

Treebeard's roots in medieval European tradition

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Ents are one of J.R.R. Tolkien's most striking creations, and, as Leslie Ellen Jones has observed, 'much of their power derives from Tolkien's masterly reworking of traditional themes and material.'¹ This article investigates the origins of Ents and of their leader, Treebeard². It reviews what has been established and identifies Anglo-Saxon and Norse texts whose likely influence has been overlooked.

My aim in doing this is twofold. Firstly, to deepen the reader's appreciation of the 'rootedness' of this aspect of *The Lord of the Rings*, and to intimate how expertly Tolkien weaves new magic from disparate strands of medieval tradition. Secondly, to highlight old texts that should, on their own merits, appeal to admirers of Tolkien's work.

We should start with what the Professor himself said about Ents in three of his letters:

'As usually with me they grew rather out of their name, than the other way about. I always felt that something ought to be done about the peculiar A[nglo-]Saxon word *ent* for a 'giant' or mighty person of long ago — to whom all old works were ascribed. If it had a slightly philosophical tone (though in ordinary philology it is 'quite unconnected with any present participle of the verb to be') that also interested me.'

'I did not consciously invent them at all. The chapter called 'Treebeard' ... was written off more or less as it stands, with an effect on myself (except for labour pains) almost like reading some one else's work. And I like Ents now because they do not seem to have anything to do with me. I daresay something had been going on in the 'unconscious' for some time, and that accounts for my feeling throughout, especially when stuck, that I was not inventing but reporting (imperfectly) and had at times to wait till 'what really happened' came through. But looking back analytically I should say that Ents are composed of philology, literature and life. They owe their name to the *eald enta geweorc* of Anglo-Saxon, and their connection with stone. Their part in the story is due, I think, to my bitter disappointment and disgust from schooldays with the shabby use made in Shakespeare of the coming of 'Great Birnham wood to high Dunsinane hill': I longed to devise a setting in which the trees might really march to war. And into this has crept a mere piece of experience, the difference of the 'male' and 'female' attitude to wild things, the difference between unpossessive love and gardening.'

'I have no recollection of inventing Ents. I came at last to the point, and wrote the 'Treebeard' chapter without

any recollection of any previous thought: just as it now is. And then I saw that, of course, it had not happened to Frodo at all.'³

To these observations must be added the words of Michael Tolkien, quoted by Daniel Grotta:

'The true explanation for the invention of ents ... is that Tolkien's son Michael asked that they be put in the story. "From my father I inherited an almost obsessive love of trees: as a small boy I witnessed mass tree-felling for the convenience of the internal-combustion engine. I regarded this as the wanton murder of living beings for very shoddy ends. My father listened seriously to my angry comments and when I asked him to make up a tale in which the trees took a terrible revenge on the machine-lovers, he said, 'I will write you one.'⁴

The following sections examine the three elements that J.R.R. Tolkien identified: philology, literature and life.

Early English Texts and the *Oxford English Dictionary*

The word 'Ent', then, comes from Old English — Tolkien's main field of academic study — where, in both literature and topographical names, it denotes some kind of mighty creature. Scholars usually translate Old English *ent* (plural *entas*) as 'giant', since the Anglo-Saxons used it to render Biblical Latin *gigas* and *gigantes* (Genesis 6, 4) and to describe the giant Goliath. They also used it of Hercules, the Cyclopes and Nimrod, the original warrior, hunter and city builder.⁵

The Anglo-Saxons considered *entas* to have been builders, especially of huge stone edifices, whether Roman or prehistoric. The words *eald enta geweorc* ('old work of 'ents') are found in *The Wanderer*, an Old English elegiac poem, where they describe empty buildings:

*Ypde swa pisne eardgeard alda scyppend
oppæt burgwara breahtma lease
eald enta geweorc idlu stodon.*

'Thus the Creator of men laid waste this dwelling-place until, deprived of the sounds of city-dwellers, the old work of ents stood idle.'⁶

In *The Ruin* — another Old English elegy — the 'work of ents' is not just empty, but ruined. The poem's description of what may be Roman Bath begins:

*Wrætlic is pes wealstan! Wyrde gebraecon;
burgstede burston; brosnad enta geweorc.*

'Wondrous is this wall-stone! Fated events broke it;⁷ the city buildings burst apart; the work of ents decays.'⁸

1. Jones (2002: 68).

2. I capitalize the first letter of the word 'Ent' when referring to Tolkien's creatures, to help distinguish them from their Old English forebears.

