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# Bilbo Baggins and the Forty Thieves: The Reworking of Folktale Motifs in *The Hobbit* (and *The Lord of the Rings*)

Giovanni Carmine Costabile  
*Independent*

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## Bilbo Baggins and the Forty Thieves: The Reworking of Folktale Motifs in *The Hobbit* (and *The Lord of the Rings*)

### Abstract

*The Hobbit* is undisputedly influenced by Germanic sources such as *Beowulf*, the *Völsunga Saga* and both the *Elder Edda* and the *Prose Edda*. While there is no reason to deny this result of criticism, I argue that acknowledging the aforementioned sources should not constitute a reason to deny the potentiality of other sources from other cultural areas. The similarities between *The Hobbit* and a famous tale from the *Arabian Nights*, *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, offer a chance to investigate a much wider potential field wherein to look for shared motifs when only considering the list of analogues to the latter tale, featuring German, Greek and Chinese versions. The fundamental theme of cupidity, as evidenced by the type AT-763, is also represented, besides by *The Pardoner's Tale* by Chaucer, which Tolkien assuredly knew, also by many other different versions encompassing a large field of cultural areas. Tolkien's comments on the genealogy of many fairy tales, included in a draft of his lecture *On Fairy-stories*, offer us evidence that he was aware of these cultural phenomena and pretty much interested in them, thus corroborating the statement I am advancing, i.e. since Tolkien was an expert of Folklore as much as many philologists (e.g. Grimm brothers) back then were, there is no reason to limit the field of enquiry of the sources for his works within the strict boundary of the Germanic Middle Ages.

### Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*—Sources; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Knowledge—Folk tales; *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*; *The Arabian Nights*

### Cover Page Footnote

My heartfelt thanks to the Professor who many years ago introduced me to the studies of the Arabian culture, Amos Bertolacci at Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa, and to the Tolkien scholar who mostly encouraged my research for the present article, Oronzo Cilli



## BILBO BAGGINS AND THE FORTY THIEVES: THE REWORKING OF FOLKTALE MOTIFS IN *THE HOBBIT* (AND *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*)

GIOVANNI CAROLINE COSTABILE

MOST TOLKIEN SCHOLARS WILL AGREE THAT TOLKIEN was influenced by *Beowulf* in writing *The Hobbit*. The shared detail of the cup stolen from the dragon's hoard<sup>1</sup> is too evident not to admit that the Anglo-Saxon poem, which Tolkien translated and lectured on, was a source for the romance. To this we should add the curse of the treasure, resulting in Thorin's sickness in *The Hobbit*, and forcing Wiglaf to bury the treasure in *Beowulf*.

The influence of at least three additional Germanic sources, the *Völsunga Saga*, which also features the killing of a fierce dragon guarding a rich, cursed treasure, Fáfnir, by a brave hero, Sigurd,<sup>2</sup> the *Völuspá* in the *Elder Edda*,<sup>3</sup> and the *Gylfaginning* in the *Prose Edda*, providing Gandalf and the Dwarves with their names,<sup>4</sup> strongly contribute in drawing a picture of Tolkien's substantial indebtedness toward Germanic legends and folklore.

My purpose is not to deny these results of criticism, but to add to them a consideration of the folktale motifs which underlie both the Germanic world and Tolkien's works, and possibly shaped them, with the intent to do justice to Tolkien's vast knowledge of Folklore and also to shed some additional light on the process of composition of *The Hobbit*; and perhaps something interesting might be deduced about *The Lord of the Rings* as well.

My approach is not altogether new, since there have already been quite a few works of criticism focusing on the reworking of folktale and folkloric motifs in both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.<sup>5</sup> What is peculiar to my consideration is the readiness to evaluate different sources which may originate

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<sup>1</sup> Noted by many; see for instance Shippey (*Road to Middle-earth* 80).

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the most detailed treatments of the influence of the *Völsunga Saga* on Tolkien, concerning dragons and dragonslayers, through the early reading of Andrew Lang's and William Morris's versions thereof, are included in Evans and in Atherton.

<sup>3</sup> A work which also includes the lay dealing with Fáfnir which is titled after him, the *Fáfnismál*.

<sup>4</sup> As often documented, for example see the particularly detailed and reasoned treatments by Shippey (*Author of the Century* 15-17) and Atherton (21-23).

<sup>5</sup> Benvenuto (236); Merkelbach (57-66); Nycz (67-75); Sebo (133-43); Sinex (93-112).

outside the borders of the strictly Germanic competence, a readiness motivated by the fact that Tolkien read and knew many folktales deriving from a wider field of cultural areas.

