

5-1-2020

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A New Look at Northern Influence on Tolkien's Elves

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Shackouls Honors College: Honors Thesis

April 15, 2020

Introduction

J.R.R. Tolkien is widely known for his genre-defining books *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. These works have shaped fantasy fiction since its inception, and in many ways represent a break from previously established conventions. One of the most remarkable changes was a wholesale reimagining of elves. Thanks to Tolkien's work, elves are no longer synonymous with fairies in the popular imagination, with most literary depictions of elves over the past several decades resembling Tolkien's elves. This is even more impressive when one considers the fact that, at the time of Tolkien's writing of *The Lord of the Rings*, typical depictions of elves bore little resemblance to the ones that Tolkien would go on to describe. The great question regarding Tolkien's reimagining of elves is how he moved from the starting point of Victorian fairies to the noble, stately figures seen in *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and especially *The Silmarillion*.

Several scholars have investigated the steps that Tolkien might have taken to create the elves and which sources might have influenced him in this process. In this discussion, the consensus that has emerged is that he was primarily influenced by Celtic myth, particularly the Tuatha Dé Danann, the gods of pre-Christian Ireland.¹ It is true that Tolkien's elves in their later forms exhibit many shared characteristics with the Túatha Dé Danann and with their later, literary forms, the *áes síde*. Analyses focusing primarily upon characteristics, however, often fail to incorporate the effects of one of Tolkien's major influences: that of Northern mythology.²

¹ I will typically use "Celtic" when referring to both Irish and Welsh myth or language simultaneously. When distinguishing between the two, I will refer to the specific group in question.

² There are two ways that I will be using the word "Northern" in the context of European mythology. One is a geographical term which I use to encompass England, Ireland, Wales, and Iceland, and by extension to refer to Old Norse, Anglo-Saxon, and Celtic mythology. The other is a categorical term that I use to refer specifically to geographically northern myths that fall within the Germanic mythological family: i.e. Norse and Anglo-Saxon. Though I prefer to use the categorical term rather than the geographical term when possible, it is difficult to avoid the use of both, so I will be using "northern" for the former usage and "Northern" for the latter usage.

This influence, refracted through the Christian lenses both of the original transcribers and of Tolkien himself, had a major impact on the nature of the elves in a way that has not yet been examined. In fact, descriptive traits notwithstanding, the character of the elves is more influenced by the Northern myths than by any other source, including Celtic myth. In order to reach this conclusion, it is necessary to examine Tolkien's familiarity with the North, what the Northern myths have to say about elves, and how specifically the Northern influence took shape in the elves of Middle-earth.

The Importance of the North

J.R.R. Tolkien spent most of his life and practically his entire academic career interacting with the Northern myths. As a result, these myths proved to be a major influence on his fiction, especially on the Middle-earth corpus. In order to understand the nature and extent of this influence, it is necessary to examine Tolkien's first encounters and some of his key interactions with the North before and during his creation of Middle-earth.

Tolkien had the fortune to be born not long after the end of the Victorian period, which saw a large-scale revival of interest in Old Norse-Icelandic subject matter. Of special importance to this revival was the first English translation of the *Völsunga* saga from Old Norse, published in 1870 by William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon. This translation, along with some of Morris's later work³, helped inspire a wave of both academic and nonacademic interest in Northern stories, language, and culture. This surge of interest proved to have lasting effects on Tolkien.

There were two main components to Tolkien's early exposure to Northern myths: his introduction to the myths themselves through the medium of fairy tales and his introduction to the old Northern languages. As a child, he read and loved Andrew Lang's Fairy Books, including

³ Especially *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains*. For more on Morris's influence on Tolkien, see Kelvin Lee Massey, "The *Roots* of Middle-Earth: William Morris's Influence upon J.R.R. Tolkien."

most importantly the *Red Fairy Book*, which contained Lang's retelling of the story of Sigurd, Brynhild, and Gudrun.⁴ Later, as a schoolboy at King Edward's School, the young Tolkien discovered a strong affinity for languages. Sometime around 1908, he discovered Old English through George Brewerton, a teacher at King Edward's, and in turn began to read *Beowulf*, which would go on to play an important role in his scholarly career. Shortly thereafter, he began to learn Old Norse, having acquired a copy of the *Völsunga* saga, upon which Andrew Lang's "Story of Sigurd" was based, in the original language. He discovered the field of philology around the same time and was fascinated by the dual enchantments of language and myth. By 1910, he was able to recite from both *Beowulf* and the *Völsunga* saga and could speak Old English with some fluency.⁵ These elements, Northern myth and language and philology, would be the guiding stars of his career.

Tolkien began his studies at the University of Oxford in 1911. While there, he became acquainted to varying extents with medieval Welsh and Finnish. His ever-growing love of philology led him to begin reading English Language and Literature during the Trinity term of 1913. This allowed him to focus his scholarly efforts on Old and Middle English and on Old Norse, reading the Icelandic sagas and both the *Prose Edda* and the *Poetic Edda* in the original language.⁶

When England entered the first World War in 1914, Tolkien opted to join an officer training corps while remaining at Oxford in order to finish his studies. Though he was actively writing during this period, including the first attempts at what would eventually become the basis of his Middle-earth legendarium, he did relatively little work focused on Northern myth. The

⁴ Humphrey Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography* (New York City: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 30.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 54-56

⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

only notable piece he produced relating to the North is his unfinished translation of the story of Kullervo from the Finnish *Kalevala*, upon whom Tolkien would later model his character Túrin Turambar.⁷ After Tolkien's graduation from Oxford in the summer of 1915, he officially joined the British armed forces. Though he began his first attempts at what would become *The Book of Lost Tales* while in the army, from this point until his discharge in 1918 there would be precious little time for scholarly reading or writing.

