In a letter to Milton Waldman, a slightly perturbed J.R.R. Tolkien, author of the world renowned *Lord of the Rings* series stated:

> "I was from early days grieved by the poverty of my own beloved country: it had no stories of its own….Of course there was and is the Arthurian world, but powerful as it is, it is imperfectly naturalized…and does not replace what I felt to be missing…Do not Laugh! But once upon a time…I had in mind to make a body of work of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story…which I would dedicate simply to England."[1]

Anyone born of western culture within the last half century knows that Tolkien not only lived to see his dream actualized, but also in doing so gained a level success and clout rivaled by few writers of the twentieth century. Skeptics may have qualms with linking Middle Earth to Britain, but further investigation should put their doubt to rest. Tolkien has on many occasions expressed directly his homelands inspirational qualities, in fact, the term Middle Earth was borrowed from an Old English poem found in the Exeter Book known as *Christ I.* The line follows as such: *"Hail Earendel brightest of angels, over Middle Earth sent to men..."*[2]

Still, some may challenge the authenticity of Tolkien's fiction, claiming it was merely that and never borrowed from medieval culture. A closer investigation will prove this false, as Tolkien's writings are wrought with innumerable medieval cultural references and influences, some seemingly speculative, others still strikingly similar to original sources.

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[1] Jane Chance, ed., Tolkien the Medievalist (London: Rutledge, 2003), 26.

[2] Michael D.C. Drout, ed., *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment* (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2007), 99.

From names and places to themes and storylines, much of Tolkien's created world can be traced back to medieval English roots. Indeed, if one aspired to catalogue the entirety of medieval history's influence upon Tolkien, they would not only have to veer from fact to speculation, reread many unpublished versions of his work, correspondences, interviews, essays and lectures, along with countless medieval sources, but also spend several lifetimes in the process. In order to narrow the scope, I will focus my writing on Tolkien's most popular works: *The Lord of the Ring*s and *The Hobbit,* on the theme of his monsters and monstrous races.

As a professor of philology at Oxford University, Tolkien familiarized himself with numerous languages, including several no longer in use. As a professor with a keen interest in medieval literature, he was inclined to pour through and translate countless medieval texts.[3] One with such interests would be hard pressed to find a better home than he had at Oxford. The Bodleian Library of Oxford has one of the largest and most comprehensive medieval manuscript libraries in the United Kingdom, providing a wealth of material for study.[4] Unfortunately, today records exist of Tolkien viewing only three manuscripts firsthand: the MS. Bodley 34 of the Bodleian, The Corpus Christi 402 of Cambridge, and the Cotton Nero A.x of the British library, and only one of these, the Cotton Nero A.x, features illustrations.[5]

That is not to say Tolkien was unfamiliar with manuscript illustration, to say that he was familiar with all things medieval would be an understatement, it simply means the

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[3] Ibid, 328-331

[4] Otto Pacht and J.J.G. Alexander*, Illuminated Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library Oxford* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), vi-vii.

[5] Drout, *Tolkien Encyclopedia*, 404

records do not exist. As Bodleian Librarian Judith Priestman explained to me via email; in those days viewing rules were less strict, less thorough and likely to survive over the years, and sometimes simply nonexistent. There is no concrete proof, but it is almost certain he saw a great deal of these images, it is even known that Tolkien had the habit of illuminating the margins of his own manuscripts,[6] and many of his own drawings such as this one from *The Hobbit* (Fig.1) bear line and form qualities stylistically similar to medieval illustration. Though my topic is based largely on speculation, enough evidence can be found to infer that Tolkien's fiction, especially its visual aspects of color, theme and form, was directly influenced by medieval manuscript illustration.

