

And the Word was Made Flesh

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Academic Work

Tolkien's academic output was lamentably meagre. I mean this both in the sense that he produced very little — his articles will fit comfortably into a paper file, and he produced no books in his lifetime¹ and in the sense that what he did publish often covers an area of study so limited as to leave many tantalising implications untouched.

The great exception is his article *Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics*, in which he wrests the poetic genius of the Old English work from the hands of critics who seemed intent on reducing it to a desiccated pedestrianism². Why is the article so striking? As with all great works, an easy answer cannot be given, yet a few indications may be proffered³.

Partly it is that Tolkien stresses the obvious, which so many of his learned predecessors had failed to do; in brief, he pointed out that the universally acknowledged greatness of the poem's style would not be felt to be dignified, but merely incongruous, if the subject the poet had chosen to place at the centre — the fights with the various monsters — were not equally open to the expression of greatness in the hands of a gifted artist⁴. Tolkien shows some of the ways in which the poet's choice of subject has made a poem with greater depth and applicability than if he had chosen a 'realistic' human situation, such as the Life of St Oswald.

Partly it is Tolkien's gift of expression, reflecting a well-read and considered understanding of his subject, that is so impressive. For example, who could better this simile for the learned — but short-sighted — researchers of the poem:

For it is of their nature that the jabberwocks of historical and antiquarian research burble in the tulgy wood of conjecture, flitting from one tum-tum tree to another. Noble animals, whose burbling is on occasion good to hear; but though their eyes of flame may sometimes prove searchlights, their range is short.

Or again, using an image resonant of biblical parable:

I would express the whole industry in yet another allegory. A man inherited a field in which was an accumulation of old stone, part of an older hall. Of the old stone some had already been used in building the house in which he actually lived, not far from the old house of his fathers. Of the rest he took some and built a tower. But his friends coming perceived at once (without troubling to climb the steps) that these stones had formerly belonged to a more ancient building. So they pushed the tower over, with no little labour, in order to look for hidden carvings and inscriptions, or to

¹ Since his death two editions have appeared, which he himself left unfinished, of the Old English Exodus and the Finnesburh Fragment. It is to be hoped that his edition of *Beowulf*, the text closest to his heart, will someday be published. Unfortunately, the incompleteness of these editions, and the long gap between writing and publishing, renders them of limited scholarly value.

² I leave out of consideration here essays such as *On Fairy Stories* which do not deal with the main field of Tolkien's academic study.

³ For those of you unfamiliar with Tolkien's academic work, I recommend this one article before all others. It is best read in the version found in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism* (ed. L. E. Nicholson, Notre Dame, 1963, pp. 51-103), since all the foreign and Old English quotations are there translated. It is regrettable that Christopher Tolkien, in producing the volume of essays entitled *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* (London, 1983), could not have offered this aid to the readership, which is explicitly not intended to be academic. As this edition is the most recent and accessible, however, I use it for purposes of reference in this article.

⁴ Thus (page 19): 'I would suggest, then that the monsters are not an inexplicable blunder of taste; they are essential, fundamentally allied to the underlying ideas of the poem, which give it its lofty tone and high seriousness.'

discover whence the man's distant forefathers had obtained their building material. Some suspecting a deposit of coal under the soil began to dig for it, and forgot even the stones. They all said: 'This tower is most interesting.' But they also said (after pushing it over): 'What a muddle it is in!' And even the man's own descendants, who might have been expected to consider what he had been about, were heard to murmur: 'He is such an odd fellow! Imagine his using these old stones just to build a nonsensical tower! Why did not he restore the old house? He had no sense of proportion.' But from the top of that tower the man had been able to look out upon the sea.

But Tolkien is at his best when he is expounding the implications of a short expression, from which the poem's overall significance may be gleaned:

It is in *Beowulf* that a poet has devoted a whole poem to the theme [of 'this indomitability, this paradox of defeat inevitable yet unacknowledged'], and has drawn the struggle in different proportions, so that we may see man at war with the hostile world, and his inevitable overthrow in Time. The particular is on the outer edge, the essential in the centre.

Of course, I do not assert that the poet, if questioned, would have replied in the Anglo-Saxon equivalents of these terms. Had the matter been so explicit to him, his poem would certainly have been the worse. None the less we may still, against his great scene, hung with tapestries woven of ancient tales of ruin, see the *hæleð* walk. When we have read his poem, as a poem, rather than as a collection of episodes, we perceive that he who wrote *Hæleð under heofenum* may have meant in dictionary terms 'heroes under heaven', or 'mighty men upon earth', but he and his hearers were thinking of the *eormengrund*, the great earth, ringed with *garsecg*, the shoreless sea, beneath the sky's inaccessible roof; whereon, as in a little circle of light about their halls, men with courage as their stay went forward to that battle with the hostile world and the offspring of the dark which

ends for all, even the kings and champions, in defeat... Death comes to the feast, and they say He gibbers: He has no sense of proportion.

