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An Overview Of the Northern Influences on Tolkien's Works

Abstract

J.R.R. Tolkien studied the Old Norse literature and mythology thoroughly. While knowing Northern literature does not provide a key to unlock the meanings of his major works, his characters, creatures, implements, customs, incidents, and themes do have antecedents in the Eddas and sagas. This paper assesses the extent and impact of those antecedents.

Additional Keywords

Eddas; Northern literature; J.R.R Tolkien: influences upon; mythology; sagas

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Gloriana St. Clair

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In a 1966 essay entitled "The Shire, Mordor, and Minas Tirith," Charles Moorman concluded, "The greatest single influence upon Tolkien is the Eddas and sagas of the North." The purpose of this talk is to provide an overview of the influence of Northern literature on Tolkien's master work, *The Lord of the Rings*. First, I will define Northern literature and provide a brief description of Tolkien's knowledge of it. Then I will discuss creatures, customs, personalities, and themes that show a Northern influence.

Northern literature

At Oxford, Tolkien taught Old English language and literature. Old English or Anglo-Saxon is the language spoken in England from 450 to 1150; it has an extraordinarily rich literature, including the Old English poem *Beowulf*. Towards the end of the Old English period, the Scandinavian countries – Norway, Sweden, and Denmark – flourished. Iceland, Greenland, and North America were discovered; the former two were colonized. The literature produced during this period had mythological underpinnings collected in works called the Eddas with an older *Poetic Edda* and a later, more literary *Prose Edda*.

In addition, many anonymous authors wrote several kinds of prose works called sagas. Sagas were written in the Old Norse language, the parent language for Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, and Icelandic. Many types of sagas were written: historical sagas, such as the *Heimskringla* (history of the kings of Norway), the Faeroe and Orkney islands sagas, and the *Saga of the Jomsvikings*. Sagas of olden times concerned themselves with the legends and myths of former times. *The Volsunga Saga* and the *Saga of King Heidrek*, which Christopher Tolkien translated, are two examples. Lying sagas were stories about far away places and creatures – genii, dragons, magic carpets; Tolkien did not seem much interested in these. Most successful artistically and most influential on Tolkien and all others who have read them are the family sagas. These Icelandic sagas give an amazingly clear and vivid picture of the society of Iceland in the tenth

and eleventh centuries. Five sagas stand out for their excellence – the *Eyrbyggja Saga*, *Egil's Saga*, *Laxdale Saga*, the *Saga of Grettir the Strong*, and *Njal's Saga*. While each of these offered raw material for the creation of *The Lord of the Rings*, I have selected many examples from the *Njal's Saga*.

Tolkien's knowledge

Tolkien began studying Old English at age sixteen when his schoolmaster George Brewerton lent him an Anglo-Saxon primer. He moved on to read the Old English poem *Beowulf*. He studied Middle English and then began to read Old Norse, reading the *Volsunga Saga*, the Old Norse version of the story of Sigurd and the dragon Fafnir, in the original language (Carpenter, 1977, pp. 34, 37). He delighted his friends in the Tea Club, subsequently renamed the Barrovian Society, with tales from *Volsunga*, and he read a paper to the school literary society on Norse Sagas (Carpenter, 1977, pp. 46, 49).

Here at Oxford Old Norse was his special or secondary subject, and he learned from the well-known scholar W.A. Craigie. He probably read most of the sagas discussed in Craigie's *Icelandic Sagas* (1913, *passim*). Tolkien's biographer Humphrey Carpenter comments that Old Norse literature and mythology "had a profound appeal to Tolkien's imagination" (Carpenter, 1977, p. 65).

Tolkien continued his interest in Northern literature throughout his life. He and his colleague E.V. Gordon, the editor of an Old Norse text, founded a Viking Club for undergraduates to drink beer and read sagas (Gordon, 1957, pp. vii-x, Carpenter, 1977, p. 105). At Oxford, he formed a club called the Coalbiters to encourage the reading and discussion of Icelandic sagas in the original language (Carpenter, 1977, pp. 119-20). The Inklings supplanted the Coalbiters in the 1930s, but only after all the principal Icelandic sagas and the *Poetic Edda* had been covered (Carpenter, 1977, p. 149). Tolkien, who had read these works in their original language and discussed them with a succession of professional colleagues, had a profound

knowledge of this body of literature.