3. Carpenter (1981: 208, no. 157; 211, no. 163; and 231, no. 180).

4. Grotta (1992: 106).

5. See Bosworth and Toller (1898), Toller (1921), and, for the equation with Hercules, Batley (1980: 220).

6. Lines 85-87 in the edition of the Old English text by Klinck (1992: 78). Translations in this article are mine, unless otherwise indicated. For full translations of the Old English poems mentioned see Bradley (1982).

7. The second half of this line was also formerly rendered as 'the Fates destroyed it'.

8. Lines 1-2. Old English text from Klinck (1992: 103). Jones (2002: 63) mistakenly attributes the words *eald enta geweorc* to *The Ruin*.

Editor's note: the Old English character 'thorn' is throughout this paper represented by the letter *p*.

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Tolkien took this association with stone ruins and used it as part of the basis of the Ents' assault on the stones of Saruman's Isengard. The name of Saruman's tower comes from *Maxims II*, a third Old English poem containing the formula 'work of ents':

*Cyning sceal rice healdan. Ceastra beoð feorran gesyne,
orðanc enta geweorc, pa pe on pysse eorðan syndon,
wraetlic weallstana geweorc.*

'A king must guard his kingdom. Cities can be seen from afar, the orðanc ['skilful'] work of ents, those which⁹ are on this earth, wondrous works of wall-stones.'¹⁰

Ironically, though, Orthanc is not built by Ents, but comes into their possession through conquest.

The association of *entas* with old constructions is also made in the Old English *Andreas*. This poetic account of the ministry of St. Andrew describes roads as *enta ærgeweorc* ('ancient work of ents') and uses *eald enta geweorc* - the same words found in *The Wanderer* and, as we shall see, *Beowulf* - to describe a building's storm-beaten pillars.¹¹ The saint speaks to one of these pillars, and gets a river to burst from it to overwhelm his evil tormentors. Perhaps this contributed something to Tolkien's story of how the Ents breached the dams at Isengard.¹²

The elegiac epic *Beowulf* refers to *entas* four times:¹³

i. In line 1679 *enta ærgeweorc* describes the hilt of the giantish sword with which Beowulf slew the mother of the giant Grendel.

ii. In line 2717 *enta geweorc* describes the stone arch and pillars forming the entrance to the dragon's lair.

iii. In line 2774 *eald enta geweorc* describes either the dragon's hoard or its chamber.

iv. In line 2979 we find the only instance of the Old English adjective *entisc* 'entish' (whence Tolkien's Entish language): an *entiscne helm* ('entish helmet') worn by the Swedish King Ongentheow is broken by a blow from an ancient giantish sword (*ealdsweord eotonisc*).

Here, again, is the association of *entas* with ancient stone buildings. But what is otherwise unparalleled is the creatures' forging of sword and, apparently, helmet. Perhaps Tolkien got the idea from this — and the links with Hercules, Nimrod, the Cyclopes and the antediluvian giants — that Ents were formidable fighters.¹⁴

The *OED* - to which Tolkien contributed¹⁵ - does not

record Old English *ent*, as the word is not found again in English literature before Tolkien¹⁶. The *OED* does, however, record three other words spelt the same way, each with a distinct meaning and derivation. When Tolkien writes of the word's "slightly philosophical tone (though in ordinary philology it is 'quite unconnected with any present participle of the verb to be')", he is referring to the second of these. This obscure word, which came from Latin *ens*, *-tis*, meant 'existent' or, more specifically, 'The Ent, i.e. the existent unity ... which reason discovers behind the variety and mutability of things'. It may have suggested to Tolkien that Ents are somewhat removed from the quotidian matters of the world beyond Fangorn Forest. As Verlyn Flieger says: "Tolkien seemed to want to re-connect the word *ent* to the verb 'to be,' that is, to the primal notion of 'being' ... And so, while Treebeard, like many other characters in *The Lord of the Rings*, went through changes in the course of his creation, one idea behind him may be at least as old as nature itself."¹⁷

Tolkien also made use of the *OED*'s third 'ent' word: the dialectal and colloquial variant of 'isn't' (compare 'ain't'). As Flieger again observes, this word lies behind Treebeard's punning explanation to Merry and Pippin that 'There are Ents and Ents, you know; or there are Ents and things that look like Ents but ain't, as you might say.'¹⁸

Given this, Tolkien would surely also have noticed the *OED*'s first entry for 'ent': 'a scion or graft'. This 17th-century word comes, we learn, via French *ente* from, ultimately, the same source as Old English *impa* ('a young shoot of a plant or tree; a sapling; a sucker, slip, scion'), a word that came to be used of small devils and is now familiar as 'imp'.¹⁹