If we are ready to admit, at least by way of a hypothesis, that there was a tale in particular which bears some strong resemblances to the plot of *The Hobbit*, with no prejudice whatsoever on the origin or setting of the tale or the period of its composition—if we are ready to admit this, that tale would no doubt at all be identified with *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, included in the *Arabian Nights*.

My short summary of the tale takes this form: A poor woodcutter named Ali Baba one day was walking in the forest when he happened to see the leader of a group of forty thieves opening the mouth of a cave by saying “Open Sesame!”, after which all of the thieves entered the cave. Ali Baba could not believe his own eyes. The leader said “Close Sesame” to seal the cave again when they all had come out of it. Ali Baba, amazed at the discovery, uttered the magic formula and entered the cave as well. Inside he found heaps of treasure. Ali Baba told his brother Kasim about the wondrous cave and Kasim, greedy to have a share in the treasure too, set off for the cave. Unfortunately, though, he could not recall the words to leave the cave and was killed by the thieves when they returned there and found him inside. After a while Ali Baba, wondering about the fate of his brother, went to the cave, only to discover Kasim’s body there. A slave girl called Morgiana helped him take Kasim’s body back home in order for it to be properly buried. Unable to find the body upon their return to the cave, the thieves tracked Ali Baba down. The leader disguised himself as an oil seller and managed to stay with Ali Baba, bringing along mules loaded with forty oil jars containing the other thieves. But Morgiana discovered his plot and poured boiling oil into the jars, killing the other thieves. Morgiana also stabbed the leader of the thieves during a dance she was pretending to perform for him. Ali Baba was saved and had enough treasure to make his children and grandchildren rich too.

The first common motif is the magic door, to be opened in the Arabic tale by uttering the magic words “Open Sesame” and “Close Sesame,” or through the light of the moon on Durin’s Day in *The Hobbit*. Then there is the theme of Kasim’s greed which leads him to his death, paralleled by Thorin’s dragon-sickness, leading him to his death as well; although he repents before dying, which Kasim is not offered any chance to do. The dragon Smaug plays the exact same role as the forty thieves, being the guardian of a treasure who is angered upon finding part of the treasure missing and storms off to punish the people assumed to be responsible for the theft. Finally, the helpful slave girl Morgiana is an analogue of Bard, as much as of Sigurd the Dragonslayer.

Although I am aware that it might seem absurd to consider a tale of the *Arabian Nights* as a source for *The Hobbit*, nevertheless we should notice that the tale was included in *The Blue Fairy Book* by Andrew Lang, which Tolkien surely read in his childhood, and on which he comments in the draft called *Manuscript A* of his lecture *On Fairy-stories*: “Let us take the *Blue Fairy Book*. The main sources are French [...]. Besides the traditional French there are [...] six from Grimms. [...] four from Scandinavia, a couple [inserted] three from the Arabian Nights (Aladdin) (Forty Thieves, (...)) [Paribanou?] Achmed” (Tolkien, *On Fairy-stories* [OFS] 177).

It is very interesting to read Tolkien’s further comments in the same manuscript: “We have far back a certain fairy-story which becomes literary in Arabian Nights, is diffused in European tradition e.g. Galland’s adaptation > [...] early modern translation > and abridged or retold dwindles back to a fairy tale of Paribanou in the *Blue Fairy Book*” (OFS 184). While in *Manuscript B* he wrote (but later struck through): “Far back a folk-tale or fairy-story can be guessed; in The Arabian Nights it appears tricked out with literary raiment; it is diffused in Europe by means of translations and adaptations; it is abridged and re-told, dwindling back into ‘mere’ fairy-story: the tale of The Fairy Paribanou in the *Blue Fairy Book*” (OFS 227).

Therefore I would like to suggest the actual possibility of the influence of the motifs of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, if not the tale proper, on Tolkien’s works, provided that we are ready to enlarge our field of enquiry to sources and analogues throughout different geographic and cultural areas in time and space, into what is a very widespread index of motifs.

Let us read what folktale expert W.A. Clouston has to tell about analogues of the tale. First he retells us a tale from North Germany:

