



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,  
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

---

Volume 28  
Number 3

Article 9

---

4-15-2010

## Totemic Reflexes in Tolkien's Middle-earth

Yvette Kisor  
Ramapo College, NJ

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Kisor, Yvette (2010) "Totemic Reflexes in Tolkien's Middle-earth," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 28 : No. 3 , Article 9.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol28/iss3/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact [phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:  
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>

SWOSU<sup>TM</sup>

---

## Mythcon 51: A VIRTUAL “HALFLING” MYTHCON

July 31 - August 1, 2021 (Saturday and Sunday)

<http://www.mythsoc.org/mythcon/mythcon-51.htm>



## Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico; July 29 - August 1, 2022

<http://www.mythsoc.org/mythcon/mythcon-52.htm>

### Abstract

A close look at Tolkien’s incorporation of traces of shamanism and totemism in his depiction of Gandalf and other characters; yet another indication of how Tolkien created historical depth in his tales by reproducing the way traces of early mythic and religious themes survive in later tales and folklore.

### Additional Keywords

Shamanism in The Lord of the Rings; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Gandalf; Totemism



## TOTEMIC REFLEXES IN TOLKIEN'S MIDDLE-EARTH

YVETTE KISOR

THAT J.R.R. TOLKIEN TOOK INSPIRATION FROM *Beowulf*, among many other medieval works, in writing *The Lord of the Rings* [*LotR*] and his other tales of Middle-earth is well known. This has been amply documented by T.A. Shippey, among others.<sup>1</sup> What I would like to explore here is the way in which shamanism, particularly in its connection to Old English works like *Beowulf*, has left its imprint on Tolkien's works.

This may seem like a curious idea, and perhaps an explanation, and justification, is in order, via a short detour into the work of Tolkien admirer and Old English scholar, Stephen Glosecki.<sup>2</sup> Much of Glosecki's work focused on what he called shamanic and totemic reflexes in Anglo-Saxon culture. These related terms refer to the residue of an older culture that remained in the Germanic cultures of history and record. Things like the prominence of the avunculate (the tie between mother's brother and sister's son) and the prevalence of animal imagery, according to Glosecki, point to an earlier culture that was matrilineal and totemic. Further, elements of surviving Old English poetry indicate an older shamanic tradition that underlies them, a residue that well may not have been fully understood by the poets themselves.<sup>3</sup> Along with his scholarly focus on Anglo-Saxon culture, Glosecki had an abiding interest in the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, teaching a class on "Lore of the Rings" at UAB (University of Alabama at Birmingham), most recently in 2006. In that course he included many of the Old English and Germanic texts that served as Tolkien's inspiration in order to reveal what he called the "glowing depths [that] underlie Tolkien's fantasy" (qtd. in Crossley 10).

One way to think about the intersections between these two ideas is to consider totemic and shamanic reflexes in Tolkien's work. One runs into an immediate problem, however: Whereas a poem like *Beowulf* may contain elements that reflect an older culture, Tolkien's Middle-earth is not a work that

---

<sup>1</sup> Explored most fully in his *The Road to Middle-earth* and *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*.

<sup>2</sup> This article found its genesis in a paper delivered at the session "Anglo-Saxon Studies in Memory of Stephen O. Glosecki" at the Forty-third International Congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University, May 2008. Stephen Glosecki passed away in 2007.

<sup>3</sup> The fullest treatment of his ideas is found in his book *Shamanism and Old English Poetry*.

accrued over significant periods of time but is the creation of one man—a secondary world. While the prevalence of the avunculate in *Beowulf* can be said to reflect the presence of an older culture where such relationships had a power and meaning, the full relevance of which is likely lost to the later Anglo-Saxons, for Tolkien's Middle-earth such depth of cultural history is not a condition of its creation. Yet Tolkien created his secondary world to have at least the appearance of such depth of history and culture. As such, it can perhaps be said to contain such reflexes as Glosecki finds in Old English poetry like *Beowulf*.