The word *impa* (or perhaps *impe*) was best known to generations of students of medieval English literature as the first part of the later compound noun *ympe-tre* ('grafted tree'), found in the Middle English romance *Sir Orfeo*. In this poem, the hero's wife Heurodis (Greek Eurydice) sits beneath an *ympe-tre*, goes to sleep and falls into the power of the fairies. This is a narrative motif - probably of Celtic origin - also found in other romances, notably the French *Tydorel*, which calls the tree an *ente*.²⁰

This, I suggest, is one reason why Tolkien linked Ents with trees. Another is presumably the simple fact that, given time, tree roots can ruin stonework.²¹ Tolkien may well also have been struck by a coincidental semantic likeness between the

9. Grammatically, the words translated 'those which' could refer to either the cities or the ents.

10. Lines 1-3. Old English text from Shippey (1976: 76).

11. Lines 1235 and 1495 in Brooks (1961).

12. Tolkien's account of the rescue of Frodo and Sam from the foot of Mount Doom recalls another memorable passage from *Andreas*. St. Andrew, having reached the far-off slopes of the evil kingdom of Mermedonia, wakes his weary followers who are lying beside him. They tell him that 'eagles came journeying in flight over the surging of the waves, exulting in their wings; they took the souls from us as we slept, happily ferried them aloft in flight' (lines 863-6). Compare Tolkien's description (1954-5: VI, 77): 'Side by side they lay; and down swept Gwaihir, and down came Landroval and Meneldor the swift; and in a dream, not knowing what fate had befallen them, the wanderers were lifted up and borne far away out of the darkness and the fire.'

13. Quotations are from Klaeber (1950).

14. For references to *entas* in Old English literature, see s.v. 'ent' in Bosworth and Toller (1898) and Toller (1921). The former also records the word *entcyn* ('ent-kin'/giant-race'). The association of *entas* with buildings is, arguably, also seen in line 21 of the poem *Elene*; see Gradon (1977: 27).

15. See Gilliver (1995) and (2002).

16. Old English *ent* derives from an earlier, unrecorded form *anti* and is cognate with New High German *enz* ('monster'), according to Holthausen (1974). Note that *ent* is a different word from *eoten* (Old Norse *iotunn*), which also means 'giant' and appears in its later form *Etten* - in Tolkien's *Ettendales* and *Ettenmoors*.

17. Flieger (1993: 88). Compare Treebeard's words in Tolkien (1954-5: III, 72): 'well, I am an Ent, or that's what they call me. Yes, Ent is the word. The Ent, I am, you might say, in your manner of speaking.'

18. Tolkien (1954-5: III, 73).

19. Note also medieval Latin *enta* ('root, plant, sapling') in Latham (1965).

20. See Bliss (1966: xxxv-xxxvii). In his preface, Bliss acknowledges the debt his edition owes to Tolkien. The poem was best known from Sisam (1921), which includes Tolkien's 'A Middle English Vocabulary'. For Tolkien's translation see Tolkien (1975: 115-30).

21. Jones (2002: 63).

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OED's first 'ent' and one instance of Old English *ent*. In the first homily, titled *Sermo de initio creaturae*, of the late 10th-century Catholic Homilies by the monk Ælfric of Eynsham we read:

*Da syððan weard mancyn purh deofel beswicen, and gebiged fram Godes geleafan, swa pæt hi worhton him anlicnyssa, sume of golde, sume of seolfre, sume eac of stane, sume of treowe. And sceopon him naman, pæra manna naman pe wæron entas and yfeldæde, eft pa ða hi deade wæron, pa cwædan pa cucan pæt hi wæron godas, and weorðodon hi, and him lac ofredon. And comon pa deoflu to heora anlicnyssum and pæron wunedon and to mannum spræcon swilce hi godas wæron.*²²

'Then mankind became deceived by the devil, and turned from God's belief, so that they made themselves images, some of gold, some of silver, some also of stone, some of wood [*treow* 'tree']. And they gave them names, names of those people who were giants [*entas*] and wicked, after they were dead. Then the living said that they were gods, and honoured them, and offered them gifts. And then devils came to their images and dwelled therein and spoke to people as if they were gods.'