A poor woodcutter, about to fell a beech at the back of the scattered ruins of the castle of Dumburg, seeing a monk approach slowly through the forest, hid himself behind a tree. The monk passed by and went among the rocks. The woodcutter stole cautiously after him and saw that he stopped at a small door which had never been discovered by the villagers. The monk knocks gently and cries, “Little door, open!” and the door springs open. He also cries, “Little door, shut!” and the door is closed. The woodcutter carefully observes the place, and next Sunday goes secretly and obtains access to the vault by the same means as that employed by the monk. He finds in it “large open vessels and sacks full of old dollars and fine guilders, together with heavy gold pieces, caskets filled with jewels and pearls, costly shrines and images of saints, which lay about or stood on tables of silver in corners of the vault.” He takes but a small quantity of the coin, and as he is quitting the vault a voice cries, “Come again!” First giving to the church, for behoof of the poor, a tenth

of what he had taken, he goes to the town and buys clothes for his wife and children, giving out to his neighbours that he had found an old dollar and a few guilders under the roots of a tree that he had felled. Next Sunday he again visits the vault, this time supplying himself somewhat more liberally from the hoard, but still with moderation and discretion, and "Come again!" cries a voice as he is leaving. He now gives to the church two tenths, and resolves to bury the rest of the money he had taken in his cellar. But he can't resist a desire to first measure the gold, for he could not count it. So he borrows for this purpose a corn-measure of a neighbour—a very rich but penurious man, who starved himself, hoarded up corn, cheated the labourer of his hire, robbed the widow and the orphan, and lent money on pledges. Now the measure had some cracks in the bottom, through which the miser shook some grains of corn into his own heap when selling it to the poor labourer, and into these cracks two or three small coins lodged, which the miser was not slow to discover. He goes to the woodcutter and asks him what it was he had been measuring. "Pine-cones and beans." But the miser holds up the coins he had found in the cracks of the measure, and threatens to inform upon him and have him put to the question if he will not disclose to him the secret of his money. So the woodcutter is constrained to tell him the whole story and much against his will, but not before he had made the miser promise that he would give one-tenth to the church, he conducts him to the vault. The miser enters, with a number of sacks, the woodcutter waiting outside to receive them when filled with treasure. But while the miser is gloating over the enormous wealth before him—even "wealth beyond the dreams of avarice"—a great black dog comes and lays himself down on the sacks. Terrified at the flaming eyes of the dog, the miser crept towards the door but in his fear forgot the proper words, and instead of saying, "Little door, open!" he cried, "Little door, shut!" The woodcutter, having waited a long time, approached the door, and knocking gently and crying "Little door, open!" the door sprang open and he entered. There lay the bleeding body of his wicked neighbour, stretched on his sacks, but the vessels of gold and silver, and diamonds and pearls, sank deeper and deeper into the earth before his eyes, till all had completely vanished. (Clouston 390-91)

To this tale Clouston adds his comments, pointing out how the North German tale bears a strong resemblance to the first part of the tale of Ali Baba: both have a poor woodcutter as a hero, the German version has a monk taking up the same role of the forty thieves, and it features the magic words "little door, open" reminding us of "open, sesame." Additionally, both have a borrowed

corn-measure offered as a circumstance for the revelation of the secret,<sup>6</sup> while the fate of the miser and the disappearance of the treasure are classified by Clouston as “German touches” (Clouston 391).

Moreover, Clouston puts the second part of Ali Baba in relation to the legend of the stolen treasure of Rhampsinitus the King of Egypt in Herodotus’s *Histories*, where two brothers steal from the king’s treasure and one is killed, while the other smartly avoids all the traps set by the king to catch him until he wins the king’s favour and the hand of his daughter. Besides,

the discovery of Ali Baba’s being possessed of much money from some coins adhering to the bottom of the corn-measures is an incident of very frequent occurrence in popular fictions; for instance, in the Icelandic story of the Magic Quern that ground out gold or whatever its possessor desired (Powell and Magnusson’s collection, second series); in the Indian tale of the Six Brothers (Vernieux’s collection) and its Irish analogue *Little Fairly*; in the modern Greek popular tale of the Man with Three Grapes (Le Grand’s French collection), and a host of other tales, both Western and Eastern. (Clouston 392)

In Clouston’s commentary then there are also cited stories which constitute parallels to Morgiana’s pouring of the boiling oil in the jars, right before the report of Clouston’s last minute addition.

There is yet another German version, in Grimm, which preserves some features of the Arabian tale omitted in the legend of The Dumbburg:

There were two brothers, one rich, the other poor. The poor brother, one day wheeling a barrow through the forest, had just come to a naked-looking mountain, when he saw twelve great wild men approaching, and he hid himself in a tree, believing them to be robbers. “Semsi mountain, Semsi mountain, open!” they cried, and the mountain opened, and they went in. Presently they came out, carrying heavy sacks. “Semsi mountain, Semsi mountain, shut thyself!” they cried; and the mountain closed and they went away. The poor man went up then and cried, “Semsi mountain Semsi mountain, open!” the mountain opens, he goes in, finds a cavern full of gold, silver, and jewels, fills his pockets with gold only, and coming out cries, “Semsi mountain, Semsi mountain, shut thyself!” He returns home and lives happily till his gold is exhausted. Then “he went to his brother to borrow a measure that held a bushel, and brought himself some more.” This he does again, and this time the rich brother smears the inside of the bushel with pitch and when he gets it back finds a gold coin sticking to it, so he taxes his poor brother with having treasure