Glosecki himself may have been attracted to this idea. In his most recent publication, his essay on the possible mythic resonances of the metrical charms in his 2007 essay collection, he refers to Tolkien no less than three times. In a discussion of Woden/Odin as he figures in the *Nine Herbs* charm, Glosecki refers to him parenthetically as a figure "that in turn underlies the Wotan of Wagner's Ring operas and their spin-offs, as well as, one might argue, Tolkien's peripatetic wizard Gandalf" ("Stranded Narrative" 62). In a note to his translation of the *Wið Dweorh* ("Against a Dwarf") charm, Glosecki observes that "the charm reflects pre-modern impressions of the 'dwarf' popularized in more recent folktale and fantasy. It's especially eye-opening vis-à-vis Tolkien's sanguine dwarf characterizations" ("Stranded Narrative" 65, note 36). And finally, in a footnote to his discussion of "disease-riders" in the Old English charms such as *Wið Færstice* ("Against a sudden/violent stabbing pain") and the *Nine Herbs* charm, Glosecki asks "Need we look further for the exemplar of what might be Tolkien's most horrific villains, the *Nazgûl*, 'Dark Riders' or 'Ringwraiths'? Today, much of their impact depends upon their deep mythic resonance, most apparent here in the metrical charms" ("Stranded Narrative" 67, note 38). These are suggestive observations, and worth examining more fully. The one I would like to take up here is the characterization of Gandalf as a shamanic figure.<sup>4</sup>

In various discussions of Odin as a shaman-god, Glosecki observes his many shamanic traits: his association with the mead of poetry; his hanging on the world-tree Yggdrasil as a shamanic initiation rite; his sacrificing an eye for the gift of prophecy; his identification as shape-shifter; his eight-legged steed Sleipnir, which becomes his vehicle of ecstatic travel; his leading of the wild host

---

<sup>4</sup> Shamanic figures and initiations in various works have been discussed in *Mythlore's* pages before, though not as manifested in Tolkien's works. John Hollwitz considers Ransom's transformation in C.S. Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet* as a type of shamanic initiation ritual while Nancy-Lou Patterson examines the figure of Lord Peter Wimsey in Dorothy L. Sayers's detective novels as a shamanic "wounded healer." Similarly, Bettina Knapp analyzes shamanic qualities in the figure and journey of Väinämöinen in the Finnish *Kalevala*, a text that was an important influence on Tolkien, and finally Edgar L. Chapman examines shamanic figures in Richard Adams's works. Like Glosecki's, all these studies utilize Mircea Eliade's classic work on shamanism as a starting point.

of the dead (the *Totenheer*, the wild hunt); and the etymology of his name (OE *wod* "possessed, frantic" related to the Latin *vates* "seer, poet") (*Shamanism* passim).<sup>5</sup> In particular, Glosecki singles out the shamanic initiation rite in his discussion of Odin, seeing a reflex of such rites in Beowulf's descent into the mere and encounter with Grendel's mother.<sup>6</sup> Such rites are rife with imagery of death and rebirth, of descent into an underworld and sometimes ascent into the sky, and of an encounter with a mythic figure waiting to destroy and reconstitute the new shaman, who emerges from the ordeal with new power (*Shamanism* 141). Gandalf's experience in Moria bears obvious parallels. Moria itself is a dark place, deep in the earth, that has become a name of fear among the peoples of Middle-earth: "On all others a dread fell at the mention of that name. Even to the hobbits it was a legend of vague fear" (*The Lord of the Rings* [*LotR*], II.4.287); as they enter the mines Gandalf asserts that "[t]here are older and fouler things than Orcs in the deep places of the world" (II.4.301). During their journey Frodo (a figure with shamanic overtones himself, given his propensity for dreams and visions and his sensitivity to other dimensions of reality) feels "a deep uneasiness, growing to dread" (II.4.303) and "the certainty of evil ahead and evil following" (II.4.304).

