Norse Mythological Elements in *The Hobbit*

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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 (in “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.”

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.” Tolkien drew upon a child’s Stern perception of Right and Wrong, in which “mercy untempered by justice” leads to “satisfaction of values” 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.”

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,”[2] Tolkien added 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 mainly that “the child lacks the last great battle between realism meaningful to him, and he lacks the learning which is necessary for the interpretation of allegorical fiction.”[3] Tolkien, however, broadened “children’s literature” by building not on the child’s abnormalities but on children’s positive attitudes, a 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 Bilbo, a human being, and the great 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 epistle 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.”[4]

But Bilbo’s mother, “the fabulous Belladonna Took” gave her son an unobbligable 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 identifiable Northern mythological source.

Gandalf the wizard displays each of the three manifestations of the Scandinavian god Odin. Odin is said to have appeared to Harold Wartooth, King of the Danes, in pre-Christian times as “an old man of great height, clad in a hairy mantle, rather like Gandalf, famous in hobbit lore as a magician, who one day turned up 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 victory, choosing slain warriors to live with him in Valhalla until they join in the great war against 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 Nargs beyond the Edge of the Wild. The eagles, sacred in Norse myth to Odin, helped Odin to accomplish the good works 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 raven who attends Gandalf. Gandalf’s steed Friend Beorn resembles Odin’s ravens from gobins 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 Alfhelm, one of the three divisions of the Færie, were so-called “elfs,” who were supposed to reside. The fey elves of Tolkien’s Middle-earth 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 redeemable magical lore that “Evil things did not come into that valley” (Hobbit, p. 61). Tolkien’s dwarves also strongly resemble their Old Norse forebears, “creatures with strange names, who boded ill to the small 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 rings dropped every ninth night.[12] Once Tolkien’s dwarves had wrought equally mundane and more durable works of everyday use, but by doing so, they were made at burial-mounds, in which elves were supposed to dwell in the afterlife. Tolkien’s dwarves were chosen by 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. 75), exemplifying the strong relationship 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 the destruction upon the world, 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. 66-67), and so Gollum must unwillingly yield it when Bilbo solves the clues. The ring enables Bilbo later to carry out his mission in the dragon’s cave, 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 its later trilogy), Tolkien is employing the long tradition of the Norse ring-wars. In these stories, 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 (king or ganger) and his harrower.

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. 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 bejewelled armory. 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 can conquer. Bard's success, subjective to the force of death which neither heroes nor the gods themselves could conquer, is a victory for humanity, 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, who had overcome his own fears in order to persevere.

At the same time when he was writing The Hobbit, Tolkien enumerated the harsh burden 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 often wished that a great battle 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 whilst 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 sheath. "I will give you a name," he said to it, "and I shall call you Sting" (Hobbit, p. 194).

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 nothad 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-earned 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. 236). Bilbo's success, subject to the dualistic principle of Good and Evil.

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

2 Ibid., p. 44.
3 Ibid., p. 41.
5 Ibid.
8 J. R. R. Tolkien, The Hobbit (New York: Ballantine, authorized ed., 1966), p. 147. "The Old Norse adjective Ór, from which Orin, the later form of his name in Scandinavia, must be derived, bears a similar meaning (to the Germanic urt, meaning high mental excitement, fury, intoxication, or passion)."

Continued on page 55
Norse Mythological Elements Continued from page 50

beings poured into cups at tombs by Swedish country folk up to our own

day.

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 Hawthornen 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’ sentimenality is paraphrase Waugh’s (p. 225). And Cecil’s admiration for Howard Ovinger
Sturgis’s novel Bedchamber is mentioned in connection
with Waugh’s liking for that novel (p. 416).

Norse Mythological Elements

... Continued from page 50 session: raging, furious, intoxicated, (sic) and can be
used to signify poetic genius and inspiration.

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

11 Ibid., p. 28.

12 Ibid., p. 42. Tolkien’s inspiration for the “One Ring
to bind them all” seems plain.

13 Ibid., p. 43.

14 Ibid., pp. 76-7.

15 H. R. E. Davidson, The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England


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double column width should be 9 1/2” wide.

2276-7: “Ancient in years, he mounts guard over the heathen
soldiers yet he is not one wht the better for it.” Also cf.
Beowulf 2312-22: “Then did the valiant spitt 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.”

17 Tolkien Reader, p. 45.