



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

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

Volume 9
Number 4

Article 17

12-15-1983

Norse Mythological Elements in *The Hobbit*

Mitzi M. Brunsdale

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



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

Recommended Citation

Brunsdale, Mitzi M. (1983) "Norse Mythological Elements in *The Hobbit*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 9 : No. 4 , Article 17.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol9/iss4/17>

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.

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

SWOSUTM

Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico • Postponed to: July 30 – August 2, 2021



Abstract

Considers the influence of Norse mythology on *The Hobbit* in particular, both in story elements and in “Northern courage.” Asserts that in *The Hobbit*, Tolkien “bases each of the major elements of the quest on an identifiably Northern mythological source.” Sees the moral choices presented in *The Hobbit* as characteristic of those faced by the “stern heroes of Northern myths” and important to children, whose notions of right and wrong are more basic than those of adults.

Additional Keywords

Norse literature—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien; Norse mythology—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Influence of Norse mythology; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*—Sources

Norse Mythological Elements in The Hobbit

Mitzi M. Brunsdale

Andrew Lang, the Scottish nineteenth-century collector of fairy tales, believed that "Is it true?" was "the great question children ask." But J. R. R. Tolkien declared ("On Fairy Stories," 1938) that children had asked him far more often, "Was he good? Was he wicked?" Tolkien concluded, "they were more concerned to get the Right side and the Wrong side clear. For that is a question equally important in History and in Faerie."¹

First in his children's book *The Hobbit* and later in the trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien exhibited a universe that seemed to exist in history rather than one merely an invention of Faerie. Much of Tolkien's ability to convince his readers of the "real" existence of the Middle-earth he created seems to stem from the conviction he shared with Chesterton, that children "are innocent and love justice: while most of us are wicked and naturally prefer mercy."² Tolkien drew upon a child's stern perception of Right and Wrong, in which "mercy untempered by justice" leads to "falsification of values"³ and turned for the basis of his Middle-earth to a world he had loved since his own boyhood, "the nameless North of Sigurd of the Volsungs, and the prince of all dragons."⁴

Since that somber Northern atmosphere is illuminated only by human heroism in the face of inevitable defeat by the forces of evil, and "the hero can prove what he is only by dying,"⁵ hero and dragon in the great Germanic myths are as intimately bound together as the child's Right and Wrong, one unable to exist without the other. Conventional explanations for children's fascination with fantasy and adventure maintain that "the child lacks the experience that would make realism meaningful to him, and he lacks the learning which is necessary for the interpretation of allegorical fiction."⁶ Tolkien, however, broadened "children's literature" by building not on the child's inabilities but on children's positive --if rigorous--Northern moral sense, unclouded by softer virtues of mercy and forgiveness.

The Hobbit centers on a decidedly Northern quest for dragon's gold, culminating in the slaying of the dragon Smaug by Bard, a human hero, and the ensuing Battle of the Five Armies, pitting the forces of Good against those of Evil, with the prize the freedom of men, elves, and dwarves--and hobbits, the utterly new beings Tolkien created to witness the quest and to act out its principal role. Tolkien's gently rounded little protagonist, the hobbit Bilbo Baggins, half human size, brightly clad, and good natured, dwells at first in the epitome of creature comforts: "a very comfortable tunnel without smoke, with panelled walls, and floors tiled and carpeted. . . and lots and lots of pegs for hats and coats" and dinner "twice a day when they can get it."⁷ But Bilbo's mother, "the fabulous Belladonna Took" gave her son an unhobbitlike yearning for adventure that draws him, willy-nilly, into accepting the wizard Gandalf's invitation to join Thorin's band of dwarves in seeking out Smaug's lair. Aside from the hobbit himself, though, Tolkien bases each of the major elements of the quest on an identifiably Northern mythological source.