Whatever the associations of Moria, it is in his encounter with the Balrog that Gandalf's experience most clearly parallels shamanic initiation rites. He challenges the Balrog, and both prevails and is felled, and their encounter is one that takes place beyond the world the rest of the Fellowship occupies. It is clearly a descent, a long descent through freezing water ("long time I fell," says Gandalf), and Gandalf fights with his otherworldly opponent "far under the living earth where time is not counted [... where] the world is gnawed by nameless things" (*LotR* III.5.490). The Balrog clutches him, and Gandalf hews him, and they ascend from the depths to the highest peak, "a dizzy eyrie above the mists of the world" (III.5.490). From there, says Gandalf,

darkness took me, and I strayed out of thought and time, and I wandered far on roads that I will not tell [...]. I lay staring upward, while the stars wheeled over, and each day was as long as a life-age of the earth. Faint to my ears came the gathered rumour of all lands: the springing and the dying, the song and the weeping, and the slow everlasting groan of overburdened stone. (III.5.491)

The encounter with the Balrog, the descent into the underworld, the ascent into the sky, the configuration of the reality Gandalf experiences as being beyond time, and his description of his experience as a journey ("Now I have walked

---

<sup>5</sup> Marjorie Burns has also discussed this association; see *Perilous Realms*, 71-3, 95-9, 104-5.

<sup>6</sup> Glosecki, "Patterns of Initiation," chap. 5 of *Shamanism*, 141-80.

there [...] I wandered far on roads that I will not tell")—all these features suggest the outlines of a shamanic initiation rite.

But perhaps the most important parallel to shamanic initiation is the transformation Gandalf undergoes. When he returns to the world of the living he is fundamentally changed. His figure bears a light-filled transparency and there is new power in him. He can confront the Black Riders (associated by Glosecki with the disease-riders challenged by the shamanic doctor in Old English charms) as the White Rider and battle the Dark Lord Sauron in a non-physical plane: "I sat in a high place, and I strove with the Dark Tower; and the Shadow passed" (III.5.484). He has superior knowledge and can see things others can not. He is shamanic in a way that is clearly related to his experience in Moria. Even his reference to being sent back, seen in the world of Middle-earth as a reference to the Valar or perhaps even Eru, can be accommodated to a shamanic system that locates a *monotheos* at the top of the "ladder of spirit powers," a supreme being distant from the human world, or a *demiurge*, both less distant and less powerful than the *monotheos*, but involved in the initiation of the shaman (Glosecki, *Shamanism* 33).

If Gandalf, then, can be seen to have shamanic associations, are there other elements of shamanism in the world of Middle-earth? And given the importance of Glosecki's idea of reflexes of older cultures, what is the relationship between the Third Age seen in *LotR* and the older First Age viewed in *The Silmarillion* [*Sil.*]? According to Glosecki, a fundamental aspect of shamanism is a basic animistic world view, a sense of the universe as animated by spirits, from living creatures such as animals and plants to inorganic objects such as stones. In a world where trees speak and move this seems an obvious point, but not all creatures of Middle-earth are equally cognizant of this phenomenon. The Elves are the most in touch with Arda as an animate entity, as is the Ent Treebeard who knows "the world is changing: I feel it in the water, I feel it in the earth, and I smell it in the air" (*LotR* VI.6.959), and after his encounter with the Balrog, Gandalf can hear "the slow everlasting groan of overburdened stone" (III.5.491). Yet most of the peoples of Middle-earth at the end of the Third Age cannot feel and hear such things, and as such their situation parallels that of the Anglo-Saxons Glosecki discusses. In his discussion of vestiges of animism, he focuses on objects that retain a spiritual and physical force that goes beyond symbolism, concentrating on weapons and gold such as the boar-helmet in *Beowulf* as a reflex of the animal guardian and the sword Greyflank in *The Saga of Gísli*, which retains the spirit of its owner. Similar vestiges are present in *LotR*: the elven rope and *lembas*, for example, retain an essence of their elven creators and have resulting power, both helpful (for Frodo and Sam) and harmful (for Gollum). The flip side of the elven artifacts are the Morgul-weapons of the Nazgûl—recognized immediately as evil by Elves like

Glorfindel who are as loath to touch them as Orcs are to handle *lembas*. Frodo's wound received on Weathertop features a piece of Morgul-blade that works its way into Frodo's body—animated indeed (II.1.215). And of course there is the Ring itself that more than any of these objects retains the essence of its maker.<sup>7</sup>