Nature of the influences

Tolkien's interest in Northern literature manifests itself in many ways. In a 1979 article in *Mythlore*, I argued that the most proper genre for *The Lord of the Rings* is the saga. In spite of intimations by the critics that the darker landscapes are Northern, I think the landscapes of *The Lord of the Rings* are not greatly inspired by the volcanoes, glaciers, and hot springs of the sagas. The Ring and other implements do have some interesting parallels in Northern literature, but on balance they are more medieval in their inspiration than exclusively Northern.

Creatures

The hobbits are Tolkien's unique contribution to the people of Middle-earth. Hobbits share many characteristics of the Icelanders of the famous family sagas. Both have an exaggerated sense of hospitality; Bilbo's concern about the adequacy of food for the dwarves is an example. In the *Njal's Saga*, Gunnar's wife the ignoble Hallgerd steals to maintain her table. That act begins a blood feud which eventually kills off all the major characters (Bayerschmidt and Hollander, 1955, pp. 107-61). Both hobbits and Icelanders love to reckon their ancestors: the heritage of the Tooks is clear in Frodo and his cousins. Icelanders often divide themselves along lines of kinship in a feud. Both hobbits and Icelanders like fancy clothes. Hobbits dress in bright colours – green and yellow – and Icelanders have blue and black silk gowns, elaborate fur cloaks, silver and gold outfits, and ornate armours. Even hobbit timidity has a Viking antecedent. Thorin's account of the dangerous adventure ahead reduces Bilbo to shaking like a melting jelly. This whole scene may relate to an account of a hero named Hott who is cured of his fear by the hero Bothvar in the saga of King Hrolf (Gordon, 1957, p. 32).

The Elves of Northern literature are man-sized and intermarry with humans. In both Northern literature and *The Lord of the Rings*, elves have traditions of healing and of being capable smiths. The Eddas mention Dark Elves, perhaps some suggestion for orcs, but their main inspiration must come from elsewhere.

The catalogue of dwarves in the Poetic Edda provides the names for sixteen dwarves in *The Hobbit*, and two more names come from the *Prose Edda*. J.S. Ryan pulled all of this together in 1965 (pp. 50-51). Many dwarf characteristics – short stature with long beards, love for treasure, skill as smiths, and bad temper – derive from the Eddas and sagas.

In a letter to his son Christopher, Tolkien called Gandalf his "Odinic wanderer" (1981, p. 119). The wizards seem to have their inspiration in the gods of Old Norse mythology: Gandalf from Odin, the all-father; Saruman from the wicked god Loki, Radagast perhaps from the fertility God Frey. The other two Istari who were sent but played no part in the affairs of Middle-earth might have been patterned after Balder, Heimdall, or Thor.

Norse cosmography reveals the world as a circular disk held by the roots of Yggdrasil, the world Ash. Ents derive

from this conception. The Old Willow's attempt to ingest Pippin parallels a story of a magician who is regenerated by being pulled into a tree and subsequently kicked out in the Magnus saga (Schlauch, 1916, pp. 137-38). Trolls, like those who capture Bilbo and the dwarves, play little part in Icelandic saga except as a common term of insult.

In "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien says that as a child he "desired dragons with a profound desire." Although dragons are scattered through medieval literature, they are particularly interesting in Northern literature and in the Old English poem *Beowulf*. In the *Volsunga Saga*, Fafnir is a human brother of Regin and Otr. Otr shape-shifts into an otter whom the God Loki kills in a moment of senseless violence. The father demands that the skin be covered with gold as a wergild or blood payment. The gods comply by stealing the gold from the dwarf Andvari who curses it. Covering a remaining whisker with a cursed ring was a detail of the story that tickled Tolkien's imagination. The brother Fafnir turns into the talking, greedy dragon who is eventually slain by the hero Sigurd. But this dragon and the one in *Beowulf* pale beside the magnificence of Tolkien's Smaug.

Other parallels with Northern connections would include some birds, wargs, horses, the eye of Sauron, Bombadil and Goldberry, the balrog, and Shelob. The creatures of *The Lord of the Rings* have many antecedents in the creatures of Northern mythology and literature.

Customs

Northern customs do not appear equally distributed among the creatures of Middle-earth. While I have noted that hobbits share some customs with Icelanders, the peoples of Rohan and Gondor are the closest in the patterns of their society.

Noel, Green, and I have all explored the relationship between the riddle game between Bilbo and Gollum and the one between the King and Gestumblindi, who is Odin in disguise (Noel, 1977, p. 33; Green, 1970, pp. 112-18; St. Clair, 1979, pp. 11-16). Many of the riddles are alike, and both contests end with the same kind of singular question.