A chief reason that Tolkien felt a certain lack of folklore for his culture is the fact that his homeland, England, can at times have a lack of identity. Throughout history, Britain has felt the influence of peoples from countless far-flung places in the world. As an island, Britain has been conquered and invaded by, migrated to and settled in, by countless cultures ranging from Britons, Saxons and Romans, to Angles, Vikings and Normans. This being true, is it not also true to say that all of these cultures have combined to formulate what can be considered English? Tolkien then could have certainly justified borrowing elements from all of these cultures in order to create his English mythology. Bear in mind that Tolkien was well educated in almost all medieval cultures and could read many of their texts in their original form without translation. Even the lesser known works rarely escaped him, giving him a wide range of media from which to draw influence. The fact that he was literate in so many dead languages adds to his repertoire because in seeing the work first hand, he could not only avoid meaning and connotation otherwise lost in translation, but also witness firsthand the illustrations and

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[6] Drout, *Tolkien Encyclopedia*, 402.

marginal artwork so prevalent of the era, making this time period's imagery even more vivid to him.

One of the most popular themes surviving today from medieval culture is that of the dragon. Indeed, the image of St. George in battle is so prevalent today that it is hard to imagine medieval folklore without the image of a brave knight pitted against the fire breathing beast surfacing rather rapidly. Anyone well read in Tolkien is familiar with countless dragons, some infamous, some not even worthy of being named, but the most popular of course is Smaug. In *The Hobbit*, Bilbo Baggins and his crew of Dwarven companions set out to Mount Erebor, the lost Dwarven Kingdom, to kill Smaug, who has despoiled the kingdom and claimed the treasury as his own. [7]

Jonathan D. Evans, who has done extensive research on the topic of medieval dragon literature, has compiled a basic set of traits and commonalities which most dragon stories from Beowulf to *Eric et Enide* follow faithfully. Though he compiled this list long after the writing of The Hobbit, it seems that Tolkien noticed these similarities first as Smaug fit the archetype comfortably.

One of the central concepts of Evan's work is that the habitat of the dragon is always in remote locations, far from lawful lands.[8] This is the case in *Beowulf*, and certainly the case with Smaug as the adventurers have to travel many months to reach Erebor. Indeed, before occupying Erebor, Smaug was said to have come from an even more remote locale, from "the North", or the"the Great Wastes" a land occupied by no lawful creatures.

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[7] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1937), 22.

[8] Jonathan D. Evans, "Semiotics and Traditional Lore: The Medieval Dragon Tradition," *Journal of Folklore Research* 22 (1985): 94.

The following traits listed by Evans are also shared by Smaug. Evans claims the dragons are always large; Tolkien describes Smaug as "vast"[9]. Evans claims dragons can always fly, and this is of course certainly true of Smaug.

The final and perhaps most important trait of dragon tales is the climax, in which the dragon and the hero are pitted against one another in combat, which always results in the dragon's death. Upon assaulting the village of Lake Town, Smaug is slain by the hero: an Archer known simply as Bard, who fells the beast with a by using his treasured "black arrow" and placing a single shot to a weak spot on the underside of Smaug's armor.[10]

The exact details of Smaug's death are critical in comparing The Hobbit to medieval literature. The fact that Bard had to strike Smaug in a single weak spot is relevant as the location of the death blow is always named in dragon slayer stories. In *Erec et Enide*, Erix places his spear directly in the heart of the beast, and other tales similarly describe the blow as being placed; in the side, in the belly, or under the wing.[11] In resorting to the use of his prized black arrow, Bard is also complying to the mold of dragon slayers, as they usually received aid from a special or magical piece of gear or weaponry. In the Norse *Baerings Saga*, the hero Baering is successful in fighting of a dragon by the use of a magical garment which wards off poison and fire.[12]

The comparison of the character Smaug to actual medieval dragon literature is helpful in understanding the depth of Tolkien's knowledge of medieval culture. It's certain that similarities exist in the literary sense, but what of the visual?

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[9] Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 193.
[10] Ibid, 224.
[11] Evans, *Dragon Lore*, 96.
[12] Ibid, 104.

