

# Echoes of Echoes

## The Influence of Northern European Mythology on J.R.R. Tolkien

by [Trent Hergenrader](#)

Like many readers, I first discovered J.R.R. Tolkien's work in my early teens, starting first with *The Hobbit* and moving to *Lord of the Rings*. While I enjoyed the books, I didn't love them, probably because I found them too difficult to read. It wasn't until I took a fantasy and science fiction literature course in college that I was introduced to *The Silmarillion*, a book published after Tolkien's death. His son, Christopher, gathered the volumes of poems, stories, and lays that his father had written throughout his life and formed a prehistory to Middle-earth. Upon reading it, I realized instantly that I'd read *Lord of the Rings* when I was far too young to understand it. I corrected this by rereading *Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* several times each over the next few years, along with Tolkien's letters and essays. Only after multiple readings did I begin to see a unified picture of the man and his work.

Peter Jackson's trilogy of *Lord of the Rings* renewed interest in Tolkien. A glance at Tolkien's biography reveals a few interesting facts that would be repeated in articles about the man ad nauseum: his stories sprung from his love of languages; he desired to create a mythology for England; and he was inspired by Norse mythology. Most investigations stopped without deeper exploration of what any of those statements truly meant. For the first, there's little counter-argument: Tolkien was a skilled philologist and his invented languages are as unique and complex as the world he created; and while the study of words bores most people to tears, there are entire books discussing the various tongues of Middle-earth. The point regarding a mythology for England is much stickier. There's the matter of how Tolkien defined "mythology" and how he thought myth functioned—a debatable topic which could be a book unto itself. But it's the last point, the one regarding the influence of Norse mythology on Tolkien, that's taken for granted and therefore invites deeper investigation.

The influence of Norse mythology on Tolkien's work, for example, is often "proved" by stating that Middle-earth takes its name from Midgard, a name taken from Norse mythology that literally means "Middle-earth." Another favorite example is that the many names, including Gandalf's, were taken from an ancient Norse poem. A third common influence cited is German composer Richard

Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, which in turn was taken from the 12th-century German epic *Nibelungenlied*. In that poem, a cursed treasure inspires greed and brings death, much like Tolkien's Ring of Power does in *Lord of the Rings*. Yet these comparisons only prove the letter of the influence northern myth had on Tolkien, not the spirit.

While Tolkien was interested in the mythologies of northern Europe, ironically, he was greatly influenced by what was missing from those stories. The majority of those works that survived to modern times—*Beowulf*, the Norse Eddas and Icelandic Sagas, the Finnish *Kalevala*—often exist in fragments or in isolation. As a result, these works are full of references to other tales: stories undoubtedly known to an ancient audience but forever out of reach for the modern reader. Tolkien found this inspiring. He thought a story's reliance on other, usually older, tales made it curiously strong. In a speech entitled, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics,"<sup>1</sup> Tolkien argued that the *Beowulf* poet used connected legends "to give [a] sense of perspective, of antiquity with a greater and yet darker antiquity behind." (p.31) Interruptions to the plot's narrative to tell the audience of old feuds or dead kings are not needless diversions—for Tolkien, these details add solemnity and depth to the story, making it feel rich and timeless. It was a technique Tolkien would eventually adopt in his own writing.

It's true that Tolkien's earliest stories explicitly borrowed from northern myths, one which dealt with Túrin Turambar, a tragic hero who unknowingly has an incestuous relationship with his sister and commits suicide. The storyline mirrors that of the ill-fated Kullervo from the Finnish epic poem, *The Kalevala*. Such copying of northern myth continues in Tolkien's first major work, *The Hobbit*. As mentioned earlier, Gandalf and the dwarves get their names from the ancient Norse poem *Voluspá*, and later Tolkien also borrows a plot device from an ancient tale—Bilbo draws Smaug the dragon's wrath by stealing a single cup. It's this same act (a pauper's theft of a trifling item) that brings forth the dragon in *Beowulf*. As Tolkien moved to writing *The Lord of the Rings*, he no longer relied on his love of northern myth for names or plot. Instead, he sought to invoke the mood of the northern myths and he began using his "ancient" elvish stories that would someday be published as *The Silmarillion* to give *The Lord of the Rings* the sense of antiquity and perspective he admired in *Beowulf*.

Even ancient stories have more roots stretching into a more ancient past, and poets commonly used stories from an older, heroic past to foreshadow future events. For example, after Grendel's death in *Beowulf*, a celebrating bard sings of Sigemund the dragon-slayer. To the revelers in the hall it's a fitting choice, comparing a hero of old to the one in their midst; yet to the *Beowulf* poet's audience it anticipates *Beowulf's* own impending struggle with a dragon. Tolkien could feel the power of those passages and included similar scenes in his own work. In *Lord of the Rings*, Bilbo sings of Eärendil, the hero who undertakes an impossible mission to rescue the world from evil in the First Age. Again, this is a fitting song offering hope in troubled times, yet it also foreshadows Frodo's

imminent and seemingly impossible journey. Tolkien emulated the poets he admired by embedding myths in his narrative to provide a metaphorical bridge, linking a mythic past to his story's present, and even glimpsing the future.

Tolkien also wanted to evoke a sense of loss and longing in his work, the solemnity he identified in the myths of northern Europe. In *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*,<sup>2</sup> Tolkien wrote that he wanted to impart a "heart-racking sense of the vanished past" in *Lord of the Rings* (p.110). Tolkien himself cites a moment in *The Two Towers*<sup>3</sup> where Gandalf relates his desire to use Saruman's Stone of Seeing, "' . . . to look across the wide seas of water and of time to Tirion the fair, and perceive the unimaginable hand and mind of Fëanor at their work, while both the White Tree and the Golden were in flower.' [Then Gandalf] sighed and fell silent" (p.204). Consider this passage in light of Tolkien's commentary on *Beowulf*, again from his 1936 speech *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*:<sup>1</sup>

[the Beowulf poet] was telling of things already old and weighted with regret, and he expended his art in making keen that touch upon the heart which sorrows have that are both poignant and remote. If the funeral of Beowulf moved once like the echo of an ancient dirge, far-off and hopeless, it is to us as a memory brought over the hills, an echo of echo. (p.34)

While the reader might have no concept of who Fëanor is, what Tirion may be, or the significance of the Two Trees, Gandalf's subdued and sorrowful reaction evokes a powerful response from the reader. The stories of Middle-earth's elder days come to the reader second-hand, thousands of years removed, yet they lost none of their poignancy. These glimpses into the past also create a desire in the reader to know more of Middle-earth's history, and dream about that world's stories that may be forever lost.

This insatiable longing for more of the tale makes *The Lord of the Rings* such an enduring book and Tolkien an extraordinary author. By imitating the structure of northern European myths, Tolkien created Middle-earth with a fragmentary backdrop of a vibrant past that was somehow lost, never to be fully recovered. Furthermore, his characters are deeply touched by the significance of their mythic past, and we as readers see how ancient stories bind their past to their present. It makes me wonder how much of our cultural history has been lost as well.

Tolkien's world still captivates me even after multiple readings, because in large part it serves as a constant reminder to consider how our own cultural myths function in today's world. *Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* continue to be two of my favorite books because they give me the slightest taste of the elusive, the intangible, and the mythic—the echo of the echo of an ancient tale, floating from over the far-off hills.

the end

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