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<sup>6</sup> That is how the thieves manage to track him in the original tale.

and learns the secret. Off he drives, resolved to bring back, not gold, but jewels. He gets in by saying, "Semi mountain, Semi mountain, open!" He loads himself with precious stones, but has forgotten the word, and cries only, "Simeli mountain, Simeli mountain, open!" The robbers return and charge him with having twice stolen from them. He vainly protests, "It was not I," and they cut his head off. (Clouston 392-93)

It is evident that the twelve wild men play the same role as the forty thieves, while it is the hero's brother again who dies because of his own coveting. In both Ali Baba's tale and the two German version it is a tree which offers a hiding place. Clouston cites Wilhelm Grimm, who expressed himself about the latter German tale to this effect:

It is remarkable that this story, which is told in the province of Münster, is told also in the Hartz, about The Dumburg, and closely resembles the Eastern story of 'The Forty Thieves,' where even the rock Sesam, which falls open at the words Semi and Semeli, recalls the name of the mountain in the German saga. This name for a mountain is, according to a document in Pistorius (3, 642), very ancient in Germany. A mountain in Grabfeld is called Similes and in a Swiss song a Simeliberg is again mentioned. This makes us think of the Swiss word 'Sinel,' for 'sinbel,' round. In Meier, No. 53, we find 'Open, Simson.' In Pröhle's 'Märchen für die Jugend,' No. 30, where the story is amplified, it is Simsimeliger Mountain. There is also a Polish story which is very like it. (Grimm, qtd. in Clouston 393)

Clouston points out, though, that Wilhelm Grimm is wrong in assuming that the magic words in Arabic are 'semi' and 'semeli,' since instead the original magic word is 'simsim,' corresponding to Modern French 'sesame' and thence to Modern English 'sesame.' Both 'simson' and 'semi' in the two German version are evident corruptions thereof.

Subsequently he also reports a Chinese tale concerning the cave Kwang-sio-foo, found in N.B. Dennys's *Folklore of China, and its Affinities with that of the Aryan and Semitic Races*:

There was in the neighbourhood a poor herdsman named Chang, his sole surviving relative being a grandmother with whom he lived. One day, happening to pass near the cave, he overheard some one using the following words: "Shih mun kai, Kwai Ku hsen shêng lai," Stone door, open; Mr. Kwai Ku is coming. Upon this the door of the cave opened and the speaker entered. Having remained there for some time he came out, and saying, "Stone door, close; Mr. Kwai Ku is going," the door again opened and the visitor departed. Chang's curiosity was naturally excited,



and having several times heard the formula repeated, he waited one day until the genie (for such he was) had taken his departure and essayed to obtain an entrance. To his great delight the door yielded, and having gone inside he found himself in a romantic grotto of immense extent. Nothing however in the shape of treasure met his eye, so having fully explored the place he returned to the door, which shut at his bidding, and went home. Upon telling his grandmother of his adventure she expressed a strong wish to see the wonderful cavern; and thither they accordingly went together the next day. Wandering about in admiration of the scenery, they became separated, and Chang at length, supposing that his grandmother had left, passed out of the door and ordered it to shut. Reaching home, he found to his dismay that she had not yet arrived. She must of course have been locked up in the cave, so back he sped and before long was using the magic sentence to obtain access. But alas! the talisman had failed, and poor Chang fell into an agony of apprehension as he reflected that his grandmother would either be starved to death or killed by the enraged genie. While in this perplexity the genie appeared and asked him what was amiss. Chang frankly told him the truth and implored him to open the door. This the genie refused to do, but told him that his grandmother's disappearance was a matter of fate. The cave demanded a victim. Had it been a male, every succeeding generation of his family would have seen one of its members arrive at princely rank. In the case of a woman her descendants would in a similar way possess power over demons. Somewhat comforted to know that he was not exactly responsible for his grandmother's death, Chang returned home and in process of time married. His first son duly became Chang tien shih (Chang, the Master of Heaven), who about A.D. 25 was the first holder of an office which has existed uninterruptedly to the present day. (Clouston 393-94)

From all this we might gather at least that Tolkien must have known the version of the story reported by the Grimm brothers, as well as possibly Herodotus, the Icelandic story of the Magic Quern, and the Irish *Little Fairly*, due to his vast knowledge of Classics and of Icelandic and Celtic tradition. To begin with, he might have come across those versions on his own, not through Clouston, whose comments in the *Supplemental Nights* he might only have read if he were a subscriber of the Burton Club, which we do not know he was, or if someone he knew was and lent the book to him. It is interesting that one of the scholars who were most influential on Tolkien, W.F. Kirby, whose translation of

the *Kalevala* Tolkien read and appreciated,<sup>7</sup> also produced many notes to Burton's edition of the *Arabian Nights*. But all of what these other tales amount to concerning *The Hobbit* is very little. Instead the motif of a man killed by his own cupidity, as we have seen, is reflected in *The Hobbit*, though quite good-heartedly. Clouston says it is a very common theme; therefore we should ask ourselves in which tales we might find it, and whether they were known to Tolkien.