Runes and spells are also common to both worlds. Christopher Tolkien notes that the runes of *The Lord of the Rings* are Old English ones, but they were used in Old Norse language and society, too. Odin hanged himself on the world tree to gain a knowledge of the runes. They were the basis of his power to heal, to break metal, to thwart evil, to quench flames, to seduce, to destroy witches, and to speak to hanged men (Crossley-Holland, 1980, p. 188).

The patronymic style for names – Thorin son of Thráin son of Thrór King under the Mountain; Frodo son of Drogo – follows Northern styles such as Leif Erikson. These high and formal names fit in with a tradition of courtesy. The entrance of Aragorn, Legolas, Gimli, and Gandalf into King Théoden's court runs in close parallel to the entry of Beowulf and his companions into King Hrothgar's presence. Traditions of woman rulers (Éowyn's stewardship), of required service in war, and of a ruling steward are also common to Middle-earth and Northern lands.

Burial customs of Gondor and the North Sea are similar.

Denethor speaks of the funeral pyre as a barbaric custom, but the history of the kings of Norway notes that Odin instituted it. Both cultures also built barrows to shelter their dead kings. The funeral pyre of Denethor offers an ironic commentary on the pyres described in the poem *Beowulf* – one for Beowulf himself and one for Hnaef in an interpolated narrative.

Subterranean descents appear often in Northern literature and in *The Lord of the Rings*. The hobbits' encounter with the Barrow-wight early in *The Fellowship of the Ring* has many parallels to a scene in the *Saga of Grettir the Strong*. In both, the hero is warned not to go near the barrow, a long arm gropes for and seizes the hero, the hero strikes back, the hero gets out of the barrow, treasure is hauled up, and the hero goes away with a sword. Bilbo's subterranean descent into the goblin cavern may also be closely compared with Beowulf's adventures with Grendel and Grendel's mother.

The underpinning of Norse ethics was a system of *comitatus* (loyalty to friends, to lord), kinship, and revenge. The Fellowship setting out from Rivendell is not bound by a formal oath but by this unspoken commitment to the leader, to the Ringbearer, to the mission. Both Merry and Pippin enter into formal retainer relationships with King Théoden and the steward Denethor. The effect of *comitatus* is to make the bond of friendship as close as that of kinship. The code demanded revenge for the death of a friend or a kinsman. Revenge motivates many saga actions, but plays only a minor role in *The Lord of the Rings*. One example, the dwarves' long war to avenge the killing and humiliation of Thrór, has some close parallels with *Njal's Saga*. Weregild, the paying of money or a service, as an alternative to revenge is common in the sagas. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Pippin takes service with Denethor, and the horse Felaróf comes into service of Eorl of Rohan as service weregild. Thus, particularly among the men of Rohan and Gondor, customs practised in Northern countries are present.

Personalities

In *The Lord of the Rings*, eight characters (Beorn, Denethor, Boromir, Faramir, Aragorn, Théoden, Éowyn, and Galadriel) have significant sources in specific individuals or types of individuals in Northern literature. Today, I'm going to sketch antecedents for Denethor and Galadriel.

Denethor is part of a tradition of Norse heroes who prefer suicide to the shame of being unable to revenge the death of a son or a close friend. The *Eyrbyggja Saga*, the *Vatnsdale Saga*, *Egil's Saga*, and *Saga of the Jomsvikings* all have stories about an Icelander who shuts himself up to die because he cannot accomplish a revenge. The *Beowulf* poet, writing about third-century Danes, chronicles a father's grief for his dead son in a beautifully written passage. Like Hrethel in *Beowulf*, Denethor has two sons – Boromir dead, Faramir dying. This passage about Hrethel also echoes through Théoden's exchange with Saruman before Orthanc (Tolkien, 1966b, pp. 185-6).

Further, the character of Denethor also draws specifically on Njal from the *Saga of Burnt Njal*. Both are good-looking men with the gift of foresight. Each loses his favourite son.

Both complain that their sons will not follow their advice any longer. Both refuse to go on without their honour while they might be saved if they chose. Both die on a blazing funeral pyre. This comparison adds dimension to the character of Denethor. The intelligent, courageous, perceptive, witty Njal is what Denethor might have been if Denethor had not come under Sauron's influence through use of the palantir.