Today, medieval manuscripts are studied for far more than the words they contain. During the Middle Ages and especially in Britain, the illustration of these texts became a popular and important art form. Some were didactic in nature, meant to illustrate the story or educate illiterate masses. Others are seemingly decorative, while others still are enigmatic and at times seemingly anarchic. An example of the latter kind is an illustration from a Missal illuminated by Petrus de Raimbeaucourt in which mischievous apes taunt a scribe (FIG. 2). Whatever the intent, these illustrations fill many manuscripts surviving from the middle ages, countless of which would have been available for Tolkien's viewing during his time at Oxford.

As popular as the dragon was in medieval literature is mirrored in their frequency of illustration. This was in part due to their metaphorical significance in this time. The embodiment of evil and villainy, dragons were constantly used to represent the forces of evil. One of the most popular types of book in medieval culture was the bestiary. A sort of medieval zoological book, bestiaries compiled lists of animals and monsters, (most of which were real but many still known to be fictional today) gave information about them, and then made them into religious metaphors.[13] These bestiaries were almost always illustrated, and were most popular in England. Perhaps the most prevalent addition to these books was the dragon. They were almost always a representation of evil or sometimes even Satan himself. Tolkien it seems was well aware of this trend and in his essay "Beowulf: The Monsters and The Critics", identifies the inherent evil of the dragon

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[13]Michael Arnott, "What is a Bestiary?" The Aberdeen Bestiary Project, http://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/what.hti

and describes them as; "a personification of malice, greed, destruction, (the evil side of heroic life)".[14]

In The Hobbit, Tolkien describes the main antagonist Smaug as; "…a vast red-golden dragon…from his jaws and nostrils (came) wisps of smoke", he also describes him as having a "…huge coiled tail."[15] In the Bodleian there are several bestiaries all including extensive texts on dragons and corresponding images. One of these created in England and now residing in the Bodleian, contains an illustration bearing striking similarities to Smaug. Known as the Ms Bodley 764, this bestiary contains an illustration (fol.091v) of two red and gold dragons, both with coiling tales wings and puffs of smoke about their nostrils; striking similarities to Smaug.(Fig.3)

Coincidental as the similarities between the dragons of Bodley 764 and the Smaug might be, the truth is most medieval dragon illustrations share this color scheme and build. Some scholars accredit commonalties in illustration to the use of archetypes. If this is the case perhaps Tolkien is guilty of following them as well.

The fact that these two medieval manuscript illustrations bear extreme resemblance to one of J.R.R. Tolkien's fictional characters proves nothing. Understanding that they reside at the institution in which he spent the majority of his adult life, and are both written in a language he could read first-hand also offers little. But the fact that his field of study and personal interests would have led him to investigate several medieval manuscripts, possibly even the Bodley 764 shows that perhaps these images, knowingly or not, impressed themselves into his mind and resurfaced in the form of the dragon Smaug.

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[14] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics, and Other Essays* (Boston, MA: The Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984),17.
[15] Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 194.

During the early middle ages, Europe was stuck in a state of chaos. Rivaling nobles squabbled over boundaries, Christians Kings and Clergy struggled to subdue pagans by any means necessary, and raiding bands of warriors added an element of fear to the lives of all. More still classical learning had been forgotten and it seemed the entirety of the continent had regressed. Jacques Le Goff, in his book *The Birth of Europe,* explains just how this all began to change, for the benefit of most, but at the expense of many.

By the end of the Eleventh century, almost all of Europe had been Christianized. There still were some pagan sects or groups the Vatican might deem heretical but the fact remains; for the first time in European history the majority of a continent shared a common belief system. It is at about this point in history where scholars begin to use the word "Christendom" to refer to Europe. This of course did not stop the bickering or bloodshed but it grant them something which they could identify each other as equals about. Over time the prevalence of one faith upon what most Christians saw as the known world led to a sort of "us vs. them" mentality. In fact in 1215 Canon 68 of the Fourth Lateran Council made it law that all non Christians present themselves as such with their clothing, and refrain from appearing in public on holy days.[16] This type of thinking, which might be viewed as a sort of European Christian superiority complex, eventually lead to centuries worth of prejudice, hatred and persecution, which did not reach a pinnacle until the twentieth century.[17]

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[16] Paul Halshall, "Medieval Sourcebook: Twelfth Ecumenical Council: Lateran IV 1215." The Internet Medieval Sourcebook. http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/lateran4.html

[17] Jacques Le Goff, The Birth of Europe (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005)1-6.

