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## Mirkwood

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### Mirkwood

#### Abstract

Contrary to the repeated assertion that it was William Morris who in 1888 first adapted Mirkwood from Old Norse, Sir Walter Scott had in fact used the name seventy-five years earlier in his 1814 novel *Waverley*.

#### Additional Keywords

mirkwood; Hobbit; Walter Scott; William Morris

## EXTREME MINIMALISM IN *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

PIERRE H. BERUBE

IN PASSAGES OF PARTICULAR INTENSITY, I NOTICE that Tolkien often resorts to minimalism. His words become simple, homely, ancient. Monosyllables predominate. In some subliminal way which I cannot analyze, this increases the pathos. At least, such is the effect on me. Shakespeare and the Bible use the same trope. I have not observed it often in modern writers.

The most extreme case would be a passage composed *entirely* of monosyllables, and this actually occurs twice in *The Lord of the Rings*, and only twice. These two occurrences, I was startled to discover, correspond to the two main turning points of the plot.

That plot is simple: Get the Ring to the Fire. As the reader is constantly reminded, this is the primary action. All else is ancillary—the wars and policies, the adventures, the glimpses of ancient history, the poems, the strange races and cultures of Middle-earth, the astonishing feats of imagination, the subtle characterization, even the languages.

In this primary plot-line there are two turning points. At the Council of Elrond, Frodo accepts the quest: “‘I will take the Ring,’ he said, ‘though I do not know the way’” (II.2.270).

At the Sammath Naur, he repudiates it: “‘I have come,’ he said. ‘But I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The ring is mine!’” (VI.3.944).

Surely this cannot be coincidence.

PIERRE H. BERUBE is a retired software engineer with a lifelong interest in Tolkien. He lives in St. Johnsbury, VT, with his wife Felisa, a cat, and some memories.



## MIRKWOOD

JOHN V. ORTH

MOVING THROUGH Bilbo Baggins's journey with the dwarves, the company sheltered with Beorn and enjoyed the best meal they had had since they left the Last Homely House in the West. It was to be a long time before they would feast again. Ahead of them on their route lay a dark and dangerous wood, “the terrible forest of Mirkwood.” The dwarves knew that “after the mountains it was the worst of the perils they had to pass before they came to the dragon's stronghold” (*The Annotated Hobbit* [H] VII.177). Beorn agreed. The way through Mirkwood was “dark, dangerous and difficult.” Water would be a

particular problem. One stream crossed the path, “black and strong,” but Beorn warned them not to drink from it or bathe in it. He had heard that it carried “enchantment and a great drowsiness and forgetfulness” (H VII.183). To make matters worse, Gandalf would not be accompanying them through the forest.

The dire warnings proved all too true. When Bombur slipped into the stream in Mirkwood, he fell into an enchanted sleep and had to be carried the rest of the way. Soon thereafter, the company was attacked by spiders, saved only by Bilbo, who used the power of the Ring to remain invisible. Captured by the Wood-elves, the dwarves were again rescued by Bilbo and the Ring.

As with so much of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien chose the names of his characters and places with great care. The name Mirkwood appealed to him, as he wrote to his grandson, because it was an ancient name that was not “a mere ‘colour’ word: ‘black,’” but was “from the beginning weighted down with the sense of ‘gloom’” (H 183n10, citing *Letters* #289, p.370).

Douglas Anderson’s note in *The Annotated Hobbit* adds that “The name *Mirkwood*, as a great forest with similar associations, was used earlier in a novel that Tolkien knew well: *A Tale of the House of the Wolfings* (1888) by William Morris” (H 183n10). Peter Gilliver, Jeremy Marshall, and Edmund Weiner in *The Ring of Words: Tolkien and the Oxford English Dictionary* give William Morris even more credit:

It was not Tolkien himself who first adapted *Mirkwood* from the Old Norse word. William Morris’s *The House of the Wolfings* (1889) is set in *Mirkwood*, where the settlements of the Goths stand in forest clearings, rather like those of the Woodmen of Mirkwood in *The Lord of the Rings* or the earlier Woodmen of Brethil in *The Silmarillion*. (Gilliver et al 165)

Heretofore overlooked is the appearance of Mirkwood in Sir Walter Scott’s popular novel *Waverley*, first published in 1814, seventy-five years before Morris’s tale. The eponymous hero Edward Waverley used to wander along an avenue on his estate,

which, after an ascending sweep of four miles, gradually narrowed into a rude and contracted path through the cliffy and woody pass called Mirkwood Dingle, and opened suddenly upon a deep, dark, and small lake, named, from the same cause, Mirkwood-Mere. There stood, in former times, a solitary tower upon a rock almost surrounded by the water, which had acquired the name of the Strength of Waverley, because, in perilous times, it had often been the refuge of the family. (vol. I chapter 4)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Janet Brennan Croft has pointed out that the image of a tower surrounded by a lake resonates with Isengard in *The Lord of the Rings* as well.

It would be difficult in general to believe that Tolkien was unfamiliar with Scott's novels and poetry, but it is established by Oronzo Cilli in *Tolkien's Library* that he quoted from *Marmion* (254), knew *Waverley* (317), and mentioned Scott specifically in his essay on "The Devil's Coach-Horses" (213). Other scholars have noted Scott's possible influence on Tolkien. Kaleigh Jean Spooner has shown that Tolkien, like Scott, used poetry written in an heroic style to create the appearance of authenticity.<sup>2</sup> And Sebastián Alejandro Freigeiro has recently pointed to similarities between the Ring itself and a certain magic ring mentioned in Scott's *The Fair Maid of Perth* (1828).

In addition to the common appearance of Mirkwood in *Waverley* and *The Hobbit*, it is worth noting that the two novels also share a general similarity of themes. Tolkien described *The Hobbit* as "the study of a simple ordinary man, neither artistic nor noble and heroic (but not without the undeveloped seeds of these things) against a high setting" (H 361n.6, citing Letters #131, p.159). Like Bilbo Baggins, Scott's hero, Edward Waverley, matures on a long and perilous journey through war and rebellion.

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<sup>2</sup> It is noteworthy that William Morris followed Scott in mixing poetry and prose. The full title of Morris's novel set in Mirkwood was *A Tale of the House of the Wolfings and all the Kindreds of the Mark Written in Prose and in Verse*.