Galadriel's tale is an unfinished one. Unlike other characters in *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien was still evolving her nature and her adventures. In the *Unfinished Tales*, Christopher Tolkien observes that the story of Galadriel and Celeborn has more problems than any other story of Middle-earth. He concludes that "the role and importance of Galadriel only emerged slowly, and that her story underwent continual refashionings" (Tolkien, 1980, p. 228). I believe that Tolkien had two women in Northern literature in his subconscious when he created Galadriel. Between them, they account for some of her contradictions and for the unsatisfactory nature of her story.

One of these women is Unn the Deep-minded whose adventures occur in the *Laxdale Saga*, the *Sturlunga Saga*, and the *Landnamabok*. Unn has several characteristics that Tolkien might have drawn upon as he was creating Galadriel. After Unn's son who has become ruler over half of Scotland is killed, she builds a ship in secret and escapes to Iceland with her family and her wealth. She settles land, providing for those nobles accompanying her. She is a generous woman who governs well. At the end of her life she arranges for the marriage of her favourite grandson, prepares a great feast, entertains her guests well, and retires to her bedchamber, where she dies. She is buried in a ship under a mound. Like her, Galadriel is also a paragon among women. Her name from her mother is Nerwen (man-maiden) reflecting her height and prowess as a leader. She was strong, brilliant, learned, and swift in action. Both she and Unn had intelligence and second sight. Galadriel also builds a ship and sails away. She does so without permission and thus violates a ban against departure and is forbidden to return.

Galadriel has two characteristics not shared with Unn the Deep-minded: golden hair and pride. Hallgerd, the wicked wife of Gunnar in *Njal's Saga*, has most remarkable hair: "long silken hair that fell to her waist." In *Njal's Saga*, Gunnar, who is defending himself against his enemies, asks Hallgerd for two strands of her hair to fashion a bowstring. Hallgerd wants to know if anything depends on it. Gunnar says that his life does; she reminds him of a slap he gave her and refuses. Gunnar dies overcome by many wounds. This scene must surely be an inspiration for the dwarf Gimli's request for a strand of Galadriel's hair.

Hallgerd's pride may also have contributed to the character of Galadriel. Hallgerd and Njal's wife battle over who will have the seat of honour at high table, killing several men in their feud. Galadriel's pride results in a long exile from the West. Although forgiveness is offered, she does not accept it until she believes she has earned it through her rejection of the Ring. The mixture of these two influences makes Galadriel a more interesting character. These two personalities indicate some of the ways in which both

individuals and types of characters in Northern literature provided materials for Tolkien's imagination.

Themes

Tolkien's friend and colleague C.S. Lewis said, "If we insist on asking for the moral of the story, that is its moral: a recall from facile optimism and wailing pessimism alike, to that hard, yet not quite desperate, insight into Man's unchanging predicament by which heroic ages have lived. It is here that the Norse affinity is strongest: hammer-strokes but with compassion" (Lewis, 1968, p. 15). The concept of fate in Northern works, the need for courage, a conception of evil, the tragedy of mortality, the doom of the immortals, and the paradox of defeat are themes common to Northern literature and *The Lord of the Rings*.

Fate is a complex subject in literature. Beowulf finishes a speech about how he would want his famous mail-shirt disposed if Grendel were to eat him with the statement, "Fate goes ever as it must" (Crossley-Holland, 1968, p. 44). As a warrior, he believes that Fate controls events. Numerous characters from the sagas share his beliefs and his statement of them. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf expresses this concept when he notes that Bilbo was meant to find the Ring. Gandalf also declares that Gollum "is bound up with the fate of the Ring." He continues, "My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many – yours not least" (Tolkien, 1966a, p. 69). The rule of God, which wars with the concept of Fate in *Beowulf*, is absent from *The Lord of the Rings*. The One has intervened by sending the Istari to aid Middle-earth in this battle, but no further actions are taken. The other idea frequently expressed in *Beowulf* and in the sagas is that "Fate often saves an undoomed man when his courage is good." The warrior's personal courage may mitigate against an evil fate.

Heroic ages have lived through courage, and courage is one of the great lessons of *The Lord of the Rings*. In *Beowulf*, courage is a quality of the hero. In his battle with Grendel, Beowulf fights alone. When he dives into Grendel's mother's mere, his companions sit around the edge of the vile lake. When he faces the dragon, most desert, leaving him with only his kinsman Wiglaf. In the sagas, many more characters exhibit courageous behaviour. Njal's wife and grandson die with him; women, servants, and dogs all behave in an admirable manner. Likewise in *The Lord of the Rings*, all characters are called to courageous behaviour. Sam overcomes his multitude of fears to stay with Frodo beyond the end, Théoden is raised from despair to heroism, Éowyn and Merry stand against a Ringwraith – all are tried and find the courage to face their worst fears. Just as Elrond has composed the Fellowship to represent the free peoples of Middle-earth; so all these peoples demonstrate their worthiness to be free through their courage.