Gandalf the wizard displays each of the three manifestations of the Scandinavian god Odin. Odin is said to have appeared to Harald Wartooth, King of the Danes, in pre-Christian times as "an old man of great height, . . . clad in a hairy mantle."⁸ rather like Gandalf, famous in hobbit lore as a magician, who one day turned up from his wanderings at Bilbo's door as "an old man with a staff, . . . a long grey cloak, and a white beard" (*Hobbit*, p. 17). In Norse myth, Odin primarily appears as a god of battle and giver of victory, choosing slain warriors to live with him in Valhalla until they join in the last great battle between the gods and evil forces, when Odin's special adversary is the great wolf Fenris. Gandalf too at first seems only an old wanderer, but once on the way, he soon uses his magical power, like Odin's, to speak with beasts and birds like the

King of the Eagles, who saves Bilbo and the dwarves from the wolfish Wargs beyond the Edge of the Wild. The eagles, sacred in Norse myth to Odin, help preserve the forces of Good Gandalf guided at the Battle of Five Armies. Odin was also known as a shaman, especially able to bring ecstasy in battle and poetic inspiration, with sacred ravens to bring him news, like the ravens who attend Gandalf. Gandalf's strange friend Beorn, who rescues Bilbo and the dwarves from goblins and at last wins the Battle of Five Armies for the forces of Good in the shape of a great bear, is reminiscent of the berserker warriors consecrated to Odin, who fought with superhuman strength in the intoxication of battle and could reputedly assume the shape of fierce animals. Odin's third function, as God of the Dead, also underlies Gandalf's inability to change Man's mortal fate, just as Odin had to bow to the earthly death of his warriors.

The other two non-human races portrayed in *The Hobbit*, the elves and the dwarves, are similarly closely related to Northern mythology. Tolkien's elves have nothing but their name in common with the amusing but ineffectual pixies of folklore. The inhabitants of the Old Norse Alfheim, one of the three divisions of the Scandinavian mythological universe, were impressive, powerful beings with a special power of healing. Ceremonies honoring them continued until the late Viking period, around 1018 A.D., when animal sacrifices were made at burial-mounds in which elves were supposed to reside.¹⁰ The fey elves of Tolkien's Mirkwood are beautiful and dangerous, inhabiting forests the Hobbits normally fear and avoid, and their powers involve healing and magical regeneration. The Last Homely House of Elrond Halfelven at Rivendell where Bilbo and the dwarves recuperate after the first part of their journey is permeated with such redoubtable magical lore that "Evil things did not come into that valley" (*Hobbit*, p. 61). Tolkien's dwarves also strongly resemble their Old Norse forebearers, "creatures with strange names, who bred in the earth like maggots, and dwelt in hills and rocks. These were skilled craftsmen, and it was they who wrought the great treasures of the gods,"¹¹ among them the great gold ring Draupnir from which eight other rings dropped every ninth night.¹² Once Tolkien's dwarves had wrought equally splendid wonders, but, like so many other of his folk, Evil has driven them from their lands. Lacking "a mighty warrior, even a Hero" (*Hobbit*, p. 33), Gandalf has chosen Bilbo to help steal the dwarves' treasure back from Smaug the dragon. Like the Germanic hero Beowulf, Bilbo is thus engaged to help a people not his own. Echoing the traditions of the Germanic warriors, too, when the dwarves' leader Thorin falls in battle, a victim of his own lust for gold, his two nephews also die defending him (*Hobbit*, p. 275), exemplifying the strong relation between a Northern chieftain and his sister's sons as well as the Germanic code of the *comitatus*.

One of the Norse dwarves' mightiest artifacts was the gold ring in the story of Sigurd the Volsung. This ring brought only destruction on those who wore it, even Sigurd, who killed the dragon Fafnir and took over his hoard of treasure.¹³ When little Bilbo, certainly no hero in the stamp of Sigurd, is separated from the dwarves and finds a strange creature, Gollum, they play one of the primitive riddle games beloved of early Germanic tribes. The prize is Gollum's "precious," a ring that enables its wearer to be invisible. Bilbo knows the riddle game binds even wicked creatures (*Hobbit*, pp. 86-7), and so Gollum must unwillingly yield it up when Bilbo wins. The ring enables Bilbo later to carry out his mission in the dragon's cave, but by doing so it brings about the climactic battle of the story. In giving this ring so much power in *The Hobbit* (to say nothing of his later trilogy), Tolkien is employing the long tradition of Old Norse ring-magic. In the old temples of Thor, silver or gold arm-rings were kept to swear sacred oaths and magically protect their wearers from sword-blows.¹⁴ Germanic tribes offered brides their wedding-rings on a sword, linking marital with military fidelity, and the ring-hilts of

Viking and Germanic swords testify to the sacred reciprocal bond between the lord (ring-giver) and his heorowearde.¹⁵ The ring in Tolkien's work as well as in the Germanic mythological tradition which inspired it encircles the universal dualistic principle of Good and Evil.