Here we see that Old English *ent* could, in this specific context, denote a tree - and a talking one at that. This instance of *ent* is so striking and prominent that it seems unlikely that Tolkien would have overlooked it. In fact, it is tempting to suggest that the homily's association of giantish *entas* with wickedness and deception, together with the later notion of abduction under an *ympe*-tree, contributed to Tolkien's earliest conception of Treebeard. This was as an evil forest giant who captured Gandalf and held him prisoner, and who deceived Frodo by feigning friendliness while being in league with the Enemy.²³

The idea that Ents are in a sense grafted, hybrid creatures may add credence to Verlyn Flieger's argument that Treebeard owes something to the portrayal of the Green Knight in the Middle English romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, to which Tolkien devoted much scholarly attention.²⁴ The Green Knight - who, like Treebeard, is sometimes thought (rightly or wrongly) to be a manifestation of a vegetation-god or of the so-called Green Man common in church sculpture²⁵ - is described as 'half a giant' (*half etayn*).²⁶ And not only is he bright green, but he has a beard like a bush and carries a bundle of holly.

Old English texts contains several other instances of talk-

ing trees and plants. Though they are not linked to *entas*, they would have encouraged Tolkien to make his Ents members of a line that stretches back to antiquity. For, as one student of the Green Man observes: 'The tree that speaks has a long history in Western literature: from Virgil to the Wood of the Suicides in Dante's *Inferno*, from Spenser's *Faery Queen* to Paul Valéry's poem to the Plane, from George Macdonald's *Phantastes* ... to Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*.'²⁷

The *Dream of the Rood* is an Old English poem that survives both in manuscript and, in part, in runes on the Ruthwell Cross in Dumfriesshire.²⁸ The former version describes Christ's Cross as a 'most wonderful tree' (*sylicre treow*), the 'best of woods' (*wudu selesta*), towering over the four corners of the Earth. The tree tells, among other things, of how it was cut down long ago and set up as a crucifixion cross; of how it dared neither bend nor - though it easily could - slay its enemies when Christ approached it; and of how it was wounded by the nails driven through Christ's body. In this poem, then, Tolkien learnt of a huge ancient tree that spoke,²⁹ suffered physical pain and mental anguish, had huge latent destructive power, but that was, above all, a force for the redemption of men. The parallels with Ents - and especially Treebeard - are obvious.

The *Nine Herbs Charm* is one of the most remarkable literary survivals from pre-Conquest England. This verse incantation is part of a collection of charms and prayers known as the *Lacnunga* ('Remedies'), other parts of which probably contributed to Tolkien's creation of Gollum, the Black Riders, the Witch-King's stabbing of Frodo, and his cure by Elrond³⁰. The incantation concerns the properties and actions of nine (or so) plants. Some lines resist definite interpretation, but we need consider only part of the text here.

*Gemyne ðu, Mucgwyrt, hwæt pu ameldodest,
hwæt pu renadest æt Regenmelde.
Una pu hattest, yldost wyrta;
ðu miht wið III 7 wið XXX,
pu miht wip atre 7 wið onflyge,
pu miht wip pam lapan ðe geond lond færd.*

'Remember, Mugwort, what you declared,
what you brought about at the Divine Proclamation.
You are called One, oldest of herbs;
you have power against three and against thirty,
you have power against poison and against flying disease,
you have power against the loathsome one that travels
throughout the land.'

22. Text from Clemons (1997: 186), but with my punctuation, capitalization and silent expansion of abbreviations. The passage has 'no obvious source ... and it is not clear which Biblical period Ælfric is describing', according to Godden (2000: 13).

23. See Tolkien (1988: 363, 382-4); also Flieger (2000: 154).

24. Flieger (1993). For the Middle English text of the romance see Tolkien and Gordon (1967); for Tolkien's translation see Tolkien (1975). For studies of Tolkien's creative use of this poem see Shippey (1995) and Schlobin (2000).

25. In addition to Flieger, see Sibley (2002: 137). However, Brewer (1997: 181-2) and MacDermott (2003: 11-14) dismiss any link. There are many Green Men in Oxfordshire, including the University, where Tolkien spent much of his academic career: see Hicks (2000: 52-3); also Doel and Doel (2001: 148).

26. Note, though, that Middle English *etayn* derives from Old English *eoten*, not from *ent*.

27. Anderson (1990: 33). Tolkien would also have read about talking trees in Grimm (1883-8: II, 652-3).

28. For the texts see Swanton (1987). For translations see Clancy (1998: 121-5).

29. Allen and Calder (1976: 51-8) and Swanton (1987: 66) give other instances of trees and crosses that were thought to speak. The Cross actually claps in triumph in a famous hymn, the *Vexilla regis* ('King's Banners') by Venantius Fortunatus, sixth-century bishop of Poitiers; this hymn is thought to have influenced the Old English poet.

30. See Pettit (2001: II, 34-5) and (2002: 39-44).

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Stune hætte peos wyrnt, heo on stane geweox.

'This plant is called Resounding, it grew on stone.'

pis is seo wyrnt seo wip wýrm gefeaht.

