At the “Edge of the Wild”: Tolkien’s Maps for The Hobbit

Maps in children’s books have three basic functions (Sundmark 2014a and 2014b). First, they produce a fictional space for the reader, creating a vista of the secondary world in which the story is set. Second, maps can have a referencing and indexing functioning, enabling the reader to keep track of the main events of the storyline as well as the places in which they occur. Third, maps can be used diegetically – in other words, be part of the fictional universe itself. In this paper, I will show how these functions are manifested in the maps to J. R. R. Tolkien’s The Hobbit (1937). In the theoretical frame I draw on Michel De Certeau’s and Henri Lefebvre’s work, in which place and space are distinctly conceptualized. I also demonstrate how cartographic signs, verbal text and illustration interweave, and how they are made to relate to the totality of the work (the book). In this context The Hobbit is a particularly interesting and significant example because of its importance in establishing fantasy as a publishing genre. Its conventions – also with regard to the use of maps – have been used widely as a model. The paper will address the indebtedness of later fantasy mapmakers to Tolkien, but will also point to how more recent fantasy maps depart from the Tolkien template and stake out new territory.

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