To the first question we might answer quite easily, since there is a type of tale classified as Aarne Thompson 763, titled "Treasure-finders murder each other." Among the tales classified under this type there figure, in A.D. Ashliman's collection:

- Vedabbha-Jataka: Misguided Effort (*The Jataka*).
- The Reward of Covetousness (India).
- The Punishment of Avarice (Tibet).
- Jesus and the Three Blocks of Gold (Arabic).
- Story of the Three Men and Our Lord Jesus (*1001 Nights*).
- The Merchant and the Two Sharpers (*1001 Nights*).
- The Pardoner's Tale (*The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer).
- The Hermit and the Three Ruffians (Italy).
- The Three Crosses (Germany)<sup>8</sup>

These are all profoundly moralizing stories, even to the point that the legitimacy of considering them as fairy-tales has been doubted, since they don't have an happy ending at all. For example, in *The Pardoner's Tale*, three men set out from the tavern where they were gambling and drinking on a quest to find a mysterious killer named Death and to vanquish him. They find instead a treasure in the forest; one leaves the other two guarding their discovery and comes back to the city to get a means of transportation for the treasure. The one who has left decides to offer the other two poison mixed with their drinks and food, while the latter simply agree to ambush and kill him. The couple succeeds in their misdoing and to celebrate they drink and eat, thus dying too. The moral conclusion, explicated by the Pardoner previously in his prelude to the tale, is *radix malorum est cupiditas*: "cupidity is the root of all evil." Lutz Röhrich writes:

The happy ending is one of the characteristics of the special weightlessness of the *märchen*; it is a definite and real identifying feature

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<sup>7</sup> "Tolkien discovered the *Kalevala* in W.F. Kirby's English verse translation (1907) during his final year at \*King Edward's School, Birmingham," as Hammond and Scull report (440).

<sup>8</sup> See Ashliman.

of the genre. Stories with unhappy endings are thus best treated only as special cases or sub-categories of the genre. The fact that some stories characteristically have unhappy endings would indicate that some numbers in the Aarne-Thompson classification of types of *märchen* should be excluded from the normal *märchen* classification. (qtd. in Erickson 235)

But to that Jon Erickson replies: "Yet, from a structural viewpoint, it is not at all obvious that such tales in general and *The Pardoner's Tale* in particular should automatically be excluded from the formal *märchen* classification purely on the basis of how they end" (Erickson 235).

Tolkien must have surely read *The Pardoner's Tale*, as an Oxford professor specializing in Middle English. Tolkien would probably have agreed with Röhrich rather than Erickson, since he believed the concept of *eucaastrophe* to be an essential function of Fairy-stories. That is why Tolkien, who obviously agreed with the importance of the moral message about greed, nonetheless could not suffer his Thorin dying an infamous death, as an enemy of Bilbo, and had the former acknowledge his misdoings to the latter eventually.

In pretty much the same way, again in *The Hobbit*, he set a similar situation among three armies divided two against one and with each side menacing war to the other because they cannot agree on the division of the treasure of Smaug. There are the Men of Esgaroth and the Elves of Mirkwood against the Dwarves of the Iron Hills, so that instead of three people we have three armies, and again Tolkien good-heartedly cannot bear the thought of good people fighting each other over greed, and has them being interrupted by the arrival of the Goblin army, against which they all fight together.

What is more, the three companions fighting for possession of the treasure cannot help but recall Frodo, Sam, and Gollum witnessing the bodies and treasure beneath the surface of the Dead Marshes on the way to Mount Doom. Perhaps is not simple chance, considering how very similar the theme of the treasure remaining untouched among the bodies of the fallen is to the situation of the hoard, also remaining untouched down in the dungeons, at the end of the poem "The Hoard" included in Tolkien's *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*.