'This is the plant that fought against the snake.'

Gemyne pu, Mægðe, hwæt ðu ameldodest,

hwæt ðu geændadest æt Alorforda,

pæt næfre for gefloge feorh ne gesealde

sypðan him mon Mægðan to mete gegyrede.

'Remember, Camomile, what you declared,

what you brought to an end at Alderford,

that life should never be lost on account of flying disease
after Camomile was prepared for them as food.'³¹

Here, again, we find plants that can apparently talk and fight enemies. At least one of the plants is ancient; another resists stone; and a third acts to save the lives of men. Still more intriguing is the possibility that there was a meeting of plants - including, perhaps, the crab-apple tree and the alder - at Alderford, where they made a great proclamation against an evil in their land. All this brings to mind not just the Ents, but their Entmoot.

An 11th-century Anglo-Saxon translation of Halitgar's *Penitential* preserves yet more evidence for early English belief in talking plants:

Sume men synd swa ablende pæt hi bringað heora lac to eorðfæstum stane and eac to treowum and to wylspringum swa swa wiccan tæcað and nellað underston-dan hu stuntlice he doð oððe hu se dæda stan oððe pæt dumbe treow him mæge gehelpan oððe hæle forgifan, pone he sylfe ne astyriað of pære stowe næfre.

'Some men are so blinded that they take their offerings to a stone made firm in the earth and also to trees and wells, just as witches teach them, and such a man will not understand how stupidly he acts or how this dead stone or that dumb tree can help him or give him health, when these things, for their part, can never move from that place.'³²

As one commentator on this passage observes, "the words 'that dumb tree' (*pæt dumbe treow*) imply that late Anglo-Saxon backsliders believed that their trees could talk".³³ It would doubtless be going too far to argue that the passage also implies belief in walking trees, but, strange as it may seem, there is one early British poem that preserves this idea.

Battling Trees in Old Welsh

Leslie Ellen Jones has drawn our attention to the medieval Welsh *Cad Goddeu* ('The Army of the Trees' or 'The Battle of the Trees'), a startling poem that contains an account of trees going to war.³⁴ The following lines, taken from Patrick Ford's

tentative translation, are especially striking:

'Alder, pre-eminent in lineage, attacked in the beginning;

Willow and rowan were late to the army;

Thorny plum was greedy for slaughter;

Powerful dogwood, resisting prince;

Rose-trees went against a host in wrath;

Raspberry bushes performed, did not make an enclosure

For the protection of life ...'³⁵

If Tolkien knew this poem, whether at first hand or through a translation³⁶, it would surely have heightened his disappointment with Shakespeare's account of the movement of Birnham Wood to Dunsinane in *Macbeth*. It would also have strengthened his resolve to put the matter right. Hence, perhaps, the emphatic march of the Ents on Isengard.

Old High German and the Entwives

As at least one commentator has noted³⁷, Tolkien's word 'Entwife' probably represents Old High German *Enziwib*, a word recorded under *ent* in the standard dictionary of Old English.³⁸ This work refers us to Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie*, where the word appears as the proper name *Enzawîp*.³⁹

An equivalent word is not, to my knowledge, found in Old English. This linguistic 'separation' may well have given Tolkien the idea that the Ents had 'lost' their Entwives.⁴⁰

Old Norse Tree-Men and Treebeard

Another of Tolkien's early loves was Old Norse literature. This large body of texts preserves several instances of a close link between, or even a fusion of, trees and men (which is how the reader naturally thinks of Ents). However, commentators on Tolkien's sources seem to have overlooked them.⁴¹

Firstly, it was common for Norse poets to describe men as trees. To give just four examples out of dozens, a man can be called *askr* ('ash tree'), *viðr Báleygs* ('tree of Báleygr [the god Óðinn]'), *hlynnr Gunnar* ('maple of Gunnr [a valkyrie]') and *sigrpollr* ('victory-fir').⁴²

Secondly, according to an account based on the Eddic poem *Völuspá* ('Prophecy of the Seeress') in Snorri Sturluson's 13th-century *Prose Edda*, the first man and woman were 'trees' (*tré*) - perhaps, actually, logs or driftwood. They were brought to life by the three sons of Borr, one of whom is better known as the god Óðinn (Odin):

pá er peir Bors synir gengu með sævar ströndu, fundu peir tré tvau, ok tóku upp tréin ok sköpuðu af menn. Gaf him fyrsti önd ok lif, annarr vit ok hræring, þriði ásjónu, málit ok heyrn ok sjón. Gáfu peim klæði ok nöfn: hét karlmadrinn Ask, en konan Embla.