The lack of open academic positions during the war meant that Tolkien was unable to immediately resume scholarly work after his discharge. Instead, he worked at the New English Dictionary until 1920, when he was hired as a Reader in English Language at the University of Leeds. It was there that Tolkien began to make his first major scholarly contributions to the fields of English medieval study and philology. These began with his new translation of the Middle-English poem *Gawain and the Green Knight* with his friend and colleague E.V. Gordon. It was also at Leeds that he instigated the creation of his first club dedicated to Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon, and that he nearly finished *The Book of Lost Tales*, the proto-legendarium out of which the *Silmarillion* would later develop.⁸ Additionally, at some point during his time in Leeds, he began a translation of *Beowulf*, which he finished in 1926 but which remained unpublished until 2014.⁹ His most important scholarly contributions, however, would not come until after his return to Oxford, this time as a professor of Anglo-Saxon, in 1925.

The ways in which Tolkien continued to interact with Northern myth following his return to Oxford can be seen in a few key areas, both in his formal scholarship and informally in his extracurricular activities. Informally, he created a club in the image of the one he had overseen at

⁷ Ibid., 80.

⁸ Ibid., 112.

⁹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2014), vii.

Leeds, called the *Kolbítar*, or “coal-biters.” This group, whose primary purpose was to read through aloud the Old Norse Eddas and Sagas in the original language, would go on to have an outsize influence on Tolkien’s life. Notably, this group included fellow Oxonian C.S. Lewis, with whom Tolkien would go on to strike up a long and productive friendship originally predicated on their shared love of the Northern myths. Although the group disbanded after its primary goal was accomplished, it would ultimately become the foundation upon which the later Inklings were based. It was also possibly during this time that Tolkien wrote his retelling of the *Völsunga* saga, entitled *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, which remained unpublished until 2009.¹⁰ Formally, Tolkien’s work as a professor of Anglo-Saxon saw a continued focus on *Beowulf*, which was one of the primary subjects of his lectures.¹¹ Indeed, the argument may be made that Tolkien’s most important single scholarly contribution to his field is the one that dealt directly with *Beowulf*. In 1936, Tolkien delivered an invited address to the British Academy entitled “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics.” This speech, later published in essay form, revived critical interest in the epic, which at the time of Tolkien’s speech was generally considered to be interesting as a source for studies in history, philology, and mythology, but not as an example of Anglo-Saxon poesis.¹²

By the time that Tolkien began writing *The Hobbit* in the early 1930s, he had extensive experience interacting with the Northern myths. “One writes such a story [as the *Hobbit*] out of the leaf-mould of the mind,”¹³ said Tolkien, and his “leaf-mould” had been well-enriched indeed. There is, however, one other important mythological source that bears mentioning: Celtic (Irish

¹⁰ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2009), 5.

¹¹ Carpenter, *Tolkien*, 122.

¹² J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London, HarperCollins, 2006), 5-6.

¹³ Carpenter, *Tolkien*, 182.

and Welsh) myth. The effects of Celtic influence on Tolkien's work are complex and frequently debated. Tolkien was very interested in Welsh, particularly medieval Welsh, as a language, and likely taught from medieval Welsh texts such as the *Mabinogion*.¹⁴ However, though he was well-versed in Welsh myth, it was never his area of expertise, and his few scholarly contributions relating to Welsh, including his acclaimed 1955 lecture "English and Welsh," focused mainly on philology rather than on myth. Furthermore, though Tolkien was willing to admit his interest in Welsh history and the debt that his created languages owed to Welsh, he seems to have been less inclined to admit to drawing from Welsh myth in creating his legendarium. His relationship with Irish language and myth was even more complicated, with Tolkien ardently denying the influence of Irish myth on his fiction. Famously, he professed in a letter to Stanley Unwin to "know Celtic things" and to "feel for them a certain distaste: largely for their fundamental unreason."¹⁵ In recent years, however, scholars such as Dimitra Fimi have shown how certain elements of Tolkien's fiction may in fact be influenced by Irish and Welsh myth. Writing of the influence of Celtic sources on Tolkien, Kassandra Perlongo suggests that "despite fierce opposition and, at times, strong amounts of Celtic denial, [Tolkien's] clear affinity towards the language and mythology proves it not to be the case."¹⁶ This interplay between Celtic myth on one hand and Anglo-Saxon and Norse myth on the other goes on to play an important role in the shaping of Middle-earth.

Clearly, the North, through the dual media of myth and language, was an important influence on Tolkien from well before the writing of *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings*. His early childhood and adolescent interest in the North matured into a scholarly interest while also

¹⁴ Kassandra M. Perlongo, "Mythic Archetypes: Welsh Mythology in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*," Master's thesis, (California State University, 2010), 11.

¹⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 26.

¹⁶ Perlongo, "Mythic," 18.

retaining an amateur's love of the subject matter. This remained true for the rest of his career, spanning the entire time period during which he worked to develop Middle-earth. The claim that the North influenced Tolkien's legendarium is widely agreed upon by Tolkien scholars, and there have been several who have sought to both enumerate the various ways in which this influence appears in Tolkien's fiction and to distinguish its sources. In some areas, it is both easy to see the influence and to determine its specific source. Other areas, however, are more complicated in terms of determining both influence and attribution. This is particularly true in the cases of Norse and Anglo-Saxon myth: as Heather O'Donoghue observes, "just as it's hard to tell what's Anglo-Saxon and what's Scandinavian in *Beowulf*, it's hard to disentangle the two in Tolkien's work."¹⁷ The elves of Middle-earth are a prime example of this complexity.

The Northern Elves

To understand the effects of Northern influence on the development of Tolkien's elves, it is first necessary to understand their precursors as attested in Northern myth and in Northern language. Tom Shippey notes that the presence of the words *ælf* in Old English, *álfr* in Old Norse, and *alp* in Middle-High German, to name a few, implies that they shared a common root in Proto-Germanic. Indeed, he suggests that Tolkien may have tried to reconstruct this missing root.¹⁸ Old English in particular possesses a variety of words for elves, and elves are extensively attested from a linguistic perspective in the written Anglo-Saxon record.¹⁹ Elves are also well attested in Old Norse, particularly in the *Poetic* and *Prose* Eddas. However, once one attempts to more closely investigate the elves, whether those of Anglo-Saxon or of Old Norse traditions, in order to determine their characteristics and behaviors, things become difficult.

