



*Requiem
for
the Hobbit?*

By A/Prof Cheong Pak Yean

There were only two doctors who wrote regular columns in the *SMA News* using pen names. Garfield passed away a few years ago. The other, the Hobbit, announced in the December 2010 issue that he was hanging up his pen-cum-lightsabre. When Garfield died, there was a move to remember him by compiling his writings through the decades. I am told that the *SMA* will publish these collected works as a book later this year. For the Hobbit's metaphorical demise, the *SMA News* Editor wrote a two-page editorial in December 2010 narrating the rejection by the Editorial Board of the Hobbit's "Thanksgiving" article, meandering to a discourse on Julian Assange's WikiLeaks ("Wee-Ki-Leaks"), IT and medical confidentiality. He then concluded by appealing to readers to write in to persuade the Hobbit to "Please don't go". I must admit that I was lost halfway through the editorial as I was not privy to the contents of the rejected article.

The pen is said to be mightier than the sword. When Jonathan Swift's book was published in the 17th century, it was styled as a simple

traveller's narrative titled *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World by Lemuel Gulliver*. Likewise, Lu Xun immortalised in *The True Story of Ah Q* the simple man's response to the absurdity and confusion of the period in China, between the death throes of the corrupt Manchu dynasty and the ascent of people power. Garfield's and the Hobbit's essays were written in less heroic times, but nevertheless in the same literary genre. The essays were not strident calls to arms like Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*, but styled as social commentaries masquerading as entertainment. On one occasion, though, the Hobbit did challenge a senior journalist to a virtual "catfight".

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teleporting us galaxies away from the dictates of reality. As if the world is that simple. We soon return to earth to the practice of medicine under the twin hegemony of economics and politics. However for some brief moments, we feel fuzzily good like Ah Q did for the “spiritual victory” he won. But now, it is time to wake up, wake up!

The first column by the Hobbit was published in March 1998 (Vol. 30 No. 3) on *Singapore: A Patient Transit Lounge?* It bemoaned the “setting up of a world-class foreign facility within a local tertiary hospital”. Coincidentally, the Hobbit’s swan song in December 2010 was on concerns of another foreign import, the US Residency system. In between that, for twelve years, Hobbit wrote on a panoply of topics, reserving the best for each year’s end when awards were accorded to the good, but mostly to the bad and ugly. As mentioned, the last traditional year end piece for 2010, “Thanksgiving”, was rejected and never saw print.

Someday, a social anthropologist digging into how the common doctor responded to the institutionalisation, and later commercialisation, of medicine in Singapore in the recent decades will find in the satirical writings of the two columnists, the blow-by-blow account of discomforting throes imposed by the changes to our healthcare system. Issues covered have included healthcare financing, training, licensing of clinics, increasing practice and licensing costs and greater accountability to both government and patients. Was the Hobbit reactionary, even atavistic? Or was he the antihero fighting for what is just and good for our profession and patients?

In a prologue to his book *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien writes that Hobbits are short, shy creatures dressed in bright colours, but are nevertheless capable of great courage and amazing feats under proper circumstances. We know that our Hobbit is “shy” for never revealing his identity, but we will never know if the Hobbit is brave or cowardly. Is he a righteous insider, a “Deep Throat” (aka the Watergate whistleblower) bravely speaking his mind? Or is he just a mischievous child throwing stones behind the mask of anonymity?

Perhaps, these are impertinent questions to ask of writers of this genre. *Gulliver’s Travels* would never have been written if Jonathan Swift, a clergyman, had to publish it under his own name. If he did, Swift would certainly be defrocked for his contrarian views of established religion and thrown into a dungeon, as there was a law prohibiting discussion of matters of the state. Swift would also have been charged for the pot shots his detractors considered “mischievous”. A Wikipedia literary critic observed that the character Gulliver “progresses from a cheery

optimist at the start of the first part, to the pompous misanthrope at the book’s conclusion”. The *SMA News* Editor told me that the Hobbit was exhausted of late. He had lost some of his crusading zeal and indeed the surgical mastery of his lightsabre. Has the Hobbit also succumbed to the affliction that writers of this genre are vulnerable to? If the Hobbit now self-deactivates, who can take over his role in *SMA News*?

Thus much we know – that the Hobbit cared to reflect and pen

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his thoughts for over a decade, and that the *SMA News* Editors were brave in publishing some of the Hobbit’s more controversial and provocative columns in past years. The present Editor at the end of his December 2010 editorial, after announcing the Hobbit’s notice, invited readers to write in to persuade the Hobbit to come out of his hole to continue writing. “The truth shall set us free”, he declared. Quo vadis, Hobbit? **SMA**

Note: Tolkien’s Hobbits are of either gender. The male pronoun is used in this essay to refer to our Hobbit because of the “yang” of “his” column, and not because of physical attributes.



Dr Cheong is a past President of the Singapore Medical Association, the College of Family Physicians and past Editor of the *SMA News*. He is an internal medicine physician with an interest in psychotherapy, and also an adjunct associate professor of the National University of Singapore.