The reader cannot fail to be impressed by sustained writing of this quality. Yet more lies in these passages (and in the whole essay) than meets the eye.

The first citation alludes to Lewis Carroll, that other Oxford don who spent much time in recounting fabulous adventure stories. Tolkien is hinting at an undercurrent of meaning in this essay on *Beowulf*, one that points at himself.

The second citation he characterises as allegory, a type of writing that he castigates in his introduction to *The Lord of the Rings*; it is as if he is being forced to hold back something powerful, something symbolic, in the chains of allegory here. In his creative writings, the Tower and the Sea are recurrent and important themes, second, probably, only to the Tree, which provided Tolkien with another image for story in *On Fairy Stories*.

The third citation brilliantly encapsulates the main theme of *Beowulf*, by recreating in us something of the flavour of the poem itself. Tolkien focuses on a few words fraught with dim echoes of a lost mythology (*heofen*, *eormengrund*, *garsecg*). Tolkien is writing more as a poet than an academic here — but it is nonetheless scholarly writing at its best. Yet what he writes may be applied to his own work almost as pertinently as to *Beowulf*. This indicates not merely that he has his own works in mind, but that the influence of the Old English poem, not so much in superficial plot terms, but in what it is about, its ethos, has been enormous. Whilst *The Lord of the Rings* is a celebration of what Tolkien found beautiful, more deeply it is an elegy for the passing of such things.

Much of the power of Tolkien's essay on *Beowulf* derives then from his imbuing of an academic study with the creativity that he usually reserves for his fictional work. In other circumstances he was not able to contain the inspiration of his responses within the bounds of a study; thus, what began as an introduction to the works of George Macdonald turned into what we know as *Smith of Wootton Major*; and in trying to communicate something of the

nature of his own creativity he wrote *Leaf by Niggle*, rather than an academic analysis.

But let us look at two less lofty articles by Tolkien, to see what they reveal about the relationship between his academic and his creative pursuits,

In the excavations of the late Roman period temple at Lydney, near the River Severn, several inscriptions were found, dedicated to a god *Nodens*. Tolkien supplied an appendix to the excavation report⁵, in an attempt to elucidate the *meaning* of the name. He discusses the phonology of the name in depth, and soon establishes that it represents an earlier form of the name Nuada, an Irish god, whose chief characteristic was his silver hand. It was probably from Ireland that the cult of Nodens was brought to the west of England. The paltry records of early Celtic left no means of establishing the meaning of this name, however, and Tolkien turns to Germanic (with reference to other Indo-European languages) to find the evidence that it originally meant ‘the snarer’ or ‘the hunter’. As he stresses several times in the article, philology cannot answer the question of what sort of god Nodens was, beyond this basic meaning of the name.

Tolkien takes a similar approach in his article on *Sigelwara land*⁶. The meaning of this Old English word was not in doubt: it meant Ethiopia. However, the formation was a strange one; Tolkien demonstrates that, in view of its archaism, it could not have been a gloss supplied by a clerk translating the name *Æthiopia*: it must already have existed, a remnant of a pre-Christian mythology of the English. Tolkien is meticulous in his analysis of the forms of the name, and in his (rather inconclusive) consideration of its possible meaning, on the basis of cognates in other languages. Yet, other than a vague reference to the Old English word for Paradise, *Neorxnawang*, and another, equally vague, to the Norse ‘sons of Müspel’, Tolkien does not seek to place this precious relic of

English paganism in any mythological context: philology cannot, after all, do that.

Yet it is interesting that in these two articles Tolkien has given a thorough *philological* treatment to what he clearly regards as of the deepest *mythological* interest, almost without touching on mythological considerations.

Tolkien declared, ‘To me a name comes first and the story follows’.⁷

The two articles I have dealt with clearly exemplify this procedure. But Tolkien made this remark about his own creative works. The *story* element in his own works is striking, and must rank as a chief foundation of his renown, yet this contrasts starkly with his practice in his academic work, where he hovers philologically around words with the deepest story elements inherent in them, but abnegates any responsibility to investigate these story elements — for he feels himself to be, professionally, a philologist and no more.