Evil in *The Lord of the Rings* is just as complex as courage is. The monsters are a great feature of the poem *Beowulf* and of the Northern eddas. A brief list shows variety: Sackville-Baggins, Old Man Willow, Mirkwood forest, Bill Ferny, the mountain Caradhras, Ringwraiths, wargs, orcs, the Balrog,

Southern men, Saruman, Boromir, Shelob, and Sauron. Sauron himself is a corrupted Maia – an angelic figure who has fallen into evil.

In Northern literature, evil remains. The promise of Ragnarök or the Twilight of the Gods is the promise of one more battle, for the gods and heroes in Valhalla remain there for yet another battle with the monsters. Similarly in *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf warns that the Shadow will come again. In a letter, Tolkien describes the ending of the *Silmarillion*: "This legendarium ends with a vision of the end of the world, its breaking and remaking, and the recovery of the Silmarilli and the 'light before the Sun' – after a final battle which owes, I suppose, more to the Norse vision of Ragnarök than to anything else, though it is not much like it" (Tolkien, 1981, p. 149). Courage may prevail today but tomorrow evil arises again.

Because the wages of heroism is death in time, each character must in the end render up life in Middle-earth or leave Middle-earth forever. In spite of the facile report of a critic that all the good boys came home alive, by the end of the appendices all are dead or gone. What Tolkien says of Beowulf applies equally to Aragorn and others: "He is a man, and that for him and many is sufficient tragedy . . . It is the theme in its deadly seriousness that begets the dignity of tone: *lif is læne: eal scæceð leoht and lif somod* [Life is transitory: light and life together hasten away]" (Tolkien, 1937, p. 18). The tragedy of the *Laxdale Saga* and many others is that Iceland has too few men of promise to have them engaging in blood feuds with each other. When the heroes die in a saga, their small society is bereft of leadership.

The fate of the immortals is equally bleak. In Norse mythology, the old gods became more and more closely associated with humans until they were no more than larger-than-life ancestral heroes of men. Many battled against the monsters at Ragnarök and were slain. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the Elves flee from Middle-earth taking with them their high artistic, aesthetic, and scientific aspects. As the dwarf Gimli observes: "If all the fair folk take to the Havens, it will be a duller world for those who are doomed to stay" (Tolkien, 1966c, p. 150). The verb doomed summarizes the situation: the world will be less lovely, less enchanting, less exciting, yet man's fate is to remain in it.

The mortality of man and the departure of the immortals create an atmosphere of hopelessness. A variety of characters express this sentiment: "the doom of Gondor is drawing nigh," "many hopes will wither in this bitter spring," "our hope dwindles." Yet, in Tolkien's view and in the view of the saga writer, their courage is more worthy because they believe their cause is hopeless. Thus, in *Njal's Saga*, the author values Njal's sons' decision to go into the house even though he knows that the attackers will burn them there.

Lewis notes "Northern hammer-strokes but with compassion." The Northern hammer-strokes occur in the heroic battles, the instances of courage, and the death of mortals. Compassion is not common in the hard, cold world of Northern sagas and Eddas. Compassion is Tolkien's addition to the heroic form, and I believe that he primarily

achieves it through the creation of hobbits. In a letter, Tolkien makes another important statement about the moral: "A moral of the whole . . . is the obvious one that without the high and noble the simple and vulgar is utterly mean; and without the simple and ordinary the noble and heroic is meaningless" (Tolkien, 1981, p. 160). Even in the historically-inspired Icelandic family sagas, the emphasis is on the actions of the high and noble. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the existence of the hobbits helps readers participate in those actions.

Northern literature together into his creation of Middle-earth and its stories. The term "influence" is perhaps a more descriptive one than "borrowing." Tolkien knew *Beowulf* and *Njal's Saga*, two works with some clear antecedents, extremely well. Throughout his life, he had filled his imagination with these and other Northern tales. More extraordinary than finding their influence in his work would have been not to find it there. Certainly, other literatures and mythologies also influenced his creation, but an analysis of all influences would probably reveal that "the greatest single influence upon Tolkien is the eddas and sagas of the North."

Conclusions

This overview reveals that Tolkien fused many elements of

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