriptions carved into the magic sword given Giles and identifies it as Caudimordax (commonly known as Tailbiter), the sword that all dragons fear. When Giles learns this news, his courage is redoubled as he marches off to do battle with the dragon.

The most memorable characters in the story, however, are the animals. Garm, Farmer Giles's dog, is a delightful characterization of man's best friend. He is a pastiche of conflicting emotions. In general, he is loyal to Giles, but on occasion he can be cowardly, only to turn vain and boastful at the very next moment.

His memory is quite short; he is a creature of the moment. Unlike real dogs, he talks, and Giles and his wife talk back to him. They are not surprised that Garm can talk, nor should this fairy tale element surprise the reader. Chrysophylax the dragon, Giles's enemy and the object of his quest, also talks, but he is sly and crafty. A pragmatist, he is courageous when he has the advantage, but if he has to work too hard for a conquest he may surrender. When he recognizes Tailbiter, the dragon-slaying sword, he acquiesces to Giles rather than fight him. Giles avoids angering the dragon by taking only about half of his treasure, and thereafter he becomes Giles's ally against the pompous king, who arrives to claim for himself all of the farmer's treasure.

Even in this minor work, one can find the major themes that weave their way through Tolkien's longer works. The classical view of history predominates in Tolkien's work, specifically the belief that the pure and mighty have diminished since the beginning of time. Examples of this abound in Farmer Giles of Ham. In former days, the king's knights counted among their duties the pursuit and killing of dragons, bringing back dragon tails for the Christmas celebration. Now, however, the knights are reluctant to fight, having become comfortable in their favored station. When, at the king's orders, they set out to find the dragon, they become more interested in singing and discussing points of etiquette and precedence than in the serious task at hand; and when Chrysophylax startles them on the road, they are either killed immediately or flee to the safety of shelter. The magic sword Caudimordax has rested as an ornament on the king's wall, its lineage unknown to anyone because no one has taken the pains to decipher its inscriptions. Even the common folk seem to be "little" in many respects.

They are often petty and faithless and show their lack of common sense in allowing the dragon to escape with his life on the condition that he will come back with his treasure and lay it at their feet. No one with any sense would believe an oath that a dragon takes.

In "On Fairy Stories," Tolkien had described the Perilous Realm of Faerie as a region both dangerous and beautiful. Faerie lies just beyond the borders of our small world, and our contact with it changes us. In both The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings it literally lies beyond the borders of the Shire, where danger and other-worldly beauty lie in wait. The same is true for the world of the Little Kingdom in Farmer Giles of Ham, where Faerie is called "the Wide World." Mythic creatures live not too far away from the sleepy little village of Ham, and the Perilous Realm intrudes upon the inhabitants in the shapes of both the stupid giant and Chrysophylax the dragon. As a result, the status of Ham and particularly of Farmer Giles and his dog change by the end of the tale. Giles's response to the demands of the Perilous Realm ultimately lead to his assumption of the throne arid the elevation of all who are associated with him.

As in Tolkien's major works, the quest is an important element of Farmer Giles of Ham, though in this work it is reduced both in nature and in length. Giles must depart on a journey to find the dragon and bring back his wealth, but he and the faithless knights arrive in the region of the Wild Hills in only four days. In his quest, Giles is aided by his sword and his loyal horse, which raise his courage in the face of a deadly foe. The obstacles to Giles's fulfillment of his quest are his growing fatigue and dread and, of course, Chrysophylax himself. Yet the dreaded dragon proves less interested in protecting his treasure than in preserving his own life.

A quest cannot be complete without a hero, the role which Farmer Giles fills.

Like Tolkien's hobbit heroes Bilbo, Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin, Giles is a common man who seems unlikely to improve his station in life, much less defend an entire kingdom against a dragon and later become its king. Giles's first heroic act is actually an accident: "scared out of his wits," he pulls the trigger on his blunderbuss and sends the giant off grumbling with a sore nose.

By the end of the tale, however, Giles has grown so much in courage and power that he can face a dragon without fear and rebuff his own king. Yet, as a Tolkien hero, his growth is not surprising.

Because he is close to the soil (like the hobbit heroes), he seems to be morally superior to all those around him; certainly he is superior to the King and all his court.

It is clear, then, that in Tolkien's world, noble birth does little to prepare one for heroism. Rather, wariness, wisdom, and right conduct are the hallmarks of the heroic.

Another familiar Tolkien theme is the centrality of language. Tolkien once said that the stories of Middle-earth were written as outgrowths of his interest in the languages. This also holds true for Farmer Giles of Ham. In the prologue Tolkien the editor tells the

reader that the tale is a translation of an ancient Latin manuscript and that it furnishes clues to the origin of some place-names.

Tolkien also seems to be mocking the Latin language. This gentle mockery begins on the title page, where the title is given first in Latin script and then translated below, in the "vulgar tongue."

Tolkien introduces Farmer Giles by means of his Latin name, AEgidius Ahenobarbus Juliu s Agricola de Hammo, "for people were richly endowed with names in those days." But since these are no longer the days of old, he is now referred to by the "vulgar form" of Farmer Giles of Ham. Garm, his dog, could not talk even dog-Latin, we are told, but he could use the "vulgar tongue." When Giles assumes the throne at the end of the story, the "vulgar tongue" comes into fashion at his court. Here the educated reader may insert English for the "vulgar tongue."