Many further examples might be adduced of Tolkien taking a word or name, and, to use a bacteriological metaphor, culturing it so that its mythological content grows in the fictional petrie dish; one such example will suffice here. As far as I am aware, Tolkien never pursued, academically, the purport of the name *Gandálf*, listed as one of the dwarfs in the *Dvergatal* (‘Catalogue of Dwarfs’) contained within the Norse poem *Völuspá*. There are three reasons why this name would have attracted his attention. In the first place the *Dvergatal* is an interpolation into the *Völuspá*. Secondly, *álf*, the second part of the name, means ‘elf’, yet the name is included amongst a list of dwarves. Most interesting is the first element, *gandr*; this seems to have been a sort of shamanic helping spirit — it is used in this sense in the twelfth century *Historia Norvegiae* in the earliest account of a Lappish shamanic séance. The only sign that Tolkien has felt the fascination of this name is the importance he gives in his fictional work to the character he names *Gandalf*.⁸

⁵ Appendix I: ‘The Name Nodens’, *Report on the Excavation of the Prehistoric, Roman, and Post-Roman Sites in Lydney Park, Gloucestershire*, Reports of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries, London, IX (London, 1932), pp. 132-7.

⁶ ‘Sigelwara Land’, *Medium Ævum* 1 (1932), pp. 183-196 & 3 (1934), pp. 95-111.

⁷ ‘Tolkien on Tolkien’, *The Diplomat* (vol. xviii, #197, Oct. 1966), p. 39.

⁸ I give detailed consideration of the *gandr* in my doctoral thesis (C. Tolley, *A Comparative Study of Some Germanic and Finnic Myths*, D.Phil. thesis, Oxford, 1993, pp. 533-535 & 544-557).

It is clear that Tolkien approached his creative and his academic pursuits in the same way, starting with the word and building up a story from that. The creative elements — the mythology — that he homes into in his studies could only find fulfilment in his own creative works, however. Sometimes this was indirect — he would not necessarily feel the need to make up a story about Nodens or Sigelwara land⁹ — but it could also be direct: instead of pursuing the mythological import of something he is investigating professionally, he would often stop as soon as he left the *terra firma* of philology, and rise on the wings of fancy above the fields of Middle-earth instead. I move on next to an example of this.

Eärendil

Eala earendel engla beorhtast,
ofer middangeard monnum sendeð

Behold the morning star, brightest of
angels,
over the world sent to men
(Cynewulf, Christ 104-5)

In these words the Old English poet Cynewulf proclaimed the dawning light as the harbinger of the Messiah. These words were read by the undergraduate Tolkien in the course of his study, and heralded the birth of Middle-earth.

As we have seen in other contexts, Tolkien was moved by words with an apparent story behind them. He wrote afterwards:

I felt a curious thrill, as if something had stirred in me, half wakened from sleep. There was something very remote and strange and beautiful behind those words, if I could grasp it, far beyond ancient English.¹⁰

This was the beginning of the tale of the great mariner Eärendil, who bound a gleaming silmaril on his ship's prow so that he could pierce the enchanted mists and find a passage through to the Valar, with whom he pleaded for help in the last desperate struggle of elves and men; after

setting foot on the blessed land, Eärendil was not permitted to return, but was destined to sail for ever in the sky, the silmaril still bound on his ship and seen by men as the Morning Star.

The source of the inspiration for this was specifically the word *earendel*, meaning probably 'Morning Star'; the root of the word, found also in *east*, *Easter* and Latin *Aurora*, apparently means the 'dawning light'; however, as Tolkien recognized, Eärendil was also almost certainly seen as a person; the name occurs in various ancient Germanic dialects, and in Old Norse there are tales of Aurvandill, whose toe froze as he was being carried over icy rivers by Þorr, so that the god set it in the heavens as a star in compensation.

Thus brightness was associated with *earendel* from the beginning. But where has Tolkien got the idea of linking him with the sea from? Partly it may derive from the icy rivers of the Norse tale, partly perhaps from the fact that in the twelfth century *Danish History* of Saxo Grammaticus Horwendillus, i.e. Eärendil, is the father of Amlethus (the later Hamlet), who was clearly connected with the ocean, talking as he does of sand as the meal of the sea as he walks along the shore feigning madness. However, the main reason is the name itself. In Old English there is a word *ear* meaning 'ocean'; it is probably not connected with *earendel*, but the possibility of confusion always existed. Tolkien has created a tale in which the 'confusion' is the essence of the story, a story of a mariner who (in effect) becomes the Morning Star.