Medieval Europeans were extremely interested with what is known as "monstrous races". Books such Pliny's *Natural History* and *The Marvels of the East* (Fig. 4) featured creatures that were not just shy of humanity, and consequently were wildly popular.[18] Over time, these creatures spilled out of their textual confines and entered the world of illustration, becoming a popular addition to marginal art of all types. Most were thought to be crude and ill natured, with some human like qualities yet untouched by God's glory. The Middle Earth equivalent of these bestial peoples would be the orcs, goblins, trolls and wildmen. In rare occasions however, some of the monstrous races such as the Bragmanni of Alexander Romances were idealized to what John Block Friedman refers to as "Noble Savages".[19] Likewise, Tolkien's Middle Earth was filled with righteous creatures that could fit this genre such as hobbits, elves, dwarves and ents. It's easy enough to imagine flipping through a copy of the natural history and finding a section on orcs, or seeing a hobbit scrawled into the margins of a book of hours.

To the typical medieval European there were certain qualifiers that designated something as being monstrous. In illustration, one of these aspects was the use of coloration. Elizabeth S. Bolman, in her intensive study of the Beatus manuscripts, identifies symbolic use of color in illustration. Colors designated for dark objects, specifically blue, black and brown, are consistently used to illustrate things identified as being evil such as the Devil.[20] Tolkien's evil races are no exception. Countless times he ascribes dark coloration to them. This comes as no surprise as Tolkien generally uses

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[18] John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000) 5-7.
[19] Ibid, 163.
[20] Elizabeth S. Bolman, "De Coloribus: The Meanings of Color in the Beatus Manuscripts," *Gesta* 38 (1999): 22-34

color as a characteristic symbolic of virtue or lack there of. The entrance to Mordor is referred to as the "Black Gate", the fortress of Sauron as the "Black Tower". Likewise, Minas Tirith, the greatest city of men in Middle Earth, is known as the "White City" and the White Tree of the Kings which grows there is symbolic of the hope and virtue of mankind.[21] White, says Bolman, is the color most consistently used for symbolic purposes in medieval art.[22] Little surprise understanding that ethnocentrism rampant in Medieval Europe, but white was typically a color reserved for portraying things understood to be righteous or pure in nature.

In the Cotton Nero A.x, one of the few manuscripts known to have been viewed firsthand by Tolkien, there is a copy of a fourteenth century poem known as "Pearl".[23] An illustration of the story depicts the "Pearl" maiden, dressed in white and standing on the gates of Heavenly Jerusalem.(Fig.5) In this instance the illustration is meant to be an idealization of the maiden, her white gown is as pure and untainted as her spirit. The Pearl maiden died in childhood, a time of innocence, and this depiction of her as a white maiden on the gates of heaven was meant as a reminder to viewers that only the pure of spirit were allowed into heaven. In *The Lord of the Rings,* Gandalf "conquers death" and returns to Middle Earth clad in white.[24] This achievement is also possible for us, the Pearl illustrator tells us, provided we are pure of spirit.

The Cotton Nero AX also contains a copy of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.[25] A coinciding illustration shows the Green Knight's wife tempting Gawain in his quarters. Her dress is also primarily white but is also covered with splotches of color.

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[21] Drout, *Tolkien Encyclopedia*, 107.
[22] Bolman, *De Coloribus*
[23] Drout, *Tolkien Encyclopedia*, 504.
[24] Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, 483.
[25] Drout*, Tolkien Encyclopedia*, 404.

(Fig.6) In both illustrations, the purpose of the white dress is the same; a visual

representation of the soul. Whereas the maiden's remains pure however, the wife of the

Green Knights dress is tainted, a depiction of the accumulation of sin upon her soul. In

the actual story, the Green Knight's wife is not so unchaste. Her temptation was merely

part of a game Gawain was unknowingly playing with the Green Knight and her lady.