'As Borr's sons were walking by the sea shore, they came

31. Lines 1-6, 14, 18, 23-6. Text and translation adapted from Pettit (2001: I, 60-3). Tolkien could have known this poem from several sources, including Cockayne (1864-6: III), Grendon (1909), Dobbie (1942) and Storms (1948).

32. Text and translation from North (1997: 276).

33. North (1997: 277). 34. Jones (2002: 63-8).

35. Ford (1977: 184-5). These lines are also quoted by Jones (2002: 65).

36. Such as the mid-Victorian one by D.W. Nash, best known today from its use in Graves (1961). This translation, though unreliable, still conveys the sense of fighting trees.

37. Stenstrom (1993: 55 n. 5).

38. Toller (1921). 39. Grimm (1883-8: II, 524).

40. For Noel (1977: 124), though, 'the separation of the Ents and Entwives, each loving a particular type of land, recalls that of the Scandinavian god Njörd from his wife Skadi, daughter of the giant Thjazi.'

41. At least, they are not mentioned in any of the main works that discuss Tolkien's use of Northern sources in *The Lord of the Rings*: Bates (2002); Bryce (1983); Carter (2003); Chance (2003); Day (1994) and (2003); Flieger (1993); Harvey (2003); Heinemann (1993); Noel (1977); St. Clair (1995a); Shippey (1979), (1992) and (2000). I have not seen St. Clair (1970).

42. For lists see Meissner (1921: 266-72) and <http://www.hi.is/~eybjorn/ugm/kennings/warrior.html>; cf. North (1997: 286).



At the Grey Havens

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across two *tré*, and they picked up the *tré* and made people out of them. The first gave breath and life, the second consciousness and movement, the third a face, speech and hearing and sight. They gave them clothes and names: the man was called Askr ['Ash'], and the woman Embla ['?Elm'].⁴³

This is suggestive of Tolkien's elves teaching the Ents to speak.

The clothing of the *tré* described in the *Prose Edda* leads us to my third, and most striking, group of instances, which describe the Old Norse *trémaðr*. The literal English translation of this word - 'tree-man' - is found early in *The Lord of the Rings*, where it describes the story's only giant:

'All right', said Sam, laughing with the rest. 'But what about these Tree-men, these giants, as you might call them? They do say that one bigger than a tree was seen up away beyond the North Moors not long back.'⁴⁴

Two naked tree-men receive clothing from (probably) Óðinn - and feel much better for them - in stanza 49 of the Old Norse Eddic poem *Hávamál* ('The Sayings of Hávi [Óðinn]'):

*Vaðir mínar gaf ek velli at
tveim trémönnum;
rekkar pat póttusk er peir rift höfðu;
neiss er nøkkviðr halr.*

'In the country I gave my clothes
to two tree-men;

they thought themselves champions when they had clothing;
a naked man is shamed.'⁴⁵

If these tree-men are not just scarecrows, they may well be wooden idols, possible precursors of which have been found in Danish bogs⁴⁶ and are reported by the Arab Ibn Fadlan, who met Swedish vikings on the middle Volga in 921-2.⁴⁷ That, at least, seems to be a meaning found elsewhere. In *Flateyjarbók* (1860-5: I, 403), for example, an idol associated with the fertility god Freyr is described by a Christian as *eigi kvíkr maðr*, *heldr einn trémaðr* ('not a living man, but a tree-man'), though the pagans who worshipped it had thought differently. Elsewhere in the same collection, *porleifs páttur jarlsskálds* ('The Story of Thorleif Jarl's Skald') describes how a driftwood log was carved in the shape of a man, which, when animated by the insertion of a human heart, walked and talked to people. This wooden man also fought with a spear.

Most intriguing of all is the tree-man in the final chapter of *Ragnars Saga Loðbrókar* ('Saga of Ragnar Hairy-Breeches'). This saga, which was written down in the 13th century, has links with the well-known *Völsunga saga*, whose influence on Tolkien has often been noted.⁵⁰ The last chapter of *Ragnars saga* includes a stanza that brings to mind stanza 49 of *Hávamál*. But the chapter's striking parallel to Treebeard is

the most important thing here.