Where was Eärendil to get his ship, however? Tolkien turned to another legend, preserved in just as fragmentary a state: that of Wade, the father of the well-known smith Wayland. Wade is said in the Old English poem *Widsið* to rule the Hælsings (a maritime people), and is mentioned twice by Chaucer, who at least revealed he had a famous boat. Walter Map tells something about him, how he wandered around redressing wrongs, and came to help King Offa against the Romans, his ship being driven to

⁹ I have not checked to see that he did *not* do this, however: the curious source-hunter may well find something based on these in the voluminous posthumous material.

¹⁰ H. Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography* (London, 1977), p. 64.

England against his will¹¹. His ship is only named in 1598, however, in Speght's edition of Chaucer; he writes¹²:

Concerning Wade and his bote called Guingelot, as also his strange exploits in the same, because the matter is long and fabulous, I passe it over.

The *gu* in this name may be a typical normanisation of a name beginning in *w* (as *Wade* becomes *Gado* in Walter Map, for example), which would give us an original *Wingelot*, the very name of Eärendil's ship in Tolkien. The name is highly unlikely to be original as the name of Wade's ship; it is Celtic in origin, and is in fact probably a mistake on Speght's part, for it is more usually found as the name of Sir Gawain's horse in the Arthurian cycle, including in the English *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* which Tolkien edited¹³. This very anomaly may have been the thing that attracted Tolkien; in his world, the anomaly disappears, and *Wingelot* becomes 'Foam Flower', a beautiful name, the meaning of which derives in part from the fortuity that *lôte*, clearly derived from *lotus*, already meant 'flower' in Tolkien's invented language.

One thing that stands out in Tolkien's use of *earendel* is his dramatic description of his imaginative encounter with the word itself and its context in Old English: vistas opened up of the lost mythological and literary wealth of Germania, things that might have been, had our records been more profuse. Tolkien is inspired above all by fragments that can be reassembled through comparative philology and mythology.

He did not however reassemble them into what they had been, by means of academic research, but into something new: he builds a new tower out of the stray bricks of the old, to use the metaphor he employed in his great article on *Beowulf*.

Ing

Tolkien was inspired in his fictional writing not only by his own academic research, but by that of others too; I will give one example here of the interplay of influence both from original source and research upon it.

The Germanic god Ing (to use the Old English form of his name) is first encountered — albeit only by implication — in Tacitus' *Germania* ch. 2, published in 98 AD, which mentions that Mannus 'Man' had three sons, from whom the three great divisions of the Germanic people were named; one of the groups was the Ingvaeones¹⁴. The Old English *Rune Poem* gives a little more information:

Ing wæs ærest	Ing was first
mid Eastdenum	among the East Danes
gesewen secgun,	seen by men,
oþ he siððan eft ¹⁵	until thereafter back
ofer wæg gewat,	over the wave he
	went;
wæn æfter ran;	a wagon ran after;
ðus Heardingas	so the Heardingas
ðone hæle nemdun.	named the hero. ¹⁶

Tacitus seems to have regarded Ing as a progenitor¹⁷. In Old English Ing appears to be the founder of the Ingwine (possibly derived from Ingvaeones), a synonym for 'Danes' in

¹¹ In these tales of Wade there is little sense of pressing purpose, which is so characteristic of the Eärendil story in Tolkien; however, this proves to be a later feature of the legend; in the early versions presented in the *Book of Lost Tales*, Eärendil arrives too late in Valimar to beseech help; he sets sail in the sky merely in search for Elwing, and his association with brightness comes from the diamond dust he picks up in Eldamar, not from having a silmariel on his prow: all the elements that dignify the legend as we know it from *The Lord of the Rings* are later features.

¹² For an account of the stories mentioned here, and a discussion of their sources, see R. M. Wilson, *The Lost Literature of Medieval England* (London, 1970), pp. 14 ff. (he does not however consider where Speght got the name Guingelot).

¹³ Tolkien was aware of the connexion between the names, but does not in fact suggest that Speght has lifted it from the Arthurian cycle.

¹⁴ Emended from *Ingaevones*: see *Die Germania des Tacitus* (ed. R. Much, 3rd ed. Heidelberg, 1967), p. 24; forms such as the Norse *Yngvi* indicate that, in Tacitus' day, the stem of the word would have been **Ingw-*.

¹⁵ The original manuscript of the poem is lost; we are reliant on a transcription by Hickes for the text: he reads *est* at this point. The expected form, within the orthography of the poem, would be *east* if the meaning is 'east', and Hickes has most likely confused the manuscript *f* and *s*, as he has done elsewhere.

¹⁶ *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records VI: The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems* (ed. E. Van Kirk Dobbie, New York, 1942), pp 29-30, lines 67-70.