¹⁷ Heather O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Short Introduction* (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 154.

¹⁸ Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle-Earth* (New York City: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 57.

¹⁹ Tom Shippey, "Light-Elves, Dark-Elves, and Others: Tolkien's Elvish Problems," *Tolkien Studies* 1, no. 1 (2004), 3.

The major problem with both Anglo-Saxon and Norse elves is that though they are well attested from a philological perspective, including as names, in medical and magical texts and as glosses on Latin texts, the elves themselves are not well defined. In the case of the Anglo-Saxon elves, they are only properly mentioned once in the mythological record: as an aside in *Beowulf*, where they are categorized as descendants of Cain.²⁰ Helios de Rosario Martínez lays out some of the reasons that the Anglo-Saxon elves are so elusive, writing that on one hand “early Anglo-Saxons and their ancestors may have thought of elves as otherworldly non-monstrous, good-natured, beautiful, human-like beings, related to mankind similarly to heathen gods,” but on the other that “the account of *ylfe* in *Beowulf* as part of the kin of Cain, together with *eotenas*, *orcneas*, and *gigantas*, class them with diabolic, monstrous creatures like Grendel.”²¹ Tom Shippey agrees, noting the dichotomy between the association of elves “with *nightgengan*, ‘night walkers,’ with ‘temptations of the fiend,’ and with *þam mannum þe deofol mid hæmð*, ‘the people the devil has sex with,’” and simultaneously what he terms a stubborn persistence in “[giving Anglo-Saxon] children names like *Ælf-wine*, *Ælf-red*, *Ælf-stan*, and so on.”²² Unfortunately, despite several scholarly attempts, the consensus seems to be that it is functionally impossible to determine with clarity what exactly the Anglo-Saxons might have thought of elves.

In Old Norse, on the other hand, elves are mentioned a handful of times in the *Poetic Edda* and are described in a little more detail in Snorri Sturluson’s *Prose Edda*: “there is one place that is called Alfheim. There live the folk called light-elves [*ljósálfar*], but dark-elves [*dökkálfar*] live down in the ground, and they are unlike them in appearance, and even more

²⁰ Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2000), 9.

²¹ Helio de Rosario Martínez, “Fairy and Elves in Tolkien and Traditional Literature,” *Mythlore* 28, no. 3 (2010), 68.

²² Shippey, “Light-Elves,” 3.

unlike them in nature. Light-elves are fairer than the sun to look at, but dark elves are blacker than pitch.”²³ In addition to the elves mentioned here, Sturluson mentions the black-elves, or *svartálfar*. How is one to make sense of these different elf kindreds, and how might they have influenced Tolkien’s work?

The most likely conclusion is that Sturluson is not actually referring to three different types of elves. In context, Sturluson’s use of *svartálfar* seems to refer not to a type of elf, but to dwarves. The other elf categories are a matter of some debate, and there have been several scholars who have sought to determine the types of elves to which the terms *ljósálfar* and *dökkálfar* correspond. Tom Shippey refers to this dilemma as the “elf-problem” and summarizes the work of several other scholars in “Light-elves, Dark-elves, and Others: Tolkien’s Elvish Problem.” According to Shippey, the first major attempt at positively identifying the light-elves and dark-elves was made by Nikolai Grundtvig.²⁴ Grundtvig proposes that light-elves are “the angels of the ancient North” and that the dark-elves are the ambiguous “elves of the twilight.”²⁵ Though identifying light-elves with angels is potentially promising, the identification of dark-elves with “elves of the twilight” is rather less so: it substitutes one vague description for another. In contrast to that approach is the one taken by Jacob Grimm, who argues that Sturluson must have deliberately designated three types of elves. However, this would lead to the conclusion that dark-elves (blacker than pitch) and black-elves are the same. Grimm instead decides that Sturluson was partially incorrect in his transmittal of information about the elves proposing that Sturluson’s statement that “dark elves are blacker than pitch”²⁶ can be better understood by inferring that *döckr* (dark) means “not so much downright black as dim, dingy . . .

²³ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Anthony Faulkes (London: Everyman, 1996), 19.

²⁴ Shippey, “Light-Elves,” 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁶ Sturluson, *Edda*, 19.

obscurus, fuscus, aquilus.”²⁷ With this interpretation made, there are once again three types of elves, with Grimm ultimately concluding that further identification of the elves is impossible.

Shippey takes issue with Grimm’s interpretation, listing five major issues:

1. What are light-elves and dark-elves, and what is the difference between them if it is not a matter of color?
2. If it is not a matter of color, why does Snorri say that dark-elves are black?
3. If dwarves are different from elves, as almost all early evidence agrees, then why call them black-elves?
4. What are all these Old English groups, like wood-elves and sea-elves, and where do they fit in?
5. Is there anything to be said for Grundtvig’s idea that there may have been “elves of the twilight?”²⁸

Unfortunately, like the Anglo-Saxon elves, there is simply not enough extant information to conclusively answer these questions and determine with certitude what exactly the Norse elves were.

The other main body of northern myth – Celtic myth – bears mentioning as well, though Celtic myth’s heritage is distinctly different from that of the Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon myths. Strictly speaking, elves as such are not attested in either Irish or Welsh myth in the same manner that they are in Norse myth, nor does there exist a word for elf in Old Irish or Old Welsh in the same way as for Old English or Old Norse. With that said, there are certain elements of Celtic myth that must be addressed regarding elves. The Irish tradition possesses a sort of precursor to later fairies in the *áes síde*: the people of the hollow hills. Mark Williams notes that the *áes síde*

²⁷ Shippey, “Light-Elves,” 7.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

“resemble the ‘elves’ of Old Norse and (to a much lesser extent) Old English literature to such a degree that it has been suggested they are evidence for a widespread north-western European belief in a parallel supernatural race, something common to both Celtic and Germanic cultures.”²⁹ More importantly, the Túatha Dé Danann, the Irish gods who in some tellings become the *áes síde* after their defeat by the people who would become the Irish, are often considered to have been an inspiration for Tolkien’s elves. Similarly, one can find references to a vaguely elf-like race in the *tylwyth teg*, the enigmatic “fair folk” of Welsh tradition, though there is less extant information on them than on the Túatha Dé Danann. Despite the possibility of “a widespread north-western European belief in a parallel supernatural race,”³⁰ the differences between the two branches of “Celtic elves” and the Northern elves and between their respective mythological families mean that there is no compelling reason to draw equivalences between the Túatha Dé Danann or the *tylwyth teg* and the Anglo-Saxon or Norse elves.