One might be sceptical that the forty thieves might actually replace a dragon. But one might not persist in such scepticism long after reading one of W. F. Kirby's above-mentioned notes:

My obliging friend, W.F. Kirby, who contributed to the 10<sup>th</sup> Volume of Sir Richard Burton's *Nights* proper the very able Bibliographical Essay, has drawn my attention to an analogue of this tale [*Ali Baba*] in Geldart's *Folklore of Modern Greece*: There were two brothers, one of whom was

wealthy and had four children, who were in feeble health, the other was poor and had seven children, who were in robust health. The poor brother's wife, begging relief, was allowed to come twice a week to the house of the rich brother to bake bread. Her children were starving, but the rich people gave the mother nothing for several days, and, all she could do was to wash the dough off her hands for the children, who thrived, and the rich man, discovering the cause, made his wife compel the poor woman to wash her hands before she left the house. The father found his children crying for food, and pretended to go to the wood for herbs, but really purposing to kill himself by falling from a crag. But seeing a great castle, he determined first to ascertain what it was, so he went near and, having climbed a tree, saw forty-nine dragons come out. When they were gone he entered, and found a treasure, filled his bag and hurried away. On his return home he found his wife weeping bitterly, but when he showed her the treasure, she said the first thing was to buy oil to light a lamp to Our Lady. Next day they bought a house, and moved into it, but agreed to buy only what they needed for each day's use and nothing they could do without. For two months they went often to church and helped the poor, till, one day, the wife of the rich man, who had met with losses lately, called for them and was hospitably received. She heard the story of the treasure, and the poor man offered to show his brother the place. The rich brother miscounted the dragons as they left the castle, and the one left to watch killed and quartered him. Two days afterwards his brother went to look for him, brought home the severed body, and got a tailor to sew the quarters together. Next day the dragons called on the tailor to make them coats and shoes (*sic*), and heard of his sewing together the body. He showed them the house, and forty-eight dragons got into chests, with the forty-ninth deposited with the poor man. The children, playing about the chests, heard the dragons say: "Would that it were night, that we might eat them all!" So the father took forty-eight spits and made them red hot, and thrust them into the chests, and then said that a trick had been played upon him, and sent his servants to throw them one by one into the sea. As often as the servant returned he pretended to him he did not throw the chest far enough and it had come back and thus he disposed of the whole number. In the morning when the last dragon came, the poor man told him one chest was found open: he was seized with fear, pushed in and spitted like the others and the poor man became the possessor of the dragons' castle. (Clouston 434)

It is not a great story, but it proves the fact that the nature of the guardian of the treasure is easily exchanged from one tale to another, from one version to the another, from culture to culture, from region to region. Here the forty thieves become forty-eight dragons. It is interesting to note that, even if the

dragon Smaug in *The Hobbit* does not hide inside any jar, there is still the episode of the Dwarves and Bilbo hiding inside the barrels to escape the Elvenking's Halls in Mirkwood.

Giovanni Pansa categorized the treasure stories of the Abruzzo region in Italy according to three main features: 1) the magic gate; 2) the guardian of the treasure (a *fée*, a witch, a dwarf, the Devil . . .); 3) the tripartition of the treasure in three heaps, usually according to different metals (gold, silver, copper).<sup>9</sup> Even if Tolkien did not, as is very unlikely, read the journal in which Pansa's research appeared (it is pretty much an object of exclusively local interest), the categorization of the treasure stories according to these features transcends the borders of the Abruzzo region, or Italy, or even the European continent.

The magic gate as we have seen appears in the *Arabian Nights*, in Germany, in Greece, and even in China. Tolkien, not content with showing one of them in *The Hobbit*, also invented the famous *mellon* scene for the sequel, *The Lord of the Rings*. In a sense, Bilbo's front door also becomes a magic gate when Gandalf puts the rune *G*. on it, and the Dwarves who enter that magic gate must face the guardian, Bilbo, of a treasure divided into the three symbolical heaps of his food, his hospitality and, most precious, his willingness to take part in the adventure.

As previously stated, the guardian of the treasure may typically be thought as a dragon, as it is in *The Hobbit*, or in *Beowulf*, or in the *Völsunga Saga*, but it could also be a different sort of uncanny or malevolent creature, from the genie of the Chinese legend of the cave Kwang-sio-foo to the Devil himself in some Abruzzo stories. In the tale of Ali Baba, the role of the guardian is played by forty thieves, which in the weird Greek version become forty-eight dragons, either of very small size to get inside the chests, or of reduceable size, which is a quite funny trait for a dragon.

The slayer of the guardian does not necessarily have to be a brave hero, and is not even necessarily a single person, as we have seen with the children and the poor man in the Greek version, although it could be already deduced by the parallel Morgiana/Bard, entailing that the latter should not only be compared to Sigurd as a Dragonslayer, but also, and maybe more poignantly, seen as a narratological *deus ex machina* which we should have invented, if he was not there. The uncanny "gift" of the treasure to the protagonist is paralleled by the uncannily gifted nature of one of his allies, be it Morgiana's (or the children's) cleverness or Bard's perfect focus, thus making true the popular saying *virtutis fortuna comes*, "fortune is the companion of virtue."