¹⁷ Who Ing's progeny actually were is difficult to determine. The Norse tradition is clear in regarding the Yngling dynasty as Swedish, but Tacitus' Ingvaeones are unlikely to have lived in Sweden: *proximi Oceano* suggests most naturally a position on the North Sea or Baltic littoral: cf. the Ingwine of *Beowulf*, who are the Danes.

Beowulf. Furthermore, in Norse tradition Yngvi, equated with the god of fertility Freyr, is regarded as the progenitor of the Swedish kings¹⁸. The group of peoples Ing founded included the ancestors of the Danes, judging by the term Ingwine, and also probably the Anglii, i.e. the continental ancestors of the English. He was particularly associated with a journey, appearing in the east and returning over the sea. He was probably a solar hero, and his passage represents that of the sun.

Given that he was worshipped by the ancestral English, his name, albeit only fortuitously similar to that of one of the tribes of his worshippers, is striking. Whilst not suggesting any connexion between the names, Müllenhoff in 1879 concluded that *The Rune Poem* was written from the point of view of the English, and hence that Ing's coming back over the waves implies a visit to the forefathers of the English in England¹⁹.

Tolkien has two independent stories of Ing. In the earliest, which survived into his later works, Ing or Ingwe was the leader of the first house of elves — like the Germanic peoples there were three in all — who led his people to Valinor and remained there in bliss. He also produced variants of this, in which Ing returned to Middle-earth to lead the onslaught against Morgoth and was killed in it.

One point of interest here is that Tolkien uses both forms of the name, *Ing* and *Ingwe*; now *Ing* is the English and *Ingwe* the (primitive) Norse form of the Germanic hero's name; Tolkien has other names alternating in a similar pattern, e.g. *Finn/Finwe*; it seems that a morphological feature of his invented languages is derived from a dialectal difference in Germanic.

According to Müllenhoff, *Ing* may mean 'the come'; this is the most salient feature of Tolkien's Ingwe, who along with his people were the most attached to Valimar after their arrival there. The variant of his returning to fight against Morgoth is surely related to the ambiguous and emended *est* 'back' of *The Rune Poem*.

The other use of Ing occurs in a slightly later layer in Tolkien's developing mythology, and is found in *The Book of Lost Tales II*, 304 ff. It proved to be only a temporary feature. Here, Tolkien's Ing is much more consciously modelled on the Germanic hero. Ing was the king of Luthany (i.e. Britain), semi-immortal through drinking elvish *limpe*, who helped Eärendil and thus incurred the wrath of Ossë, who drove him out; he sought Elvenhome in the west, but was driven by a storm into the far east, where he became the king of the Ingwaiwar (i.e. the Ingvaeones of Tacitus), and taught them about the gods and elves. The Ingwaiwar later invade Luthany and 'come into their own', i.e. repossess the land their founder had ruled; this represents the invasion of the English, i.e. descendants of the Ingvaeones. One outline has Ing sailing off at twilight to Elvenhome, presumably after establishing the Ingwaiwar, but with the understanding that he would one day return and guide the elves back to Luthany: clearly this is derived more from the Arthurian legends than from Germanic material, though the departure by ship of the (dead) Scyld in *Beowulf* has also played its part here; as Tolkien points out²⁰, the legend of Scyld Scefing is itself strongly coloured by the Ing myth, and the death of the hero was originally part of the cyclic process of death and rebirth (in particular of the sheaf from which the original antagonist of the myth took his name): hence the idea of the hero departing, but with the promise of return, was probably implied in the antecedent of the myth of Scyld Scefing, as well as in the solar Ing myth.

Whilst the voyages of Tolkien's Ing do not correspond exactly with those of his Germanic counterpart (the 'return' is to England, rather than from it, as Müllenhoff proposes), it is clear that Tolkien has been influenced both by the troublesome emendation *est* 'back', and by Müllenhoff's association of Ing with England — which has not been accepted by other scholars. 'Back' implies that Ing has been somewhere before, somewhere to the west of the East Danes of the Old English poem, and the thought of

¹⁸ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla* (ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, 3 vols., Reykjavík, 1941), vol. 1, p. 24.

¹⁹ K. Müllenhoff, 'Irmin und Seine Brüder', *Zeitschrift für Deutsches Altertum* (vol. 23, 1879), pp. 1 2D22.

²⁰ *The Lost Road and Other Writings* (London, 1987), pp. 93-94.

England is natural, especially when it has been sanctioned by at least one scholar.