Frá Ögmundi danska

Ögmundur er maðr nefndr, er kalladr Ögmundur inn danski. Hann fór eitthvert sinn með fimm skipum ok lá við Sámsey í Munarvági. pá er pat sagt, at matsveinar forú á land at gera mat til, en adrir menn fóru í skóg at skemmta sér, ok par fundu peir einn trémann fornan, ok var fertugr at hæð ok mosavaxinn, ok sá pó öll deili á honum, ok ræddu nú un með sér, hverr blótat mundi hafa petta it mikla goð. Ok pá kveðr trémaðrinn:

*'pat var fyr löngu, er í leið megir
Hæklings fóru hlunnalungum
fram um salta slóð birtinga,
pá varðk pessa porps ráðandi.
Ok því settumk svarðmerðlingar
suðr hjá salti, synir Loðbrókar;
pá vark blótinn til bana mönnum
í Sámseyju sunnanverðri.*

*par báðu standa, meðan strönd polir
mann hjá pyrni ok mosa vaxinn;
nú skytr á mik skyja gráti,
hlyr hvárki mér hold né klæði.'*

Ok petta potti mönnum undarligt ok sögðu síðan frá öðrum mönnum.

Which in English is:

About Ögmundur the Dane

'There was a man called Ögmundur, who was called Ögmundur the Dane. On one occasion he journeyed with five ships and arrived at Munarvágr off Sámsey.⁵¹ Then it is said that the cooks went ashore to prepare food, but other men went to a wood to enjoy themselves. There they found an old tree-man [trémann]. He was forty [ells] tall and covered with moss, and yet all his features were visible. Now they discussed among themselves who would have sacrificed to this great god. And then the tree-man says:

'It was long ago, when the sons of Hækligr went forth on their course in ships across the salty track of fishes,⁵² that I became steward [ráðandi] of this habitation [porp].⁵³

'And so warriors set me up south by the salt-sea, the sons of Loðbrók; at that time men were sacrificed to me in the southern part of Sámsey.

'There they bade the man [i.e. the *trémaðr*] stand, as long as the coast endures, beside a thorn-bush, and overgrown with moss;

43. Text from Faulkes (1982: 13), with slight changes to spelling and punctuation. Tolkien would probably have read this text in Jónsson (1931: 16). For a full translation see Faulkes (1987).

44. Tolkien (1954-5: I, 58). It is unclear whether Tolkien's Tree-men are Ents. Christopher Tolkien entertains the idea in Tolkien (1988: 254), but also notes that "long before my father had referred to 'Tree-men' in connection with the voyages of Earendel". See also Stenstrom (1993). It may be worth noting that in the 1470s the Dutch artist Hieronymus Bosch made a drawing known as 'The Tree Man': see <http://www.abcgallery.com/B/bosch/bosch1.html>.

45. Text and translation adapted from an edition and translation of the *Elder Edda* that I am preparing. For published editions see Evans (1986); also Neckel and Kuhn (1983: 17-44).

46. See Glob (1969: chap. 6). Amusingly, modern artists are now producing distinctly Ent-like figures of Green Men - for example, in Stewart Park, Middlesbrough; see Harte (2001: 18).

47. See Evans (1986: 94).

48. See Evans (1986: 93-4).

49. See Bachman (1992: 28).

50. For example, by Shippey (1992) and St. Clair (1995b).

51. The Danish island of Samsø.

52. The sea.

53. The meaning of Old Norse *porp* is disputed here. The word usually means 'habitation, farmstead, hamlet', but might sometimes mean 'group'. The sense 'bare hillock' has also been proposed. See Evans (1986: 95-7).

Treebeard's roots in medieval European tradition

now the tears of clouds⁵⁴ beat upon me;
neither flesh nor cloth protects me.'

And this seemed wonderful to the men, and they later told other people about it."⁵⁵

There are, of course, differences between this tree-man and Treebeard. For example, unlike Tolkien's Ent, the Norse tree-man is apparently an idol, erected by men and worshipped with human sacrifice. But here, as usual with Tolkien's treatment of medieval sources, we are probably dealing with selective imaginative recreation, not wholesale borrowing. At least, the similarities between this *trémaðr* and Treebeard seem to far outweigh the differences. Both characters are:

i. Ancient 'tree-men'. Treebeard, the oldest living thing in Middle-Earth, 'looked almost like the figure of some gnarled old man, standing there'.⁵⁶

ii. Guardians of a forest.

iii. Able not just to speak, but to recite verse.

iv. Tall. Treebeard is 'a large Man-like, almost Troll-like, figure, at least fourteen foot high'.⁵⁷ At an earlier stage in the story's conception he was 'about 50 feet high'.⁵⁸

v. Moss-covered, but with visible features. Treebeard's beard was 'mossy at the ends',⁵⁹ and his eyes were memorable.

vi. At least partly unclothed. 'Whether [Treebeard] was clad in stuff like green and grey bark, or whether that was its hide, was difficult to say. At any rate the arms ... were ... covered with a brown smooth skin.'⁶⁰

vii. Lonely, melancholy, largely forgotten, and very aware of the passing of time and of their world.

viii. Awe-inspiring creatures who take visitors to their

woods by surprise.