Also essential to Glosecki's concept of shamanism are ecstasy, a trancelike state in which the shaman enters another reality and time (Eliade's *illo tempore*)<sup>8</sup> and engages in a metempsychotic journey; therapy, where the shaman can engage in both healing or the inflicting of disease; and assistance, the presence of animal guardians (*Shamanism* 7-8). Aragorn's identity as healer is relevant to several of these concepts:

Now Aragorn knelt beside Faramir, and held a hand upon his brow. And those that watched felt that some great struggle was going on. For Aragorn's face grew grey with weariness; and ever and anon he called the name of Faramir, but each time more faintly to their hearing, as if Aragorn himself was removed from them, and walked afar in some dark vale, calling for one that was lost. (*LotR* V.8.847)

What is implied here is the ecstatic journey of the shaman. Both Faramir and Aragorn are in the room, yet at the same time they walk in some other dimension. Faramir confirms this upon waking: "My lord, you called me. I come," to which Aragorn replies, "Walk no more in the shadows, but awake!" (V.8.848). Aragorn affirms that he has "the power to heal," a power he specifies as "to recall [...] from the dark valley" (V.8.849), but he identifies Elrond as the greater healer, suggesting that the scenes we did not witness in Rivendell, Elrond's healing of Frodo, might have looked much like this.

Yet in the world of the Third Age such shamanic practices are clearly not the norm and they are associated with the Elves or the Númenóreans. Other peoples of Middle-earth are figured as estranged from communion with Arda, and for them such things appear only as residue of an older culture. Consider, for example, the avunculate and its association with matrilineal society, for Glosecki an important totemic reflex.<sup>9</sup> In *The Hobbit* we are told, without context or explanation, that "Fili and Kili had fallen defending [Thorin] with shield and body, for he was their mother's elder brother" (18.351). In the case of the dwarves too little is known of their social structure to determine whether this reflects a current situation or residue of more ancient custom; regardless of how the

---

<sup>7</sup> One may think of J.K. Rowling's concept of Horcruxes in her Harry Potter series in connection with such ideas of objects retaining some essence of their maker.

<sup>8</sup> Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, 94, qtd. in Glosecki, *Shamanism*, 13.

<sup>9</sup> See for example Glosecki's "Beowulf and the Wills: Traces of Totemism?" and "The Kin Bonds of Camelot."

dwarves themselves understand the practice it is noteworthy that the narrator of *The Hobbit*, Bilbo if we accept the conceit, feels the practice requires no explanation.<sup>10</sup> The hobbits themselves show indications of a more ancient culture, one they themselves understand little. It is Gandalf, not a hobbit, who tells the story of Sméagol's transformation into Gollum, and in describing his much older cultural milieu insists not only that he is of "hobbit-kind" but suggests the possibility of a matriarchal societal structure. When Frodo objects to the notion that Gollum is a hobbit, Gandalf asserts that "About their origins, at any rate, I know more than hobbits do themselves" (*LotR* I.2.53) and insists "that Sméagol's grandmother was a matriarch, a great person in her way" (I.2.55) and that she ruled Gollum's family: "There was among them a family of high repute, for it was large and wealthier than most, and it was ruled by a grandmother of the folk, stern and wise in old lore, such as they had" (I.2.51); further it is clear that it is she who banishes Gollum: "his grandmother, desiring peace, expelled him from the family and turned him out of her hole" (I.2.52). Clearly she is the figure of power and authority in the societal structure.

And finally, of course, there are the Rohirrim, modeled on the Anglo-Saxons, who feature cultural traces similar to those detected by Glosecki in poems like *Beowulf*: not intact matrilineal structure but reflexes of it. The prominence of the avunculate reflects not a current political reality but a trace of one, preserved in the frequency of the MoBr-SiSo pairs (mother's brother-sister's son), the affectionate nature of such bonds, and the presence of language to describe these familial relationships. Similarly, in *LotR* we have Théoden consistently refer to Éomer as his sister-son and Éowyn as his sister-daughter (*LotR* III.6.504, 506, 512; 8.530), demonstrating language that singles out that familial relationship, and among the characters of Rohan the trio of Théoden, Éomer, and Éowyn is not only the most prominent, but the most affectionate. The discussion of the People of the Mark in Appendix A ("The House of Eorl," 1043-