Beowulf and Rohan

That Rohan is based on Anglo-Saxon England is well known²¹; however, the arrival of Gandalf, Aragorn, Gimli and Legolas in Rohan (Book III, chapter 6) has a much more precise source: the arrival of Beowulf and his men in Denmark in the Old English *Beowulf*. A summary, with quotations, first of the relevant section of *Beowulf*, then of the passage from *The Lord of the Rings*, will illustrate this: I cross-reference precise points of similarity in the two by means of numbers.

A. *Beowulf*

Beowulf and his followers disembark from their ship and are met by the Danish coast-guard, who greets them in the following words²²:

[1:] What kind of armed men are ye, [2:] clad in coats of mail, who have thus [3:] come and [4:] brought a towering ship over the water-ways, hither [5:] over the seas?

[6:] For a long time I have been acting as coast-guard, I kept watch over the shore, so that on Danish land no enemy might do us harm with a force coming by sea. [7:] No strangers have ever begun to land here [8:] more openly with their shields, — nor were ye at all sure of the consent of men-at-arms, the permission of kinsmen. [9:] Never have I seen a mightier noble upon earth, a warrior in armour, than is one of you; [10:] that is no retainer dignified by weapons, [11:] unless his countenance, his peerless form, belies him. [12:] Now, I must know your lineage, ere ye go further, as [13:] faithless spies, on Danish ground. Now, ye strangers from far, ye sea-traversers, hear my plain opinion; — [14:] it is best to tell me quickly the cause of your coming!

Beowulf replies that they have come from Hygelac of the Geats to help Hroþgar against the ravages of the monster. The coastguard replies²³:

²¹ The horses are the major point of discrepancy; yet other Germanic peoples were known for their horsemanship, and the two brothers who may be regarded as England's founders, Hengest and Horsa, have names which mean 'Stallion' and 'Horse' — implying a stronger connexion with horses than extant records indicate; again, on the basis of (in this instance) two names, Tolkien has in his fictional writing developed a theme that lies latent in his source.

²² I use the translation of Clark Hall, to which Tolkien wrote a preface; the original is as follows (lines 237 ff.):

Hwæt sindon ge searo-hæbbendra,
byrnum werede, þe þus brontne ceol
ofer lagu-stræte lædan cwomon,
hider ofer holmas? Ic hwile wæs
ende-sæta, æg-wearde heold,
þe on land Dena lædra nænig
mid scip-herge sceðþan ne meahte.
No her cuðlicor cuman ongunnon
lind-hæbbende; ne ge leafnes-word
gud-fremmendra gearwe ne wisson,
maga gemedu. Næfre ic maran geseah
eorla ofer eorþan, ðonne is eower sum,
secg on searwum; nis þæt seld-guma,
wæpnum geweorðad; næfre him his wlite leoge,
ænlic ansyn. Nu ic eower sceal
frum-cyn witan, ær ge fyr heonan
leas-sceaweras on land Dena
furþur feran. Nu ge feor-buend,
mere-liðende, minne gehyrað
anfealdne geþoht; ofost is selest
to gecyðanne hwanan eowre cyme syndon.

²³ Original (lines 287 ff.):

Æghwæðres sceal
scearp scyldwiga gescad witan
worda and worca, se þe wel þencð.
Ic þæt gehyre, þæt þis is hold weorod
frea Scyldinga. Gewitaþ forð beran
wæpen and gewædu, ic eow wisige.

[15:] The bold shield-warrior, who judges well, must know the difference between these two — words and deeds. I understand that this is a company friendly to the lord of the Scyldings. Pass forth, bearing your weapons and armour, — I will [16:] guide you.

He promises Beowulf's ship will be [17:] carefully guarded. The Geats march on, the poet commenting on the boar images on their helmets, towards the hall Heorot, adorned in gold²⁴:

The warriors hastened; they went together until they could descry the timbered hall, splendid and [18:] gold-adorned... [19:] its radiance gleamed o'er many lands.

The guard returns to his post on the shore²⁵:

[20:] It is time for me to depart. May the Almighty Father keep you safe in your adventures by His grace. I will go to the sea, to keep ward against hostile bands.