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<sup>9</sup> Pansa (273-84).

Finally, the three heaps composing the treasure might be already there when the treasure is found, or could be formed as a means of easier transportation, but what is really important is the number three and/or the different metals. Tolkien himself is rather fond of gold and silver, but copper has no great importance alongside the former two metals in his stories, as it has instead for example in the tale of *The Three Crowns* included in the *Lilac Fairy Book* by Andrew Lang, in the story of *Cul-fin, Cul-din and Cul-corrach*, a variant of *Cinderella* included in the 1890 *Myths and Folklore of Ireland* by Jeremiah Curtin, a book which Tolkien might have read, or perhaps in the tale of *The Three Kingdoms* included in the collection of *Russian Fairy Tales* by Aleksandr Afanasjev, which we do not know if Tolkien might have read.

Nonetheless, even if the three heaps are not composed of different metals, or even if they are not actual heaps at all, we might still find a notion of them both in *The Hobbit* and in *Farmer Giles of Ham*. Not everybody notices, but in *Beowulf* the treasure is carried outside the dragon's lair thrice: first the cup, then the portion Beowulf himself wanted to have a final look upon, then all the rest. Tolkien echoes this motif in *Farmer Giles of Ham*, where the dragon Chrysophylax tells Farmer Giles: "But I can't bring it all out at once," only to hear the farmer responding: "Nor at twice, I'll wager" (63). Finally the dragon "came out of the cave for the third time with the biggest load of all, and a mort of rich jewels like green and red fire" (63). Also in *The Hobbit*, inspired by *Beowulf*, first Bilbo brings out the cup, then the Arkenstone, and at the end of the tale his own portion of the treasure. Perhaps it is also worth mentioning in this context the division of the twenty Rings of Power among the free peoples of Middle-earth, the *three* free peoples of Elves, Dwarves, and Men, which is a sort of tripartition of a treasure.

In what is probably a further variant, the *Völsunga Saga* has Fáfñir's treasure being gained in the first place by Loki as a weregild, or ransom, for the three Æsir who had killed Ótr son of Hreidmar, king of the Dwarves: Odin, Hœnir, and himself. Fáfñir's treasure consisted of Andvari's cursed gold and a cursed golden ring, Andvaranaut, with the Helm of Awe, or Ægishjálmr, constituting the third component.

If I may advance a personal interpretation, I think that a possible key to understand these tales and their peculiar fascination for the number three is gained by considering another famous cautionary tale about greed and its overcoming, *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. Some critics have already acknowledged the possibility of the Dickensian tale as a source for Tolkien,<sup>10</sup> but here what I would like to say is instead that the tale reveals in clear letters what

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<sup>10</sup> Nelson (368); Croft.

in other similar tales is only implicit, and that is the importance of Time, revealed through the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future.

Time is the variable responsible for the hoarding of the treasure, accumulated through the years, through the Ages even, in cases like the poems "The Hoard." Time features in the riddle in *The Hobbit*: "This thing all things devours: / Birds, beasts, trees, flowers; / Gnaws iron, bites steel; / Grinds hard stones to meal; / Slays kings, ruins town, / And beats high mountain down" (Tolkien, *The Hobbit* V.88). Greed is the powerless attempt to reverse Time, preserving what is precious throughout the latter's unfolding, but eventually Time wins. This is the theme of the above-mentioned poem.

A treasure should be divided in three parts according to the division of Time itself into Past, Present, and Future, as the ghosts suggest. In the murder stories, it is always the youngest of the three, whom we may label Future, who goes off to retrieve a means of transportation. In his absence, Past and Present agree to kill him, meaning that if the treasure is all saved or all spent it is like having no treasure at all, and so without him they die too. Tolkien in *The Hobbit* changes the dynamics in having Past alone (the Dwarves, wanting to keep the whole treasure for themselves) against Present and Future allied (Elves and Men, who want their share for justice and to rebuild their town). Also in *The Lord of the Rings* it would seem like we have Past alone (Gollum, the shadow of his former self Sméagol, wanting to keep the Precious for himself) against Present and Future (Frodo and Sam, respectively, who are the actual Ringbearers and are nonetheless willing to offer the Ring to others). In all cases the Past must yield or, in the case with Gollum, even be destroyed, so that Present and Future might be saved. This would seem to express the awareness by Tolkien of the fact that, if the present is worse than the past, still it evolved from it, therefore there must have been something wrong with the past already, something which we should first detect and then get rid of if we want a better future for ourselves and our children.