The evil fiery dragon who guards the mound of burial treasure stolen from the tomb of a dwarf king, Thorin's ancestor, is another of the strongest motifs of Northern myth, as in Beowulf, where the theft of one of the dragon's gold cups brings on the vast devastation of the countryside that forces the aged hero to battle for his people's lives.¹⁶ When Bilbo removes one cup—all that the little hobbit can carry—to prove to Thorin that Bilbo has indeed been inside Smaug's lair, Smaug's vengeance is just as harsh: "Flames unquenchable sprang high into the night" (Hobbit, p. 236) from the town of Dale. The human hero Bard eventually faces and slays Smaug, even though Bard apparently dies, like Beowulf, in the effort. But Tolkien does not allow Bard to die, a departure from the tradition. An old thrush carries Bard a message from Bilbo, revealing the one vulnerable spot in Smaug's bejeweled armorplating. In the Norse myth, the dragon, as the symbol for the law of mortality exemplified in the devouring flames of Northern funeral ritual, represents the force of death which neither heroes nor the gods themselves could conquer. Bard's success, however, admits humanity in Tolkien's universe to a kind of heroic immortality, only possible through the small but essential role of the hobbit. The heroic act for Tolkien, in fact, could only exist in the presence of a catalytic witness, here the hobbit, one who had overcome his own fears in order to persevere.

At the same time when he was writing The Hobbit, Tolkien enunciated the harsh but necessary lesson of maturity in the essay "On Fairy Stories": ". . . that on callow, lumpish and selfish youth peril, sorrow, and the shadow of death can bestow dignity, and even sometimes wisdom."¹⁷ Bilbo had to face not only the outward perils of unknown regions, fierce beasts and evil sorcery, but far worse, faced the inward danger most perilous to the Northern soul: that he would prove a coward. Bilbo fought his real battle with himself in the tunnel leading to Smaug's lair, "before he ever saw the vast danger that lay in wait. At any rate after a short halt go on he did" (Hobbit, p. 205). Bilbo also experiences sorrow by Gandalf's shaming him out of his despair as Gandalf leaves the party at the edge of Mirkwood: "You must either go through or give up your quest. And I am not going to allow you to back out now, Mr. Baggins. I am ashamed of you for thinking of it. You have got to look after all these dwarves for me!" (Hobbit, p. 138). Bilbo experiences an even greater sorrow, however, at the loss of his frequent dream of being back in his safe hobbit hole. His sorrow is necessary to know himself, though, and recognize his illusions for what they are. By the time the Battle of Five Armies seems lost, Bilbo has achieved a Northern stoicism, regretting only the lack of glory in the defeat:

"Really it is enough to make one weep, after all one has gone through. I would rather old Smaug had been left with all the wretched treasure, than that these vile creatures should get it, and poor old Bombur . . . and all the rest come to a bad end; and Bard too, and the Lake-men and the merry elves. . . /I have heard songs of many battles, and I have always understood that defeat may be glorious. It seems very uncomfortable, not to say distressing. I wish I was well out of it" (Hobbit, p. 270).

Thus following the Weltbild of the pagan Northern peoples, the greatest danger to the characters of The Hobbit is not the shadow of physical death but the threat of a death that will not allow them to prove themselves. Bilbo won the beginning of his personal dignity, even acquiring the Germanic warrior's right to name his sword, in a lonely battle deep in the fearsome forest:

Somehow the killing of the giant spider, all alone by himself in the dark without the help of the wizard or the dwarves or of anyone else, made a great difference to Mr. Baggins. He felt a different person, and much fiercer and bolder in spite of an empty stomach, as he wiped his sword

on the grass and put it back into its sheathe. "I will give you a name," he said to it, "and I shall call you Sting" (Hobbit, p. 154).

Bilbo has thus changed considerably by the time he arrived at the entrance to Smaug's cave:

He was trembling with fear, but his little face was set and grim. Already he was a very different hobbit from the one that had run out without a pocket-handkerchief from Bag-End long ago. He had not had a pocket-handkerchief for ages. He loosened his dagger in its sheath, tightened his belt, and went on (Hobbit, pp. 204-5).