The Geats make their way up the [21:] stone paved street (*stræt wæs stanfah*). They put their [22:] weapons against the wall of the hall, and sit on a [23:] bench. Wulfgar, King Hroþgar's [24:] officer (*ic eom Hroðgares ar ond ombiht*), comes to question them, and comments on their [25:] boldness. Beowulf declares who he is, and says he wants to give his [26:] message (*ærende*) to Hroþgar himself. Wulfgar says he will ask, [27:] 'and will henceforth announce to thee the answer which the noble leader thinks fit to give me' (*ond þe þa andsware ædre gecyðan, ðe me se goda agifan þenceð*). He advises Hroþgar not to refuse the request. The king gives a speech: he knows Beowulf by name and reputation, and bids the Geats enter. [28:] Wulfgar returns with the message, telling them they may go in in their helmets, but [29:] must leave their weapons outside. Beowulf greets Hroþgar and offers to fight without weapons against the monster Grendel. Hroþgar gladly accepts Beowulf's

offer, and after telling him a little about Grendel asks him to join the feast in hall.

B. *The Lord of the Rings*

As the company approach Edoras, Legolas is able to discern the scene and the details of the royal hall Meduseld: 'And it seems to my eyes that it is [18:] thatched with gold. [19:] The light of it shines far over the land.'

As they approach, Aragorn sings a song in the language of Rohan, 'Where now the horse and the rider?': this is inspired by a passage in the Old English *Wanderer* (*hwær cwom mearg, hwær cwom mago?*), but its theme of the passing of things is common to *Beowulf*, and is the theme that Tolkien stressed most in his lecture.

The company is greeted by a warden at the gates:

It is the will of Théoden King that none should enter his gates, save those who know our tongue and are our friends. None are welcome here in days of war but our own folk, and those that come from Mundburg in the land of Gondor. [1:] Who are you that [3:] come [8:] heedless [5:] over the plain thus [2:] strangely clad, [4:] riding horses like to our own horses? [6:] Long have we kept guard here, and we have watched you from afar. [7:] Never have we seen other riders so strange, [9:] nor any horse more proud than is one of these that bear you. [10:] He is one of the Mearas, [11:] unless our eyes are cheated by some spell. [12:] Say, are you not a wizard, some [13:] spy from Saruman, or phantoms of his craft? [14:] Speak now and be swift!

Aragorn and Gandalf explain they had met Éomer, but the guard replies that Wormtongue has forbidden any to see the king; Gandalf says his [26:] errand is with the king and no one else, and bids the guard go and tell Théoden. The guard asks what names he should give, and remarks that they seem [25:] fell and grim

²⁴ Original (lines 306 ff.):

Guman onetton,
sigon ætsomne, oppæt hy sæl timbred,
geatolic ond gold-fah ongyton mihton;...
lixte se leoma ofer landa fela.

²⁵ Original (lines 316 ff.):

Mæl is me to feran. Fæder alwalda
mid arstafum eowic gehealde
siða gesunde! Ic to sæ wille,
wið wrað werod wearde healdan.

beneath their tiredness; they give their names. The guard says he will go in, and tells them to [27:] 'wait here a little while, and I will bring you such answer as seems good to him'. He goes in and then [28:] returns, saying they may come in, but [29:] must leave their weapons, which the doorwardens will [17:] keep. The company goes through the gates; 'they found a broad path, [21:] paved with hewn stones'. The hall and its surrounds are described; at the top of the stair were stone [23:] seats. The guard, who has [16:] guided them up, now says farewell: [20:] 'There are the doors before you. I must return now to my duty at the gate. Farewell! And may the Lord of the Mark be gracious to you!' They ascend the stair, and are greeted by Háma²⁶ [24:] the doorwarden ('I am the doorward of Théoden'), who asks for their weapons. There is a heated debate over this, but the weapons are laid aside — Aragorn lays Andúril [22:] against the wall — and in the end Háma allows only the staff of Gandalf to pass: [15:] '...in doubt a man of worth will trust to his own wisdom. I believe you are friends and folk worthy of honour, who have no evil purpose. You may go in.'

In the hall, the aged Théoden sits with Éowyn behind and Gríma at his feet; this parallels the situation in *Beowulf*, where the old Hroþgar has Unferþ at his feet, and his wife Wealhþeow serving in the hall²⁷.

From this point Tolkien's narrative diverges from *Beowulf*. Théoden greets Gandalf with a cold speech which does not match Hroþgar's to Beowulf; and Wormtongue immediately adds to this with further insult. It is on Wormtongue that the influence from *Beowulf* now focuses: and whereas the scene of arrival shows a point by point, but ultimately fairly superficial influence, with Wormtongue we again encounter the more imaginative development from an original that we have seen in some of my earlier examples — a development that springs, largely, from a

philological consideration. For Wormtongue is based, in part, on *Beowulf*'s Unferþ, whose speech attacking Beowulf follows straight after the passage summarised above. His name means 'Strife'²⁸, and he seems to have been specially invented by the poet for this purpose, for his main role in the poem is to accuse Beowulf of not being up to the job of dealing with the monster Grendel, on the basis of a bad performance in a previous swimming match. Beowulf rounds on him, defending himself and pointing out that not only has Unferþ shown himself no hero, but has even been the slayer of his brothers. Unferþ's speech is strange, incongruous with the warm welcome that Hroþgar has afforded Beowulf, especially considering he is the *þyle* or 'spokesman' of the king.