One last text adds still more weight to the argument that Old Norse literature influenced Tolkien's conception of Ents. And it does so in a startlingly simple way. The early 13th-century *Orkneyinga Saga* ('Saga of the Orcadians') tells of a Danish Viking who died on Orkney. His name was *Pórir tréskegg* - 'Thorir Treebeard'.⁶¹

'... and Life'

In this article I hope to have cast new light on Tolkien's imaginative synthesis of philology and literature by supplementing the findings of Tom Shippey, Verlyn Flieger and Leslie Ellen Jones. In portraying the Ents and Treebeard, Tolkien seems to draw on all four English 'ent' words (the 'philology'), and to pull together ancient ideas about giants, sentient trees and tree-like creatures found in English, Welsh, German and Norse texts (the 'literature').⁶²

The third element - Tolkien's experience of life - appears more straightforward, but no less important. Treebeard's 'Hrum, Hroom' sound is an affectionately comical take on C.S. Lewis's booming voice, and perhaps of Tolkien's liking for the clarinet.⁶³ But what is far more significant is that Ents are the main fictional manifestation of Tolkien's love and respect for trees. These feelings are also clear in his letters⁶⁴, artwork⁶⁵ and other fiction, especially *The Silmarillion* and *Leaf by Niggle*.⁶⁶ According to one of his friends, Ents reflect aspects of the Professor's character too: 'They are charming and lovable with, also, the sadness characteristic of the author, a sadness that underlies much of his humour.'⁶⁷

54. Rain.

55. My translation, based on the text of chapter 20 in Jónsson (1950: I, 284-5); see also, especially for difficulties in the text and interpretation of the second and third verses, McTurk (1991: 17-30). Tolkien would probably have read this chapter in Olsen (1906-8: 174-5 and 221). For an English translation of the whole saga, see Schlauch (1930:185-256), though this book puts the verses into rhyming form and cannot be relied on to convey their exact meaning. The first stanza is also found, in a different context, in the second chapter of the (?)14th-century *Hálfs saga ok Hálfrekka* ('Saga of Hálfir and Hálfir's Champions'); see Jónsson (1950: II, 96-7) and Seelow (1981: 170).

56. Tolkien (1954-5: III, 70).

57. Tolkien (1954-5: III, 71).

58. Tolkien (1988: 410).

59. Tolkien (1954-5: III, 71).

60. Tolkien (1954-5: III, 71).

61. See Guðmundsson (1965: 10-11), and Pálsson and Edwards (1978: 28-9). Thorir Treebeard is also mentioned in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*; see Hollander (1964: 82). Cf. the Old Norse kenning *kinnskógr* ('cheek-forest'), which describes an old giant's beard in stanza 10 of the Eddic poem *Hymiskviða* ('The Lay of Hymir'); see Neckel and Kuhn (1983: 89).

62. Other medieval words and ideas may also be relevant to the origins of Ents and Entwives, though lack of space prevents detailed consideration of them here. Three examples: (i). the Old Norse *iviðjur* ('wood-giantesses'), best known from *Völuspá* stanza 2 (see Dronke 1997: 7, 110); (ii). various kinds of Germanic wood-spirit (see Grimm 1883-8: II, 478-87, 553, Noel 1977: 123-5, and Barber and Riches 1971: s.v. Woodwives); (iii). the Old and Middle English 'woodwose' (*wuduwasa*, *wodwo(s)*) — whence Tolkien's Woses — and the notion of 'wild men of the woods'; see Noel (1977: 89), Andrew and Waldron (1987: 235, l. 721), Shippey (1992: 60n) and (1995: 216), and Flieger (2003). The various wood-spirits of the Finnish *Kalevala* should also be mentioned. So too must the *vårdräd* ('guardian tree') found on Scandinavian farmsteads; it declared and exacted terrible vengeance on anyone who wronged it or cut it down (see Tolley 1996: 95).

St. Clair (1995a: 64) claims that Ents derive from the Norse concept of Yggdrasill, the world-tree. She also finds a Norse parallel to Old Man Willow's attempt to engulf Pippin.

63. See Carpenter (1977: 198), Pearce (1998: 70) and Ellison (2002).

64. See, for example, Curry (1995: 130) and (1997: 65), which cite a letter Tolkien sent to *The Daily Telegraph*: 'In all my works I take the part of trees as against all their enemies'.

65. See the many drawings and paintings of plants in Hammond and Scull (1995).

66. Tolkien (1977) and (2001).

67. Sayer (1995: 21).

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