---

<sup>10</sup> Bilbo's and Frodo's relationship too, while not a strictly avuncular one, is similar; Tolkien refers to Frodo as Bilbo's "favourite 'nephew,'" though the first time he uses it he puts the familial term in quotation marks (*LotR* Prol.10) and makes it clear elsewhere that Frodo is not, strictly speaking, the son of Bilbo's sister (it is perhaps worth noting that in older usage the term "nephew" could indicate a broader category of male descendent). The specific familial relationship is complicated as Frodo is related to Bilbo through both his father, Drogo Baggins, and his mother, Primula Brandybuck, making "Mr. Frodo [...] his first *and* second cousin, once removed either way," at least according to the Gaffer (I.1.22-3). The specifics of their kinship are spelled out in the Family Trees given in Appendix C, which indicate that while the relationship is more distant than that of uncle and nephew, Frodo is more closely related through his mother, as Bilbo's mother and Frodo's grandmother are sisters, while Bilbo's grandfather and Frodo's great-grandfather were brothers (App C. 1074-5). Still, "nephew" is the term Tolkien usually applies to Frodo, whether spoken by Bilbo (I.1.29) or thought by Frodo himself (II.1.219).



4) makes clear that rule passes from father to son, but also provides for the sister-son inheriting when there is no son as when Fréaláf, Helm's sister-son, founds the second line of kings, and Éomer founds the third line. This practice may reflect one that was once the norm but was superseded by patrilineal descent.<sup>11</sup>

And then there are the Drúedain. They appear in *LotR* first as the statues of the Púkel-men that Merry describes on the path to Dunharrow:

At each turn of the road there were great standing stones that had been carved in the likeness of men, huge and clumsy-limbed, squatting cross-legged with their stumpy arms folded on fat bellies. Some in the wearing of the years had lost all features save the dark holes of their eyes that still stared sadly at the passers-by. The Riders hardly glanced at them. The Púkel-men they called them, and heeded them little: no power or terror was left in them. (V.3.777)

The implication of that last line seems to be that at one time there was indeed power and terror in such figures. Later when the Rohirrim encounter Ghân-buri-Ghân, Merry recognizes the affinity between the man and the statues, seeing in the chief "one of those old images brought to life, or maybe a creature descended in true line through endless years from the models used by the forgotten craftsmen long ago" (V.5.813-4). The Rohirrim, however, do not recognize the kinship, and Elfhelm describes the beaters of the drums as "the Woses, the Wild Men of the Woods: thus they talk together from afar. They still haunt Drúadan Forest, it is said. Remnants of an older time they be, living few and secretly, wild and wary as the beasts" (V.5.813).

Tolkien gives a fuller account of the Drúedain in *The Unfinished Tales* [UT]. There they are described as companions of the people of Haleth in the First Age, living among them but of a separate race and lineage. Several details of their practice suggest shamanic qualities. They carve "watch-stones" that are images of themselves clearly related to the statues of the Púkel-men Merry encounters on the road to Dunharrow. In the account in *The Unfinished Tales* we are told that Orcs greatly fear these "watch-stones" because they believe them to be filled with the malice of their makers and "able to hold communication with them" (395). Though originally presented as a belief of the Orcs, this idea is

---

<sup>11</sup> There are other indications that in the world of men there is a deeper past, one of which men themselves have only incomplete knowledge. The first men encountered by the Elves say little of their past; when questioned by Finrod Felagund "Bëor would say little; and indeed he knew little, for the fathers of his people had told few tales of their past and a silence had fallen upon their memory. 'A darkness lies behind us,' Bëor said; 'and we have turned our backs upon it, and we do not desire to return thither even in thought'" (*Sil.* 141). What cultural practices lie in that past are murky, for the earliest records of men are made by the Elves who encountered them already traveling west.