In the Verses of the Ring, the Elves are "under the sky," which may be read as meaning they live in the Present, since the Present is what there is, and "everything under the sky" means "everything there is." The Dwarves live "in their halls of stone," with the stone communicating the idea of something already carved, finished, done, therefore Past. Men are "doomed to die," with Doom meaning something that will be accomplished in the Future, and Death, as Tolkien intended it, an open possibility for the Future, maybe even a gift.

It is interesting that in this light the Elves appear as the Present, and indeed in the Third Age their presence in Middle-earth is still relevant, even if in Letter 154 Tolkien stated that they were like embalmers, wanting to preserve the Past at all costs. It would seem that this is what they may look like from a human perspective, since Men are clearly the future, but still, when compared

the Dwarves, they lack the animosity of Thorin and his company singing “Far Over the Misty Mountains Cold,” wanting to retrieve their “pale enchanted gold” (*Hobbit* I.22) and ending up besieged in their own retrieved fortress. “The Hoard” points out clearly how the Elves lack greed, so that their alleged attachment to the Past seems to lose any morbidity and rather assume the traits of a *nostalgia* which was Tolkien’s own.

Thus it does really seem like Tolkien is reworking folktale motifs, and “The Pardoner’s Tale” and the German tale by the Grimm brothers are all very probable sources, but in this context it is perhaps worth the mind-opening effort to consider as a source even unlikely candidates like tales from the *Arabian Nights*, Greece, Russia, or even the Abruzzo region of Italy. Because we may not establish for sure which is the precise source, still by underlining all the possibilities we might describe more extensively the field within which Tolkien most likely found his sources.

I have endeavoured to complete this research because I believe that, even if source-hunting is very useful as a tool of criticism, and rewarding too, its applications must not be limited to the individuation of a precise source but, when that is not possible, to endeavour to show the whole field of possible sources sharing the same fundamental motif.

I really hope then to have proved that Jason Fisher, whom we all owe some of the most interesting findings of Tolkien research, is wrong when he declares: “Unfortunately for scholars—but fortunately for readers—it seems that Tolkien source-hunting has left very few stones unturned over the last, and very productive, quarter-century or so” (Fisher 1). I believe in fact that there is still much more that may be unearthed on Tolkien’s sources, something of which the present essay only can cover but a small portion, even though it stretches throughout the whole of Europe and Asia.

After all, anyone who has read several of the tales of which the Aarne-Thompson typology 763 is comprised can better appreciate the resounding warning against cupidity which is echoed in the very famous lines:

Three Rings for the Elven-kings under the sky,  
Seven to the Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone,  
Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die,  
One for the Dark Lord on his dark throne  
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.  
One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,  
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them,  
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.  
(Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* I.2.50)



I propose that in this case, as well as in many others, source criticism may enhance the experience of reading Tolkien's works and provide readers with some key elements linking our world to Middle-earth, not just as an imaginary past, but as a fully-accomplished Sub-creation, the very tales thereof still somehow related to the tales of the peoples living in the Primary World. To quote Rebecca Merkelbach: "[T]he fairy-tale motifs give us something we can relate to, something we expect, developed from our own world and taken from the most deeply traditional places of literature. Yet it is set in a world that is not quite our own and works slightly differently, and thus contributes to the 'arresting strangeness' of fantasy." Both of these features eventually help to achieve "Tolkien's ultimate aim: the creation of a world that the reader's mind can enter" (Merkelbach 65-66).

It is also worth remarking that, while a fond lover of the Germanic and Christian tradition, Tolkien was not a prejudiced person: as a philologist and folklore expert, he was open to what we might call the ecumenism of folktales, the motifs of which can be traced through very different geographic areas and cultures, sometimes even beyond any possibility of establishing the precise genealogy of the tale across them. But as Tolkien was very well aware, that adds to the fascination of folktales, instead of subtracting.

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**GIOVANNI CARMINE COSTABILE** is an Italian independent scholar, freelance translator, writer, and private teacher. Among his publications on Tolkien, Folklore, and Medieval Literature are articles in *Tolkien Studies* (XIV, 2017), *Inklings Jahrbuch* (34, 2017) and in the Tolkien Society Peter Roe series (*Death and Immortality*, 2017). He presents papers at conferences, symposiums and seminars throughout Europe. His first monography, *Oltre le Mura del Mondo: Immanenza e Trascendenza nelle opere di J.R.R. Tolkien*, is forthcoming in Italy. He published a selection of his poems in a book titled *Lingue di te* (Aletti, 2017) and was named a "Poet of Frederick II" in Rocca Imperiale (Italy).