Another important consideration in the analysis of the Northern elves is the influence of Christianity upon retellings of Northern myth. Iceland is generally believed to have officially adopted Christianity around the year 1000 C.E: this is attested in *Njáls Saga*, one of the best-known Icelandic sagas, as well as other Icelandic historical sources. Iceland had been settled by Norse settlers from Scandinavia and before the arrival of Christianity had possessed what is assumed to be the full Norse mythological tradition. However, as was often the case with Germanic cultures, the mythological tradition was primarily an oral one. It was not until well after the adoption of Christianity that the Icelanders began to put their stories, whether mythological or historical, in writing on a large scale. The earliest surviving long-form Old

²⁹ Mark Williams, *Ireland’s Immortals: A History of the Gods of Irish Myth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 38-39.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

Norse mythological source is the *Poetic*, or “Elder”, *Edda*, which is a portion of the Codex Regius, a collection of some ninety pages dated to circa 1270 C.E. It is, however, generally believed that the *Poetic Edda* is a copy or transcription of older material. This is substantiated by Snorri Sturluson’s *Prose Edda*, written in the early 1200s. In the *Prose Edda*, Sturluson draws directly from, if not the *Poetic Edda*, then perhaps its source material. This evidence, along with modern scholarship, tends to suggest that the *Poetic Edda* is a more or less faithful retelling of Norse mythology. However, the *Poetic Edda* is fairly silent on the issue of elves: they are mentioned by implication in the naming of the dwarves in stanzas 12 and 16 of the *Völuspá* (“Liquor and Staff-elf, Wind-elf and Thrain . . . Elf and Yngvi, Oakenshield”),³¹ and a handful of times elsewhere (What disturbs the Æsir? What disturbs the elves?),³² never in detail.

More important for understanding the Norse elves is Sturluson’s *Prose Edda*, which, as discussed previously, delineates the elves into *ljósálfar*, *dökkálfar*, and *svartálfar*. Compared to the *Poetic Edda*, however, the *Prose Edda* is a less straightforward retelling of Norse mythology. By Sturluson’s time, Iceland had officially been a Christian nation for some two hundred years, and his family, an influential Icelandic clan, had been Christians for roughly the same amount of time. As Tom Shippey observes, Sturluson likely “knew no more about what pagans really did or really thought, than we would about the folk-beliefs of the eighteenth century.”³³ This knowledge, combined with the euhemerization that Sturluson undertakes at other points in the *Prose Edda*, makes it nigh impossible to disentangle what might have been authentic Old Norse beliefs about elves from two centuries worth of retransmission in absence of the original mythological context and from Sturluson’s own possible contributions.

³¹ *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Carolayne Larrington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 5-6.

³² *Ibid.*, 10.

³³ Shippey, “Light-Elves,” 4.

In this respect, Sturluson is like the anonymous author or transcriber of *Beowulf*. The *Beowulf* poet or poets lived in a Christianized England that still possessed memories of its pagan past. While *Beowulf* is narrated from an explicitly Christian perspective, it is a perspective that appears to still be somewhat sympathetic to its predecessors. Since, unlike Sturluson, the *Beowulf* poet is not dealing with an entire mythological corpus, it is unnecessary for him to undertake euhemerization in the same way that Sturluson found necessary. Much like Sturluson, though, there are clear signs of the interaction between the relatively new Christian cosmology on one hand and the inherited imaginative framework on the other. In Tolkien's words, the *Beowulf* poet "has devoted a whole poem to the theme, so that we may see man at war with the hostile world, and his inevitable overthrow in time."³⁴ Even if, as Tolkien noted, the *Beowulf* poet did not think of his work in this way, it was nonetheless the backdrop against which he wrote. Though this old way of looking at the world was changing and being displaced by the Christian worldview, it was still the worldview which undergirded the Anglo-Saxon heroic imagination. The same is true with the Norse.

In a sense, Tolkien as a narrator wrote in the same tradition as the *Beowulf* poet and as Sturluson, though at several hundred years remove rather than merely one or two centuries. Whereas the *Beowulf* poet and possibly Sturluson drew naturally upon this mythic backdrop as the foundation of heroic imagination, Tolkien deliberately recreated this "Northern courage," this "unyielding will," as the backdrop for his writing. As Tolkien saw it, he was not only writing fiction; he was also creating a mythology, and by extension an artificial prehistory, for England. What better source from which to draw than that which had shaped the imaginations of the Northerners long ago? At the same time, there is evidence that Tolkien wrestled with the

³⁴ Tolkien, *Monsters*, 18.

difficulty of harmonizing this heroic imagination, predicated on a fundamentally pagan worldview, with his own Roman Catholicism. On the one hand, elements of these two views were irrevocably at odds. On the other, adapting this northern spirit, which was “[nowhere nobler] nor more early sanctified and Christianized [than in England]” was an important part of his work to create a mythology for England.³⁵ As Tom Birkett suggests:

It is tempting, in fact, to read the War of the Ring as an extended meditation on the theory of courage, and the possibility of reconciling Christian values of compassion, forgiveness, and hope with the heroic fatalism of the northern heroes, and through this to observe a devout Catholic taking on . . . the issue of how a preeminently desirable landscape could be resurrected and still have relevance in a Christian world.³⁶

In this struggle, Tolkien undoubtedly had both the Beowulf poet and Sturluson in mind. It seems likely that he sought, as Mary R. Bowman suggests, to reshape the northern spirit in such a way that “we can have the qualities he so admired and could not entirely give up on – that indomitable will – without the alloy of pride or the contamination of despair.”³⁷

Despite Tolkien’s reservations, this Northern heroic temper played an important role in the shaping of Middle-earth. As one of the integral themes in the Middle-earth corpus, it also played a role in the shaping of the races of Middle-earth. Most importantly, it adds another layer to the conversation surrounding the nature of Tolkien’s elves, and the debt that they owe to Northern influence.