shared by the people of Haleth who would place these “watch-stones” near their houses “believing that (being made by the Drúedain themselves for that purpose) they would hold some of the menace of the living men” (396). Tolkien goes on to relate a story told by the people of Haleth, who believed that the Drúedain “possessed uncanny and magical powers” (396), which supports exactly this belief. In this tale, entitled “The Faithful Stone,” one of the Drúedain gifted in leechcraft who protects a family must leave them briefly. He leaves a watch-stone in his place to guard the house, “la[ying] his hand upon it, and after a silence sa[ying]: ‘See, I have left with it some of my powers. May it keep you from harm!’” A few nights later the forester “heard the shrill warning call of the Drûgs—or dreamed that he heard it, for it roused no one else” (397). Looking out he sees two Orcs lighting fire to his house, but before he can shoot an arrow at them, a Drûg runs up, strikes one of the Orcs, and stamps out the flames as the other flees. Afterward the forester can find no trace of the mysterious Drûg or of the watch-stone. But when the Drûg who protects his family returns and hears the story, he leads the forester to the watch-stone, the legs of which are now scorched; it is perched upon a dead Orc. The Drûg then reveals his own scorched legs, saying

[L]ast night I slept. I woke before morning came, and I was in pain, and found my legs blistered. Then I guessed what had happened. Alas! If some power passes from you to a thing that you have made, then you must take a share in its hurts. (*UT* 398)

There are clear elements here associated with shamanic practice: the Drûg’s identification as a leech, a healer; his transmitting of his powers to the stone; the stone’s ability to act; and the close relationship between the Drûg and the stone. Glosecki discusses the importance of guardians, usually animal guardians, which he terms *nigouïmes*, to shamanic practice (*Shamanism* 31-2 and *passim*). He also discusses a merging that occurs between the guardian spirit and the shaman, where they become one and the shaman often assumes the form of his guardian spirit in his ecstatic journeys. Clearly there are elements of this here. What is also clear is that this world has withdrawn by the time of the Third Age. What in the First Age are animated objects of power and menace, the watch-stones, are simply unregarded statues by the time Merry encounters them at the end of the Third Age. Though the people are still present, their power has decreased, and much of their practice has dwindled. Ghân-buri-Ghân is more aware of the natural world perhaps, sensing the change in the wind before any other (III.5.816-7), but this is a far cry from the powers demonstrated by Drúedain from the First Age. This is generally true of a comparison of the Third Age to the First, of *LotR* to *Sil.*, where shamanic practices are much clearer in *Sil.*

Thus items like elven rope or Morgul-weapons retain an essence of their maker in a vestige of animism in *LotR*, but in *Sil.* not only does Túrin's sword bear the "malice [of ...] the dark heart of the smith" (202) as Melian affirms, it actually speaks: "Yea, I will drink thy blood gladly, that so I may forget the blood of Beleg my master, and the blood of Brandir slain unjustly. I will slay thee swiftly" (225). Transformation into an animal guardian spirit, seen nowhere in *LotR*,<sup>12</sup> figures in the story of Eärendil, as Elwing, wearing the Silmaril, throws herself into the sea to escape Maedhros and Maglor, the sons of Fëanor, but is borne up by Ulmo as "he gave her the likeness of a great white bird" and she flies over the sea to Eärendil. Even afterwards she continues to be associated with birds, flying on "wings [...] white and silver-grey [...] like a white bird" (250). Such transformations figure as well in the story "Of Beren and Lúthien" in the shape-shifting of Sauron as he battles Huan: "Then Sauron shifted shape, from wolf to serpent, and from monster to his own accustomed form" (175), and the disguises of Huan, Beren, and Lúthien, for they do not simply cover their bodies with the hides of wolf and bat, but experience a more bodily merging with the skins they wear;<sup>13</sup> when Huan and Lúthien approach in the "wolf-hame of Draugluin [...]" and the bat-fell of Thuringwethil" (178) Beren fears them and when he himself

was arrayed [...] in the hame of Draugluin, and she in the winged fell of Thuringwethil [, he ...] became in all things like a werewolf to look upon [...] and horror was in his glance as he saw upon his flank a bat-like creature clinging with creased wings. (179)