Perhaps then, this illustration is meant to be didactic; an artists attempt to display the act

of adultery as sinful, despite the actual plot of the story.

The use of dark and light coloration as representations of good and evil are not

however unique to Tolkien. Historically, they have been used for the same reason for

centuries.

Ethiopians (a medieval umbrella term used to describe Africans with negative and

racist connotations) were traditionally thought of as lacking morality in medieval

European thought.[26] This comes as little surprise in a culture in which outward

appearances were considered a reflection of the inner self. Thus, the darkness of the

African's skin was thought to be a reflection of his corrupt soul; giving rise to the racist

and ethnocentric attitudes Europeans held towards Africans.

Bodily deformations were no different, the Old Testament itself described

connections between deformity and sin, and the Book of Leviticus banned people with

certain physical imperfections from becoming an ordained priest.[27] Consequently those

with unfair or uncommon appearances, were thought of as being imperfect spiritually, a

theme definitely cohesive with Tolkien's work as his orcs are described repeatedly in the

grotesque manner as having "bent and bowlegged" frames, with ape like limbs, red eyes,

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[26] Debra Higgs Strickland, *Saracens, Demons and Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 79.
[27] Ibid, 65.

claws, darkly colored skin and blood, and fangs. The aberrant nature of the orc is reflected in an illustration of demons from the Trinity Apocalypse. Dating to the Thirteenth century and now residing in the Bodleian, the Trinity features an illustration depicting several demons tormenting the souls of the damned. (Fig. 7) These demons are essentially humanoid but also reflect the orc's aberrant nature, bearing the features of many creatures such as horns, fur, claws and fangs. Debra Higgs Strickland has outlined some of the reasons why demons were intentionally depicted this grotesque manner. She claims;

> "… the most striking and consistent feature of demons in medieval art is their combination of animal and human physical form to create a bestial perversion of God's image."[28]

As demons were a depicted as a mockery of Gods image, Tolkien tells us that Orcs were created in mockery of the elves.[29] Why then, should we not see the medieval demon as an influence for the orc? After all the word orc was derived from the Old English term *Orcneas,* which meant demon corpse.[30]

Color also is a parallel between orcs and demons. On several occasions Tolkien describes the orcs as being; "dark" or "black" and even describes their blood as being black. Likewise, the demons of the "Trinity" are colored in black, brown and blue; the colors Bolman identified as being used most for things meant to be darkly colored, and often associated with evil qualities. [31]

Though most of the monstrous races of medieval culture proved to be fictional, there were instances in which real peoples were assigned monstrous qualities as a result

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[28] Strickland, *Demons, Saracens and Jews*, 65
[29] Drout
[30] Drout, *Tolkien Encyclopedia*, 719.
[31] Bolman, *De Coloribus*, …..

of European ethnocentrism. Jews, Muslims and Africans, basically all those who did not fit into proverbial "us" mindset so prevalent in Medieval European culture, were thought of as inferior morally, and at times even evil by nature. The terms Saracen and Moor were generalized terms for all Muslims, much like Ethiopian was used to describe Africans. Thus, non-white, non-Christian peoples of all descent were marginalized and assigned less than human qualities. As mentioned before Medieval Europeans tended to believe that darker skinned peoples were inherently evil. In Folio 133r of the MS. Tanner 190 of the Bodleian Library, a marginal Saracen brandishes a sword at defenseless Christians.(Fig. 8) The Saracen's unnaturally dark blue skin is a reflection of his ill intent, and his menacing posture a reminder to Christians of the threat posed by Muslim expansion.

Gerald of Wales, in his twelfth century book "*The History and Topography of Ireland*", stated that the extreme western and southern lands of his known world had a poor climate capable of corrupting the body and soul. As wrong as this seems today, Gerald was simply a product of the prevailing thought of his time.[32]

Just as medieval Europeans thought peoples native to the south and east to be inherently evil, so did the people of Middle Earth view the Haradrim, who were repeatedly referred to in *Lord of the Rings* as being "cruel", "foul" or "cursed".[33] They live just out of familiar territory, and yet always pose a threat, just as the Saracen of the MS Tanner.