³⁵ Tolkien, *Letters*, 56.

³⁶ Tom Birkett, “Old Norse” in *A Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Stuart D. Lee (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 253-254.

³⁷ Mary R. Bowman, “Refining the Gold: Tolkien the Battle of Maldon, and the Northern Theory of Courage.” *Tolkien Studies* 7 (2010), 106.

Tolkien's Elves and Northern Influence

The main puzzle surrounding Tolkien's elves in recent years is how they seem to have sprung fully formed from Tolkien's mind, without obvious precursors in Tolkien's own time. After all, for the years prior to Tolkien's work, elves in popular conception tended to be fairies. This was largely due to the revival of interest in fairies during the Victorian era. When one compares the Victorian fairies to the elves that Tolkien described in *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and especially *The Silmarillion*, it is at first difficult to see how Tolkien might have progressed from these fairies to his elves. As a result, several scholars have investigated the creation of the elves and the debts of inspiration that Tolkien owed for that creation. Their research has shown that there are a wide range of influences on Tolkien's elves, from his starting point of Victorian fairies, to various medieval legendary sources, to early medieval Christian thought. Perhaps most interesting, however, is the influence of northern myth on Tolkien's elves.

One major scholarly consensus on the influence of northern myth on Tolkien's elves is that, despite Tolkien's avowed distaste for "Celtic things," he undoubtedly drew on at least Irish mythology in the creation of his elves. Dimitra Fimi makes a strong case for the influence of Irish mythology on the development of Tolkien's elves, arguing that Tolkien's elves are heavily influenced by the Irish Túatha Dé Danann. The Túatha Dé Danann are described in "The Book of Invasions," one of the earliest written Irish mythological sources, as skilled craftsmen, magicians, and warriors. They appear out of the far north, shrouded in darkness and bearing four treasures, and overthrow the previous inhabitants of Ireland, the Fir Bolg, in battle.³⁸ Tolkien's elves resemble the Túatha Dé Danann in several ways: history (the skills acquired by the Túatha Dé Danann in the north and the elves in the West), arrival (the flight of the Noldor and the

³⁸ Philip Freeman, *Celtic Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 18-28.

invasion of the Túatha Dé Danann), departure (the exile of the Túatha Dé Danann and the elven return to the West), other characteristics (immortality, skill in art and workmanship, magic), and nature (semi-divine beings).³⁹ These shared elements, combined with substantial Irish and Welsh influences on the earliest forms of the Middle-earth elf-lore, as seen in *The Book of Lost Tales*, make the influence of Celtic myth on Tolkien's elves undeniable. Thanks in large part to Fimi's work, most of the research on northern influences on the elves over the past fifteen years has focused on Celtic myth. However, though important, Celtic myth is only one piece of the puzzle.

The other two main branches of northern myth, Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon, are typically neglected in comparison. This is understandable. After all, the Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon elves are fundamentally elusive. Mark Williams explains this, arguing that Tolkien's elves "resemble nothing so much as an elegant compromise between the Túatha Dé Danann of 'The Book of Invasions' and those of the *Acallam*."⁴⁰ They have little in common with the shadowy elves of Norse mythology who give us the English word."⁴¹ Nonetheless, some scholars have attempted to divine the effects of Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon influence on Tolkien's elves. For example, Gloriana St. Clair notes that "The Elves of Northern literature are man-sized and intermarry with humans . . . have traditions of healing and of being capable smiths."⁴² Peter Wilkin discusses at length the Norse elf problem and Tolkien's elves, drawing connections between the different elf groups in Norse myth and Tolkien's light elves and dark elves (those who had seen Valinor and those who had not).⁴³ Tom Shippey describes the "oddly contradictory

³⁹ Dimitra Fimi, "'Mad' Elves and 'Elusive Beauty': Some Celtic Strands of Tolkien's Mythology," *Folklore* 117 (2006), 161-165.

⁴⁰ The *Acallam na Senórach*, or *The Colloquy of the Elders*, is one of the best surviving examples of medieval Irish myth/literature, written around 1220.

⁴¹ Williams, *Immortals*, 475.

⁴² Gloriana St. Clair, "An Overview of the Northern Influences on Tolkien's Works," *Mythlore* 21, no. 2 (1996), 64.

⁴³ Peter Wilkin, "Norse Influences on Tolkien's Elves and Dwarves" in *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on the Sacred*, ed. Frances Di Lauro (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2006), 76-78.

Anglo-Saxon accounts, where descriptions of malignant elves contrasted with a seeming deep-rooted respect for them”⁴⁴ and the ramifications this has for the treatment of elves in *The Lord of the Rings* (particularly the attitudes of the Hobbits, men of Gondor, and men of Rohan toward the elves).⁴⁵ All of these, too, are important aspects of Northern influence on Tolkien’s elves.

Shippey also raises another important point. During the developmental process of the elves of Middle-earth, Tolkien’s goal was not simply to create a new elf archetype but to: “recover the authentic tradition which lay further back than any account we possess, the tradition which gave rise to Snorri and *Beowulf* and the Eddic poems and the Anglo-Saxon charms and all the other scraps of evidence, which however integrated them, resolved their contradictions, and explained the nature of their misunderstandings.”⁴⁶ In this project, Tolkien had at his disposal a vast wealth of mythological sources on elves. There was, however, perhaps one area in which these sources fell short. None of the Northern myths describe the character of their elves. Irish myth provides some information as to the attitudes of its god-peoples, but it seems unlikely that Tolkien would have used the attitudes of the Túatha Dé Danann for his elves. Instead, Tolkien had to draw inspiration from a slightly different source.