Later he slinks "in wolf's form beneath" the throne of Morgoth (180); clearly this is a phenomenon of a different order than the donning of Orc-armor as a disguise by Sam and Frodo in *LotR*.<sup>14</sup>

But did Tolkien have a conception of a mythic, let alone shamanic or totemic, past lying behind the poetry of Anglo-Saxon England? And if so, how is that sense translated into his own created world of Middle-earth? In the concluding essay of the volume *Myth in Early Northwest Europe* put together by Prof. Glosecki, Tom Shippey suggests that Tolkien was aware of theories of myth and sympathetic towards nineteenth-century practitioners like Nikolai

---

<sup>12</sup> Unless you see Gandalf's description of the Balrog during their fight as an instance of shape-shifting, which I do not, seeing it rather as a description of the Balrog's physical shape once his fire is extinguished: "His fire was quenched, but now he was a thing of slime, stronger than a strangling snake" (III.5.490).

<sup>13</sup> For the merging of man and animal guardian, see Glosecki, *Shamanism* 188.

<sup>14</sup> I should mention here the shape-shifting of Beorn in *The Hobbit* who assumes bear-form, though he is something of an anomaly and like other aspects of *The Hobbit* not well integrated into the Middle-earth legendarium.

Grundtvig, J.M. Kemble, and Karl Müllenhoff, even if only in preference to the historical bent of scholars of his own time, so memorably lambasted in his landmark essay “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics” (Shippey 324). For mortal races like Men and Hobbits, part of the sense of depth created comes from his construction of their history to include a shadowy era preceding their own records or knowledge of themselves; thus the sense of a vague past lying behind the first men encountered by Elves in the First Age, or the suggestion of a matriarchal past in Hobbit pre-history. But for his immortal race of Elves, there is no forgotten past. In many ways the estrangement of Elves from the other races of Middle-earth by the end of the Third Age stands in for the disappearance of shamanism traced by Glosecki. Many aspects of the shamanic other world, the dreamtime, Eliade’s *illo tempore* (94, qtd. in Glosecki, *Shamanism* 13), are paralleled by Tolkien’s concept of Faërie. As one critic observed “[t]he trilogy is, significantly, set in the essentially inner realm of Faërie, close to the world of dream and myth” (Grant 164). Thus Lothlórien is a realm where time moves differently and is seen alternatively both as a realm of healing and peace and as “the Golden Wood,” a place of sorcery (III.2.422; III.6.502). *The Lord of the Rings* already speaks of a lost past where the spirit world was more present, but it is figured in Tolkien as Faërie and associated with the Elves. By the end of the Third Age it is retreating, and now only those with special sensitivity have access—the Elves, and those designated elf-friends. In its place legends of malevolent spirits grow up, such as Éomer’s view of Galadriel as the Sorceress of the Golden Wood, and old wives’ tales such as the Rohirrim’s of the Ents, for what was once perceived to be, and once *was*, an animated universe.