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[32] John O'Meara, ed., *The History and Topography of Ireland: By Gerald of Wales*. (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1981), 24.
[33] Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, 645.

Appearance offers another similarity between the Haradrim and Saracens. Described on several occasions as being "brown" with "dark hair"[34] the tone of their skin is what sets them apart from the "good" peoples of middle earth. The Haradrims' lack of morality is echoed in the Saracen of the MS Tanner, whose unnaturally dark skin draws stark contrast to the pale complexion of the innocent Christians.

In The Two Towers, we are introduced to the Haradrim's most powerful war machine, Tolkien writes:

> "…Sam saw a vast shape crash out of the trees… big as a house…a grey clad moving hill…(with)great legs like trees, enormous sail like ears spread out, long snout upraised like a serpent about to strike…upturned hornlike tusks bound in gold bands and dripped with blood… the ruins of what seemed a very war tower lay upon his heaving back…"[35]

Descriptions of war elephants can be widely found in bestiaries such as the one known as *The Ashmole Bestiary* (Fig. 9) Accompanying descriptions tell of people from the south and east such as Saracens, Moors and Ethiopians, who have likewise recognized an elephant's capability for destruction.[36] Though in middle earth, they are known as oliphaunts, or mumakil, the physical resemblance is close enough that it can be picked out. And elephants were a popular curiosity amongst medieval Europeans and a mainstay in bestiaries as the allegory of faithfulness and monogamy.[37]Thus widely written and drawn about, medieval elephant remains of which would have been well known to Tolkien.

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[34] Ibid, 646.
[35] Ibid, 647.
[36] Colin McLaren, ed., "Of The Elephant: Folio 10r Translation and Transcription," The Aberdeen Bestiary Project, http://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/translat/10r.hti
[37] Ibid

Admittedly, there is no hard evidence that the images in medieval text played any role upon the creation Tolkien's fiction. It is certain the literature itself did, terms such as "orc" and "Middle Earth" give testament to that. It is also certain that Tolkien knew about these illustrations, he was far too knowledgeable in medieval studies to not have known a great deal about them.

So we can only prove that he saw one manuscript with illustrations, to me the information lies in the content of his writing and the heavily visual qualities of it. I believe that medieval manuscript illustration did in fact play an integral role upon Tolkien's fiction, and that he did knowingly create imagery in faithful reproduction of their likeness.

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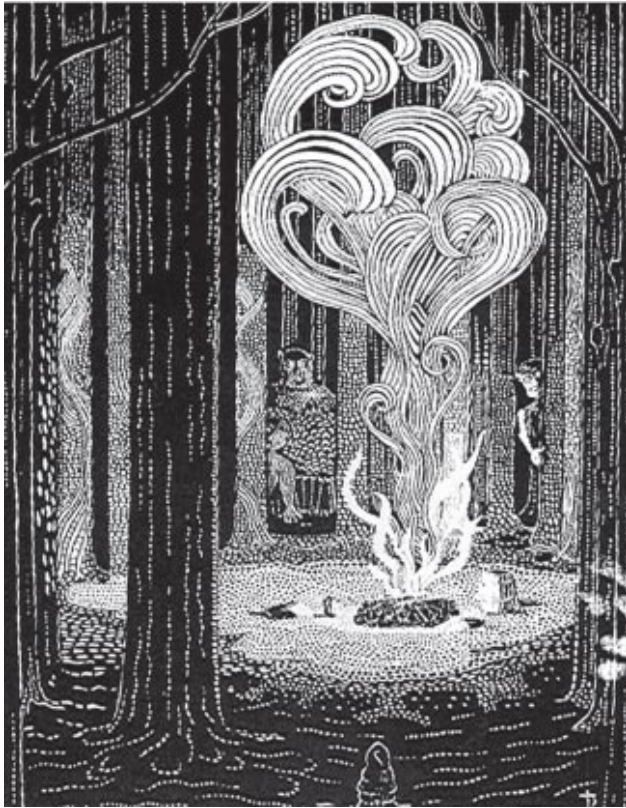NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000.