Even trapped in Smaug's tunnel with the dwarves despairing around him, Bilbo is strengthened, feeling "a strange lightening of the heart, as if a heavy weight had gone from under his waistcoat" (Hobbit, p. 223).

Bilbo's hard-won self-knowledge allows him to recognize Thorin's destructive obsession with gold even when Bard the dragon-slayer cannot. Bilbo tells Bard, ". . . you don't know Thorin Oakenshield as well as I do now. I assure you, he is quite ready to sit on a heap of gold and starve, as long as you sit here" (Hobbit, p. 256). Bilbo averts suicidal war between dwarves, men and elves by giving Thorin's great desire, the Arkenstone, to the Elvenking (Hobbit, p. 258), and even Thorin, dying, comes to praise Bilbo's wise decision: "'There is more in you of good than you know, child of the kindly West. Some courage and some wisdom, blended in measure. If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world'" (Hobbit, p. 273).

Tolkien's "merrier world" of Middle-earth surely provides children a rousing adventure tale, but The Hobbit is also a tale about the child at the heart of most of us, perceiving Right and Wrong as sternly as did the heroes of the North. Perhaps Tolkien's "child" is another name for an acute moral sense impossible to achieve in comfort and security and the certainty of salvation. If humble little witnesses may win the right to perceive and assist the noble act through their own suffering and trials, their world necessarily appeals to all of us, young and old, who want to believe in the existence of a childlike and yet immortal father to the man.

NOTES

¹J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," in The Tolkien Reader (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), p. 38.

²Ibid., p. 44.

³Ibid., p. 41.

⁴Edith Hamilton, Mythology (1940 rpt., New York: Mentor-New American Library, 1969), p. 301.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Robert Scholes, Elements of Fiction (New York: Oxford, 1968), p. 23.

⁷J. R. R. Tolkien, The Hobbit (New York: Ballantine, authorized ed., 1966), pp. 15-16. Successive page numbers in the text refer to this edition.

⁸H. R. Ellis Davidson, Gods and Myths of Northern Europe (New York: Penguin, 1964, 1977 rpt.), p. 49, n. 2, quoted from Saxo Grammaticus, Gesta Danorum (tr. Elton, 1894), VII, 248, O. 298.

⁹Ibid., p. 147. "The Old Norse adjective Od, from which Odin, the later form of his name in Scandinavia, must be derived, bears a similar meaning (to the Germanic mut, meaning high mental excitement, fury, intoxication, or pos-

The currently standard biography, with critical evaluations of Waugh's books. (The volume received two negative reviews in the Evelyn Waugh Newsletter at the time of its publication.) The index is poor: several Waugh works mentioned in the text are not in it, for example--and, more to the point here, neither Lewis nor Wain is listed in it.

Lewis is mentioned in passing in connection with an encyclical letter by Pius XII, saying the Assumption is a doctrine and is to be believed "irrespective of the claims of reason". Waugh "was delighted that the letter, by the literalism of its interpretation, put to flight many Catholic clergymen who, after relying on the arguments of the eminent Anglican theologian C. S. Lewis, had consoled worried parishioners with assurances that the terms of the definition would not put any insufferable burden on the mind" (p. 336). Probably the description of Lewis should include such a word as amateur between eminent and Anglican. The context is also odd, since Lewis's religious writings are obviously seen as at least doctrinally moderate. Perhaps the reference is to Broadcast Talks in the preface of which Lewis admits the Roman Catholic who read the scripts thought he "went too far about the comparative unimportance of theories of the 'Atonement'".

John Wain is mentioned for an essay by Waugh replying to Wain's review of P. G. Wodehouse; the exact details of Wain's review are not given.

And Cecil is mentioned for various minor reasons. Waugh once retained Rachael MacCarthy "(now Lady David Cecil) to act as his secretary" (p. 117). Cecil recommended Waugh's Edmund Campion for the Hawthornden prize, despite the fact that Waugh exaggerated the lowness of Cecil's family's pre-Elizabethan social position (p. 152). In 1939, Cecil was one of the persons Waugh approached about starting a monthly magazine (p. 197). Cecil writing on Dickens' sentimentality is paraphrased on Waugh's (p. 225). And Cecil's admiration for Howard Overing Sturgis's novel Bedchamber is mentioned in connection with Waugh's liking for that novel (p. 416).