As mentioned previously, one of Tolkien’s greatest enduring inspirations was the Northern spirit or heroic imagination. Famously, in 1941 he wrote in a letter that “I have in this War a burning private grudge . . . against that ruddy little ignoramus Adolf Hitler . . . [for] ruining, perverting, misapplying, and making forever accursed that noble northern spirit . . . which I have ever loved, and tried to present it its true light.”⁴⁷ Perhaps this “Northern spirit,” then, might hold a clue as to another influence on the elves. In “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the*

⁴⁴ Shippey, “Light-Elves,” 11.

⁴⁵ Tom Shippey, *Road*, 57-59.

⁴⁶ Shippey, “Light-Elves,” 11.

⁴⁷ Tolkien, *Letters*, 56.

Critics,” Tolkien claims that “one of the most potent elements . . . is the Northern courage: the theory of courage, which is the great contribution of early Northern literature.”⁴⁸ He then goes on to quote W.P. Ker’s *The Dark Ages*:

‘The Northern Gods’ Ker said, ‘have an exultant extravagance in their warfare which makes them more like Titans than Olympians; *only they are on the right side, though it is not the side that wins. The winning side is Chaos and Unreason*’ – mythologically, the monsters – ‘*but the gods, who are defeated, think that defeat no refutation.*’ And in their war men are their chosen allies, able when heroic to share in this ‘absolute resistance, perfect because without hope’. At least in this vision of the final defeat of the humane (and of the divine made in its image), and in the essential hostility of the gods and heroes on the one hand and the monsters on the other, we may suppose that pagan English and Norse imagination agreed.⁴⁹

Perhaps it is this very attitude, this defiant heroic fatalism, that Tolkien had in mind when creating the elves.

This attitude is seen throughout Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse mythology, but, as Ker described, perhaps nowhere more so than with the Æsir and the Vanir, the gods of the Old Norse pantheon. Odin, specifically, is an excellent example. He stands alone among the gods in his knowledge of the twilight of the gods and of Ragnarök. He knows also that the gods are doomed to lose, and that the world will be reborn in fire. Despite this, many of his actions in the surviving myths are measures to prepare for Ragnarök. Possessing foreknowledge of his doom, he nonetheless works tirelessly to prepare for the end. When Ragnarök eventually comes, he and the other gods, along with the heroes of Valhalla, will throw themselves into a battle that they will

⁴⁸ Tolkien, *Monsters*, 21.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

know they cannot win, fighting without hope because that fatalistic defiance is embedded in their very being. The Norse gods are a doomed people, but one that will face their end with resolve.

The “gods” of Middle-earth, in contrast, have no such doom. Though Manwë alone of the Valar knows what will happen at the end of Middle-earth, the Valar and those who fight alongside them are not doomed to perish in their final battle. In fact, the opposite is true: though it is not clear what the role of the Valar will be after Arda’s end, it is clear that they will be victorious in Dagor Dagorath, and that Morgoth, the dark foe of Middle earth, will be finally defeated. Until then, having completed their roles in the shaping of Middle-earth, they remain withdrawn and largely uninvolved, secure in the confidence of trusting Ilúvatar’s will for Arda.

The elves are more suited for this comparison. Unlike the Valar, they have no foreknowledge of what will come to pass, and their entire history in Middle-earth is one of decline. By the end of the Third Age, the elves who remained in Middle-earth had seen the fortunes of their kindred steadily dwindling. The First Age, the time of the glory of the elves, had seen the slow draining of their race, as elves fell in battle or by treachery to the designs of Morgoth. Those who survived to see their foe overthrown were called to return to the West. In the Second Age, the elves who had declined to answer that call sought to rebuild elven kingdoms in a changing Middle-earth. For a time, they were successful and began to regain a portion of their former strength, allying themselves with the men of Númenor. At the zenith of their power, Sauron, the chief lieutenant of their ancient foe, arrived as a seeming friend. He and the elf-lord Celebrimbor forged the rings of power, after which Sauron himself forged his own ring to seek dominion over all the inhabitants of Middle-earth. The ensuing war saw the collapse of Celebrimbor’s kingdom, and would likely have seen the destruction of all the elves had it not been for the assistance of the Númenoreans. After Sauron had corrupted the Númenoreans and

brought about their downfall, his forces struck with renewed fury against the elves. Though the elves overthrew Sauron through the Last Alliance with men and dwarves, they would never truly recover.

The Third Age sees the elves retreat inward. Those who maintain contact with the other races do so primarily as advisors rather than as actors in their own rights. Over time many leave Middle-earth, returning at last to the West. By the end of the third age, those few who remain understand that the time of the elves was coming to an end. To remain in Middle-earth means accepting the fact that the elves will inevitably “dwindle to a rustic folk of dell and cave, slowly to forget and to be forgotten.”⁵⁰ To oppose Sauron directly, however, is a costly task whose end the elves, with their limited sight, cannot see. And yet, many of the elves join in the fight against Sauron: those of Rivendell and of Lothlórien aid the Fellowship, and those of Lothlórien and of Mirkwood, though sustaining heavy losses during the War of the Ring, attack and overthrow Sauron’s stronghold of Dol Guldur.