Figure 1

An Illustration from *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien.

Note the stylistic similarities, especially in the rendering of lines and shapes.

Dragons from Folio 072v of the MS. Bodl.691, The Bodleian Library, Oxford, UK.

Figure 2

MS D.40, Fol. 124r.
Illuminated by Petrus de Raimbeaucourt
Koninklijke Bibliotheek
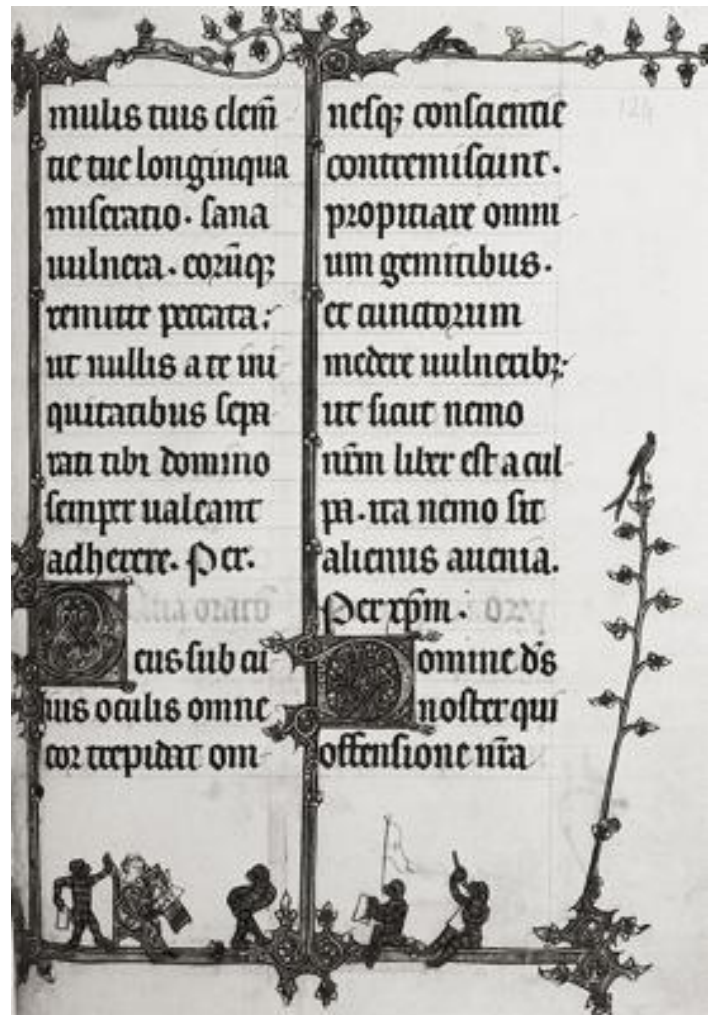
Marginal apes or "Babewyns" taunt a scribe.

Figure 3

Folio #091v of the Bodley 764
The Bodleian Library
Oxford, UK

Two dragons under a
Persindeus tree.

Figure 5.

The Cotton Nero A.X
Folio 42.v
The dreamer of "Pearl" sees   the maiden
upon the gates of heavenly Jerusalem.

Figure 6.

The Cotton Nero A.X
Folio 129
The Green Knight's wife tempts
Gawain in his quarters.

These two images from the
British Library Website.

Figure 4.