Watson, George. "From fiction to faith". TLS: The Times Literary Supplement, No. 4147 (24 September 1982), 1024.

Watson reviews Lewis's Of This and Other Worlds (1982). He calls Hooper's preface "embarrassingly hero-worshipping" but praises most of Lewis's essays and Lewis generally. "Along with George Orwell, whom he never knew and did not always approve, Lewis now looks like the finest British polemicist of the mid-century." Watson finds many modern critics and educationalists returning to positions Lewis defended as a conservative. (Williams is mentioned once in passing, Tolkien or his works, four times.)

Norse Mythological Elements Continued from page 50

session): raging, furious, intoxicated', (sic) and can be used to signify poetic genius and inspiration."

¹⁰Ibid., p. 156. Offerings of milk for the elves have been poured into cups at tombs by Swedish country folk up to our own day.

¹¹Ibid., p. 28.

¹²Ibid., p. 42. Tolkien's inspiration for the "One Ring to bind them all" seems plain.

¹³Ibid., p. 43.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 76-7.

¹⁵H. R. E. Davidson, The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 212.

¹⁶Gods and Myths of Northern Europe, p. 159. Cf. Beowulf

CONTRIBUTORS

We are pleased to further introduce the writers of articles and cover artists.

Rhone Beare

Dr. Beare teaches in the Classics Department of the University of Newcastle in New South Wales, Australia. She has probed deeply into little-known details of Tolkien's works. Three responses to her letters are printed in The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien.

Joe R. Christopher

B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. from the University of Oklahoma. His dissertation on Lewis led to the enumerative bibliographies he has published since, including C.S. Lewis: An Annotated Checklist. He teaches at Tarleton State College in Austin, Texas.

Nancy C. Hanger

She is currently in her Senior year at Gordon College in Massachusetts, and plans continued graduate work in Early Medieval History, Languages, and Literature. Her infrequent spare hours are spent in reading and Nature appreciation, including hiking.

Tisa Ho (Nga)

She has taught for a number of years in the Department of English of the University of Hong Kong, and is currently in the business world. She attended the 1981 Mythopoeic Conference at Mills College in Oakland, California.

Diana Paxson

B.A. Mills College, M.A.. She is the Founder of the Society for Creative Anachronism, and has taught courses on Myth at Mills College. She has recently published her first novel, Lady of Light and lives in a large home called Greyhavens in Berkeley, California.

Peter J. Schakel

He teaches in the Department of English at Hope College in Holland, Michigan. He is particularly adept in Lewis scholarship, and has edited Longing for a Form: Essays on the Fiction of C.S. Lewis.

Patrick Wynne

He is a Dental Lab Technician in Fosston, Minnesota in addition to the great deal of drawing which he does. Besides his strong interest in Tolkien, he enjoys writing poetry and reading historical novels.

Manfred Zimmermann

Ph.D. the University of Marburg, West Germany. He also has studied at Pembroke College Cambridge, where he first read The Lord of the Rings in 1973-74. He now teaches at Marburg University.

Submissions

Mythlore welcomes submissions of articles, art, reviews, poetry, and other material. See page 2 for the address of the appropriate Editor. Contributors of articles, cover and back cover art, should also submit a short biographical paragraph for publication in the Contributors' section.

The preferred style for articles is the MLA Handbook. To save space, please restrict the use of footnotes by incorporating "ibid." and "op. cit." citations in your text in parenthesis. Please submit two copies.

Full page art should have an image area of 7 1/2" x 10". Art for a single column should be 4 1/2" wide. Art for double column width should be 9 1/2" wide.

2276-7: "Ancient in years, he mounts guard over the heathen gold; yet he is not one whit the better for it." Also cf. Beowulf 2312-22: "Then did the visitant spit forth embers, and burn up the bright dwellings; the flaming ray wrought mischief to men, for the enemy flying through the air would leave nothing alive . . . He encompassed the people of the land with burning, with fire and flame."

¹⁷Tolkien Reader, p. 45.