In a sense, the elves are a doomed people in the same way that the Norse gods and heroes are. Their conflict is somewhat different of course: ultimately, there is a possibility that by their efforts they can help defeat Sauron, unlike the doomed gods at Ragnarök who must be defeated by the giants. But as for themselves, they are doomed as a race to diminish, and pass either into the West or slowly into irrelevance, and then on to nonexistence. In that sense, their conflict is without hope, for there is no course of action that can avert their destiny. They choose to fight not out of hope for themselves, but because to do so is to be on the right side, even if it is not the side that wins. Tolkien sums up this spirit in his translation of the key lines from the Old English

⁵⁰ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Boston: HarperCollins, 1991), 356.

poem “The Battle of Maldon:” “Will shall be the sterner, heart the bolder, spirit the greater as our strength lessens.”⁵¹

This attitude was not initially present in the elves. In *The Book of Lost Tales*, the earliest form of the Middle-earth mythology, it seems that Tolkien had yet to draw on the Northern spirit for the elves. The only hints of that spirit is in the doomed oath of Fëanor’s sons to recover the lost jewels that their father had made, and in the self-sacrifice of the elves Ecthelion and Glorfindel during the fall of the elf-haven of Gondolin.⁵² By at least 1931, however, Tolkien had expanded upon this theme, with the abortive “Lay of Leithian.” Here, one can see more clearly examples of the Northern spirit that would be carried into *The Silmarillion*: specifically, the introduction of the deaths of the elf-lords Fingolfin and Felagund.⁵³ By 1937, Tolkien had completed another iteration of the mythology, the *Quenta Silmarillion*, in which he carried forward these same themes.⁵⁴

Of course, more prominently, *The Hobbit* was published in 1937. It is not entirely clear, then, why Tolkien did not incorporate the Northern spirit in the elves of *The Hobbit*. As Christopher Snyder observes, that the treatment of elves in *The Hobbit* recalls primarily the *daoine maithe* (the good people) and the *tylwyth teg* of Irish and Welsh folk traditions respectively.⁵⁵ In the case of the wood-elves of Mirkwood, this may have been part of Tolkien’s design: Tolkien writes in *The Hobbit* that “[The Wood-elves] differed from the High Elves of the West, and were more dangerous and less wise. For most of them . . . were descended from the

⁵¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son” in *Tree and Leaf* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), 124.

⁵² J.R.R. Tolkien. “The Fall of Gondolin” in *The Book of Lost Tales: Part Two*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 2002), 183-194.

⁵³ J.R.R. Tolkien. “The Lay of Leithian” in *The Lays of Beleriand*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 2002), 231, 284-286.

⁵⁴ Incidentally, this was the same manuscript that was rejected for publication in 1937, causing Tolkien to make his remark about “Celtic things.”

⁵⁵ Christopher Snyder, *The Making of Middle-Earth* (New York City: Sterling, 2013), 104.

ancient tribes that never went to Faerie in the West . . . Still elves they were and remain, and that is Good People.”⁵⁶ Certainly, there are clear differences in character between the elves of *The Hobbit* and those of Tolkien’s later work. *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *The Two Towers*, both originally published in 1954, more clearly hint at the Northern spirit with the elves of Rivendell and Lothlórien, who are preparing to spend what strength they have left in the fight against Sauron. The attribution of the Northern spirit to the elves is most visibly present however throughout *The Silmarillion*, published in 1977, in the doomed valor of the elves. One example is in Tolkien’s description the last actions of the elven king Fingolfin at Dagor Bragollach:

“Fingolfin beheld (as it seemed to him) the *utter ruin of the Noldor, and the defeat beyond redress of all their houses; and filled with wrath and despair* he mounted upon Rochallor his great horse and rode forth alone, and *none might restrain him . . .* Thus he came alone to Angband’s gates, and he sounded his horn, and smote once more upon the brazen doors, and challenged Morgoth to come forth to single combat [emphasis added].”⁵⁷

Though Fingolfin fell in battle that day, he left Morgoth with lasting wounds, the only one among the elves to ever bloody him. There is also the example of Finrod Felagund, lord of Nargothrond, who left his kingdom, challenged Sauron, and sacrificed himself to save a man whom he had sworn to aid. Even Fëanor and his sons are examples of this, though in a distorted way. Fëanor himself, after arriving in Middle-earth, threw himself immediately against Morgoth’s stronghold, and though he knew that he could not stand against Morgoth’s hosts, “long he fought on, *and undismayed, though he was wrapped in fire and wounded with many*

⁵⁶ J.R.R. Tolkien. *The Annotated Hobbit*, annotated by Douglas Anderson (New York City: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 218-219.

⁵⁷ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 153.

wounds; but at the last he was smitten to the ground [emphasis added].”⁵⁸ This unyielding courage when faced with doom was a common feature of the elves who had returned from the West. Even those of the race of men who befriended the elves became themselves possessed of this courage because of that friendship, becoming “their chosen allies, able when heroic to share in this ‘absolute resistance, perfect because without hope.’”⁵⁹

There are two main reasons why the Northern spirit appears much more in the elves of *The Silmarillion* than in the elves of Tolkien’s other published works. The first is simply that Tolkien likely struggled with how to portray the Northern spirit in his published works. Though he was clearly seeking to incorporate the Northern spirit into his elves by 1937, as shown in *Quenta Silmarillion*, he may have hedged at that incorporation in *The Hobbit* and to a lesser extent *The Lord of the Rings*. The other reason has to do with Tolkien’s conceptions of the different elf kindreds and of the diminishing of the elves. Even in *The Silmarillion*, the Northern spirit is at its most visible in the Noldor, who had lived in Valinor but returned to Middle-Earth, and then in the Sindar, who began the journey to Valinor but stopped along the way. This, combined with the dwindling of the elves in the Second and Third Ages, suggests something about the source of the Northern spirit within Middle-Earth. Perhaps the presence of the Northern spirit in the elves of Middle-Earth has to do with exposure and proximity (in both time and space) to the West.

An important detail that must be discussed here is the previously mentioned dichotomy between elements of the Northern spirit and Christianity. For Tolkien, the Northern spirit was not usable as it was: “the true heroic spirit, Tolkien knew, was founded on ‘the creed of unyielding will’ and on a fundamental lack of hope, and was unavailable at least in theory, to the Christian,

⁵⁸ Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 107.