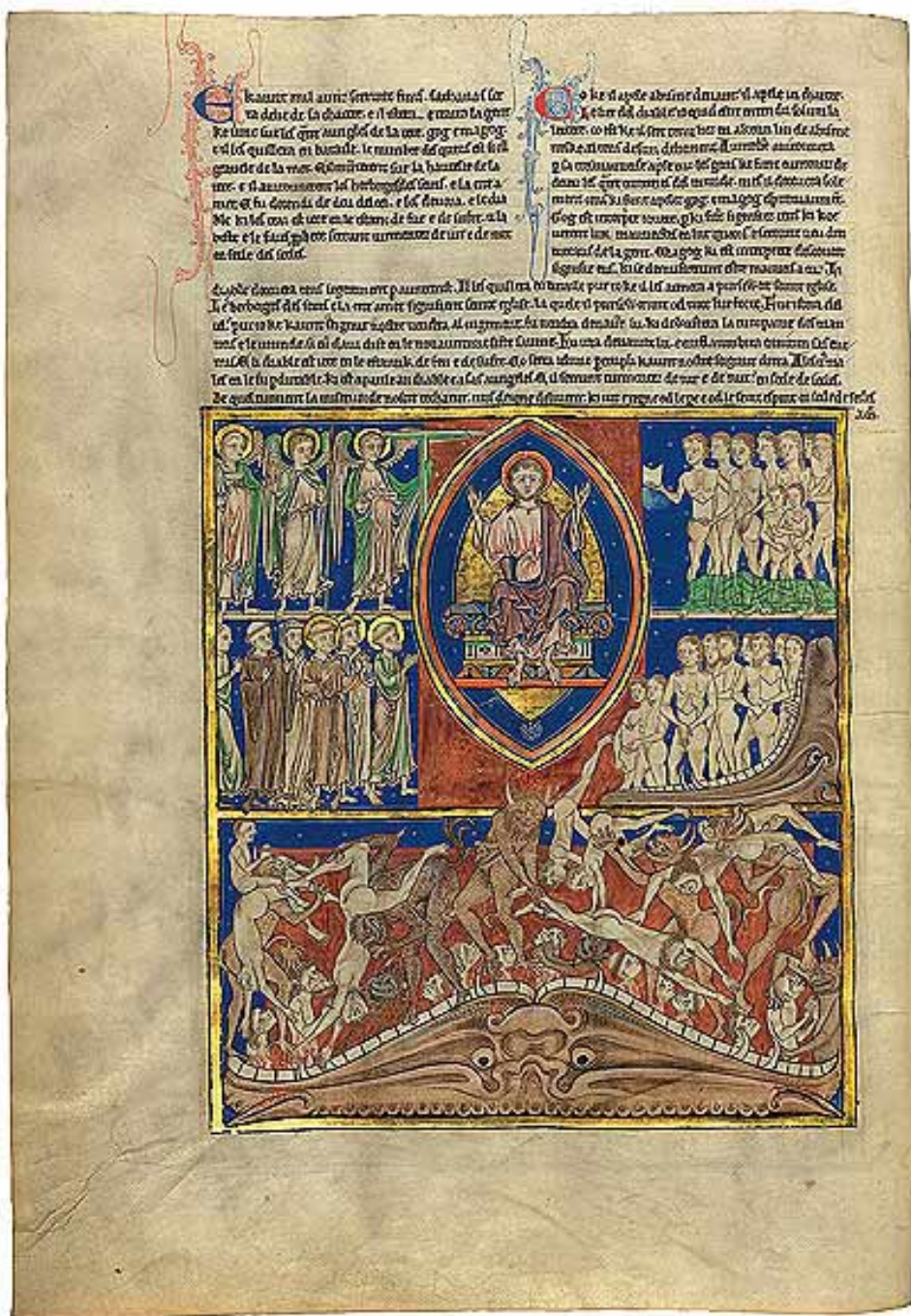Folios 050r and 038v of the MS Bodl. 614

A Sciopod shades himself with his one massive foot.

A dog-headed Cynocephalus and a hairy Wildman, both examples of what medieval Europeans knew as "monstrous races."

Figure 7

Trinity Apocalypse MS. R. 16.2
fol. 15r
The Saved and the Damned

Figure 8

MS Tanner 190
Secreta Fidelium Crucis
fol.133r
  A Saracen Threatens the Christians

Figure 9

MS.Ashmole 1511
The Ashmole Bestiary Folio 015v
Warriors upon an Elephant war steed.