WORKS CITED

- Burns, Marjorie. *Perilous Realms: Celtic and Norse in Tolkien's Middle-earth*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005.
- Chapman, Edgar L. "The Shaman as Hero and Spiritual Leader: Richard Adams' Mythmaking in *Watership Down* and *Shardik*." *Mythlore* 5.2 (#18) (1978): 7-11.
- Crossley, Jennifer. "'Lord of the Rings' Class Enchants Students." *Spectrum. Kaleidoscope* 7 February 2006: 7, 10. 1 June 2009. <<http://studentaffairs.sass.uab.edu/kscope/pdfarchives/kscope020706.pdf>>.
- Eliade, Mircea. *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. Bollingen series 76. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964. Trans. of *Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase*.
- Glosecki, Stephen O. "Beowulf and the Wills: Traces of Totemism?" *Philological Quarterly* 78:1-2 (Winter 1999): 15-47. Repr. in *Heroic Age: A Journal of Early Medieval Northwestern Europe* 5 (Summer/Autumn 2001): np. 1 June 2009.
- . "The Kin Bonds of Camelot." *Medieval Perspectives* 11 (1996): 139-52.
- . *Shamanism and Old English Poetry*. New York and London: Garland, 1989.
- . "Stranded Narrative: Myth, Metaphor, and the Metrical Charm." In *Myth in Early Northwest Europe*. Ed. Stephen O. Glosecki. Tempe: ACMRS with Brepols, 2007. 47-70.
- Grant, Patrick. "Tolkien: Archetype and Word." In *Understanding the Lord of the Rings: The Best of Tolkien Criticism*. Ed. Rose A. Zimbardo and Neil D. Isaacs. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004. 163-82.
- Hollwitz, John. "The Wonder of Passage, The Making of Gold: Alchemy and Initiation in *Out of the Silent Planet*." *Mythlore* 11.3 (#41) (Winter-Spring 1985): 17-24.
- Knapp, Bettina. "A Jungian Reading of The Kalevala 500-1300?: Finnish Shamanism—The Patriarchal Senex Figure." [Part I: Introduction]. *Mythlore* 8.3 (#29) (Autumn 1981): 25-8.
- . "A Jungian Reading of The Kalevala 500-1300?: Finnish Shamanism—The Patriarchal Senex Figure." [Part II: The Archetypal Shaman/Hero]. *Mythlore* 8.4 (#30) (Winter 1982): 33-6.
- . "A Jungian Reading of The Kalevala 500-1300?: Finnish Shamanism—The Patriarchal Senex Figure." [Part III: The Anima Archetype]. *Mythlore* 9.1 (#31) (Spring 1982): 35-6.
- . "A Jungian Reading of The Kalevala 500-1300?: Finnish Shamanism—The Patriarchal Senex Figure." [Part IV: Conclusion]. *Mythlore* 9.2 (#32) (Summer 1982): 38-41.
- Patterson, Nancy-Lou. "'All Nerves and Nose': Lord Peter Wimsey as Wounded Healer in the Novels of Dorothy L. Sayers." *Mythlore* 14.4 (#54) (Summer 1988): 13-6.
- Shippey, Tom. "Imagined Cathedrals: Retelling Myth in the Twentieth Century." In *Myth in Early Northwest Europe*. Ed. Stephen O. Glosecki. Tempe: ACMRS with Brepols, 2007. 307-32.
- . *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*. London: HarperCollins, 2000.
- . *The Road to Middle-earth: How J.R.R. Tolkien Created a New Mythology*. 1982. Rev. ed. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics." *Proceedings of the British Academy* 22 (1936): 245-95.
- . *The Hobbit*. 1937. New York: Ballantine, 1986.
- . *The Lord of the Rings*. 1955. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.

- . "On Fairy-stories." 1947. *The Tolkien Reader*. New York: Ballantine, 1966. 33-99.
- . *The Silmarillion*. 1977. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001.
- . *Unfinished Tales*. 1980. New York: Ballantine, 2002.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

YVETTE KISOR is Associate Professor of Literature at Ramapo College of New Jersey. She has various publications on Tolkien, *Beowulf*, and medieval literature. Among her recent publications are "'Elves (and Hobbits) always refer to the Sun as She': Some Notes on a Note in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*" in *Tolkien Studies*; multiple entries in *The J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment*, ed. Michael Drout (New York: Routledge, 2006); "Numerical Composition and *Beowulf*: A Reconsideration," in *Anglo-Saxon England*; and "Moments of Silence, Acts of Speech: Uncovering the Incest Motif in the Man of Law's Tale," in *The Chaucer Review*.



## MYTHIC CIRCLE

*The Mythic Circle* is a small literary magazine published annually by the Mythopoeic Society which celebrates the work of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Charles Williams. These adventuresome writers saw themselves as contributors to a rich imaginative tradition encompassing authors as different as Homer and H.G. Wells. *The Mythic Circle* is on the lookout for original stories and poems. We are also looking for artists interested in illustrating poems and stories.

Mail submissions and letters to the Editor:  
Dr. Gwenyth Hood  
English Department, Corbly Hall  
Marshall University  
Huntington, WV 25701  
or Email: hood@marshall.edu

Order through the society website:  
[www.mythsoc.org](http://www.mythsoc.org)  
US first class \$8  
Canada first class \$10  
Mexico/Latin America air \$12  
Europe/Asia \$12