⁵⁹ Tolkien, *Monsters*, 21.

who is not allowed to lose hope.”⁶⁰ Additionally, in his essay on “The Battle of Maldon” entitled “Of ermod,” Tolkien argues:

This ‘northern heroic spirit’ is never quite pure, it is of gold and an alloy. Unalloyed it would direct a man to endure even death unflinching, when necessary: that is when death may help the achievement of some object of will, or when life can only be purchased by denial of what one stands for. But since such conduct is held admirable, the alloy of personal good name was never wholly absent . . . This element of pride, in the form of the desire for honour and glory, in life and after death, tends to grow, to become a chief motive, driving a man beyond the bleak heroic necessity to excess – to chivalry.⁶¹

Tolkien, in adapting the Northern spirit for Middle-earth, had to make two primary modifications for the spirit to be in its highest form: to remove the element of the courage of despair, and to remove the element of overmastering pride. In *The Lord of the Rings*, particularly with regard to the conduct of the most heroic men and hobbits, he makes both of these modifications, though there remain characters like Boromir who in their failures succumb to despair, pride, or both while retaining their courage. With the elves, however, especially in *The Silmarillion*, he only makes one of these modifications, and even then, only partially. He reduces the element of excessive pride but allows the elves to retain the courage of despair.⁶² Another clue to the presence of the Northern spirit in the elves as compared to men is in their ultimate ends. Men have the “gift of mortality,” passing beyond the world upon their deaths and, it is suggested, on

⁶⁰ Tom Shippey, “Heroes and Heroism: Tolkien’s Problems, Tolkien’s Solutions,” in *Roots and Branches: Selected Papers on Tolkien* (Zurich: Walking Tree Publishers, 2007), 280, quoted in Bowman, “Refining,” 104.

⁶¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, “Homecoming,” 22.

⁶² As with the race of men, pride as Tolkien describes it may appear in elven courage as a result of personal failures, as with Fëanor and his sons. The reason I say that Tolkien reduces rather than removes excessive pride is because the elves as a race, far more so than men, are proud verging on arrogant, and this pride shapes much of their history in the First Age.

to some other reality.⁶³ The elves on the other hand are bound to Arda even after death. They know that Arda will one day end and, it seems, believe that they will then pass from existence entirely.⁶⁴

It should be noted that in these modifications Tolkien was not being unfaithful to his sources. As discussed previously, those who originally wrote down most of the mythological and historical accounts in England and Iceland were likely Christians: Snorri Sturluson, the *Beowulf* poet, the authors of the *Battle of Maldon* and *The Book of Invasions* and others. As a result, the written accounts were undoubtedly influenced by their writers' beliefs. In a way, Tolkien's decision to make modifications to the Northern spirit for use in his own created mythology was an act thoroughly in keeping with his spiritual predecessors.

Conclusion

J.R.R. Tolkien had a long history with the Northern myths as both a scholar and a reader. This long love affair shaped Middle-earth in a variety of ways, some obvious, others less so. One of the more complicated ways in which the Northern myths influenced Tolkien's development of Middle-earth was in the development of the elves. Elves as a mythological group are not unique to Middle-earth now, nor were they at the time of Tolkien's writing. In fact, they are present as linguistic artifacts and as beings in Anglo-Saxon and Norse myth. With the Anglo-Saxon elves, there are the dual problems of minimal attestation in mythological records and contradictory attitudes about the elves as evidenced by names, medical and magical texts, and glosses on Latin mythological texts. With the Norse elves, the problems are different. Though the Norse elves, unlike the Anglo-Saxon elves, are well-attested in both language and narrative, especially in

⁶³ J.R.R. Tolkien, "Athrabeth Finrod Ah Andreth," in *Morgoth's Ring*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 2002), 315.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 331.

Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, specific details as to their natures remain scarce. This is further complicated by a distinction made in the *Prose Edda* between different elf kindreds: light-elves, dark-elves, and black-elves. Though many scholars have put forward solutions to this elf problem, it remains unsolved. These factors, combined with the influence of Christianity on depictions of both Anglo-Saxon and Norse elves, make it difficult to ascertain much useful information regarding either group.

When it comes to Tolkien's elves, most analyses focus on the Irish *áes síde* and Túatha Dé Danann due to the similarities in characteristics and in history between the two groups. Attempts to trace Anglo-Saxon and Norse influence on the elves have focused on what little descriptive information about elves exists in those traditions. One area of northern myth that has not been considered as an inspiration for the elves is what Tolkien referred to as "the Northern spirit." This spirit is the unyielding courage in the absence of hope that Tolkien so admired, and which is displayed prominently in Northern myth and historical accounts. Elements of this spirit are found throughout Middle-earth: there are those with heroic courage among the dwarves, ents, hobbits, and men. In most of these cases, however, Tolkien found it necessary to modify the Northern spirit. Though Tolkien admired the despairing courage of the Northmen, he as a Christian believed that it was deficient in two main ways: its despair and its pride. The most heroic characters in *The Lord of the Rings* possess a courage very much like the Northern courage but lacking those two flaws. The elves, however, are unique in that they possess as a race something very akin to the Northern courage with only a reduced element of pride. Because of this, the elves are of all the peoples of Middle-earth closest to possessing the Northern spirit. Though Tolkien's elves may not draw heavily from the elves of Anglo-Saxon or Norse myth, they are nonetheless Northern in their character.

This attribution of the Northern spirit to the elves is consistent with what Tom Shippey suggests may have been Tolkien's ultimate goal for the elves. Tolkien's goal for Middle-earth was to construct a mythology for England. Since no good example of English elves existed with which Tolkien was satisfied, he created his own. It was not necessarily enough, however, for Tolkien to create his own elves, using bits and pieces of other myths. Perhaps as part of his construction of a mythology for England, Tolkien sought, as Tom Shippey suggested, to reconstruct a proto-elf which would have over time given rise to all the elves and elf-like creatures of northern myth. In order to do this, Tolkien may have found it necessary to seek to unify as many pertinent elements of northern myth as possible, blending them to the point that it would be difficult to distinguish the individual components. If this is indeed the case, the attribution of the Northern spirit to the elves fills a hole that no other source might have adequately filled.

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