Tolkien's implicit disdain for "book Latin" is illustrated especially well when the king is introduced. He is vainglorious and egotistical, as his title indicates: Augustus Bonefacius Ambrosius Aurelianus Antoninus Pius et Magnificus, dux, rex, tyrannus, et basileus Mediterranearum Partium. That the normal reader would have no idea of the literal meaning of these words really makes no difference; the very number and weight of them speak volumes about the bloated ego of the king. (Among his titles and descriptives may be found the names of King Arthur's uncle, a Roman emperor, and a Pope.)

Tolkien also pokes fun at his old bosses and the important scholarly project of two decades earlier. When Giles pulls down his blunderbuss and loads it in preparation for meeting the giant, Tolkien pauses to define this weapon for his readers. The Four Wise Clerks of Oxenford whom he consults are the four editors of the Oxford English Dictionary, and the definition is lifted directly from that dictionary, to which Tolkien had contributed definitions just after World War I. Farmer Giles of Ham is, then, just as much about language as it is about the feats of a common man in a small village long, long ago.

Topics for Discussion

1. The hero is a common man, a farmer, who, through luck and wits becomes ruler of the Middle Kingdom by the story's end. Is this message valid today? How possible is it to rise to the top? What does it take to "make it" today?

2. Consult a good English dictionary and an equally good Latin dictionary in order to discover the meanings of as many of the foreign words as you can.

All of these words are names of characters or things. Does learning their meanings add to your understanding and enjoyment of the story? Explain.

3. This story has been called a "mock epic," meaning that it pokes fun at epic and heroic narratives, mainly by imitating them in a comic fashion. Tolkien seems to be having fun throughout the work. What are the most memorable humorous passages? Is there any theme or pattern to the humor?

4. This story also makes use of irony.

Define this term and illustrate it by finding several ironic passages.

5. At the beginning of the story, Tolkien mentions that the inhabitants of Ham had not given much thought to the "Wide World" outside their district.

"But," he says, "the Wide World was there." What does he mean by "the Wide World," and does this apply to our world today? In what way?

6. What seems to be the purpose of the prologue? Does it add anything to the story that follows, or could the story get along just as well or better without it? Is it important that the story is set in our own world long ago, or should it have happened in the indefinite fairy tale setting "once upon a time, long, long ago, in a country far away"? What is the difference, if any?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Tolkien used Northern European myths as models for his own. Consult several sources of Old Norse and AngloSaxon myths about dragons and compare them with Tolkien's handling of Chrysophylax. You may also want to consult The Hobbit for descriptions of Smaug.

2. Using the same sources as above, locate information on magic weapons, particularly swords. Two such swords may be found in Beowulf, and others may be found in Tolkien's major works, The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings.

What characterizes such weapons?

3. Farmer Giles of Ham may be thought of as a modern fairy story. Read some other fairy stories, such as those in the Andrew Lang series of fairy tales (The Red Fairy Book, The Blue Fairy Book, The Yellow Fairy Book, etc.) You may also want to consult Tolkien's essay "On Fairy Stories." What seem to be the major characteristics of fairy stories? Do they have any relevance for our sophisticated modern culture?

4. It is evident from this story that, despite his low station in life, Farmer Giles is made of the "right stuff." On the other hand, the members of the nobility —the king and his knights—are obviously made of the "wrong stuff." What commentary does Tolkien make about the "right stuff" and the "wrong stuff?

Does this commentary make Farmer Giles of Ham a moral tale? If so, what is the moral of the story?

For Further Reference

Carpenter, Humphrey, ed. The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien. London: Allen & Unwin, 1981. Carpenter presents a generous selection of all or parts of some 354 of Tolkien's letters. The letters of late 1938 and early 1939 mention his plans to write a sequel to Farmer Giles of Ham and perhaps some three or four other stories of the Little Kingdom. In a letter of 1947 Tolkien denies that Farmer Giles of Ham was written for children and emphasizes that it is "specially composed for reading aloud." This book is indispensable for revealing important observations made by the author on his own work.

——. Tolkien: A Biography. London: Allen & Unwin, 1977. The authorized biography, which includes references to Farmer Giles of Ham during the critical years of 1938 and 1949.

Nitzsche, Jane Chance. Tolkien's Art: A Mythology for England. New York: St.

Martin's, 1979. In a brief but rewarding discussion, Nitzsche elaborates on Farmer Giles of Ham as a parody of medieval heroic literature and literary conventions.

Shippey, T. A. The Road to Middle-earth.

Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1983. Shippey argues that the source of Tolkien's inspiration was his love of language.

His comments on the place of Farmer Giles of Ham in Tolkien's development are worth reading.

Related Titles

Farmer Giles of Ham is the foremost of Tolkien's minor works of fiction, both in length as well as in craftsmanship. Yet it must be read in context with the other minor works, specifically Smith of Wooton Major and "Leaf by Niggle."

Though these latter works differ in tone from Farmer Giles of Ham, they all must be grouped together in that they are not works of Middle-earth.

These three works should also be read in light of "On Fairy Stories," Tolkien's exposition of the nature and place of fairy stories. Farmer Giles of Ham is closely bound up with The Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings, and The Silmarillion.

Readers who enjoy Farmer Giles of Ham should enjoy Tolkien's other works.

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