When Beowulf is about to dive in the mere to fight Grendel's mother, Unferþ lends him the sword Hrunting, and Beowulf requests that should he be killed, Unferþ be given it back; the difference between this Unferþ and the previous chagrin-driven criminal is noted even by the poet, who says he must have been drunk when he spoke before; he also points out that Unferþ was too much a coward to undertake the exploit himself, however.

The poem several times mentions how the Danish court was now at peace, but would not always be so, when the king's nephew Hroþulf would engage in strife with his cousins (the king's sons); one scene where this contrast is pointed out also mentions Unferþ as sitting at the king's feet. Is the poet intending to hint that Unferþ was to be involved in stirring up strife between the two sides of the family, supporting the upstart Hroþulf?

Tolkien was unable to resist the enticement of such an ambiguous character.

Wormtongue's cravenness is shown in his having stolen the king's sword, as well as in his

²⁶ Háma is the name of a legendary character in *Beowulf*.

²⁷ The family situation in Rohan is based on that in *Beowulf* in further particulars too: thus the enmity towards Éomer on Théoden's part, and the death of his son Théodred, which Wormtongue mentions in one breath together, stems from the internecine struggle in the Danish royal house: Hroþgar's son was slain by his nephew Hroþulf, who, under the name Hroalfkraki, was regarded in Norse tradition more as a hero than the traitor implied in *Beowulf*. Théoden's shift from blame to praise of his nephew seems to reflect a vacillation on Tolkien's part between the English and Norse traditions of Hroþulf, exploited for imaginative purposes. Tolkien chooses to exonerate Éomer; and in line with this, although he keeps the death of the king's son, he divorces it from any action of Éomer's.

²⁸ Though the name has other implications too (e.g. 'senseless'): it is typical that Tolkien should focus his interest on such a philologically multifarious character.

cowardly refusal to march to war. He is not accused of fratricide, but in the Shire later it turns out that he has murdered Lotho, an accusation poured upon him with scorn by his master Saruman, who thus eggs Wormtongue on to murder him. Wormtongue is a traitor, a spy of Saruman in the court of Théoden, who had gained the trust of the king against his wiser judgement. He also sticks loyally to his master, even in beggary, up to the last moment when he murders him. Similarly, it may be supposed, Unferþ served King Hroþgar until the rebellion of Hroþulf, when he betrayed his master.

Tolkien resolves many of the ambiguities of Unferþ in Wormtongue. In contrast to the strange behaviour of Unferþ as a favoured counsellor, there is no real doubt of Wormtongue's position as a disloyal coward: it is just that the old king — and he alone — has been deceived, and is himself undeceived in the course of events: hence Wormtongue's presence at court, and his attack on Gandalf, are both explained naturally. The inexplicable change of character of Unferþ in generously offering Beowulf his sword is made use of by Tolkien, but retaining consistency Tolkien turns the action on its head, and far from having Wormtongue offer a sword to anyone, he has him steal the king's.

The situation in Edoras is far plainer than that in Heorot, and it is by imbuing the scene with strife, with *unferþ*, that Tolkien has brought this about. The major difference between the two

arrival scenes compared above is that the Geats are welcomed by the Danes, whereas the Rohirrim cold-shoulder Aragorn and his companions, as a result, it emerges, of the machinations of Wormtongue's strife. It is clear that the detailed, but circumstantial, similarity of the arrival scenes — while it may be viewed as homage on Tolkien's part to the Old English poem — is less important than the imaginative development of the ambiguous character whose name means 'Strife'.

Conclusion

The influences from his scholarly field which shaped Tolkien's creative work were manifold. I think it will be found, however, that the most pervasive are those which stem from consideration of specific words. Tolkien's fascination with words is well-known; I have tried to show that he was not interested just in any words, but words with a story, a myth, in them, which has been lost in our extant sources. In the end, Tolkien must be adjudged more a creative writer than a scholar, in that he used scholarly methods, but did not on the whole pursue his researches to their culmination in a scholarly manner. The relationship between his professional and his private, creative pursuits may be characterised as complementary: his profession unearthed 'winged words', but it was only in his creative works that these were allowed free flight.