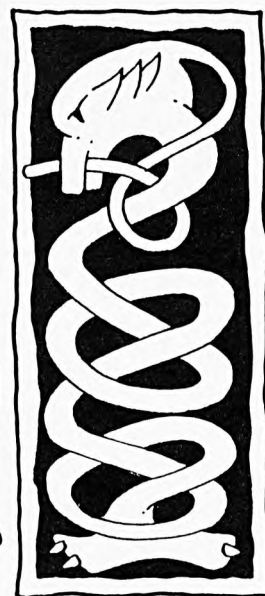




GRIMA THE WORMTONGUE: TOLKIEN AND HIS SOURCES

by
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ne of the most popular trends in Tolkien Studies in the last few years has been that of source studies. Among some of the sources suggested at various times by various critics have been Paradise Lost, "The Tale of Sir Thopas", The Worm Ouroboros, Genesis, The Wind in the Willows, The Elder Edda, The Earthly Paradise, and The Kalevala, to name a few. The main purpose of these critics in suggesting these has been to show how a particular work may have influenced Tolkien's and to trace this influence through Tolkien's Middle-earth works.

It might be noted, however, that Tolkien himself did not think much of source studies in general, feeling that most attempts to establish what his sources had been were "rather vain efforts"⁴ and also that he specifically singled out this approach to a literary work for criticism in his allegories of the tower in "Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics" and of the soup-cauldron in "On Fairy-Stories". In the Beowulf essay, he compares the poet to a man who builds a new tower out of old stone, and source hunters to the men who knock the tower over to look for hidden inscriptions, or to determine whence the man's ancestors got the stones, or to dig for coal deposits in the ground. "But from the top of that tower the man had been able to look out upon the sea."² Similarly in the 'Origins' section of his essay "On Fairy-Stories", he says: "I feel that, it is more interesting, and also in its way more difficult, to consider what they [fairy-stories] are [than what their sources might have been]... I would say: 'We must be satisfied with the soup that is set before us, and not desire to see the bones of the ox out of which it has been boiled.'... By 'the soup', I mean the story as it is served up by its author or teller, and by 'the bones' its sources or material -- even when (by rare luck) those can be with certainty discovered. But I do not, of course, forbid criticism of the soup as soup."³

The point Tolkien is trying to make here is, I think, a valid one. As many readers will testify, it is possible to read and enjoy The Lord of the Rings without being aware that the Rohirrim speak Old English, that the 'Star over Mordor' scene (Book 6, Chapter 2) is probably modeled upon one in Charlie Chaplin's The Great Dictator, that Gondor and the city of Minas Tirith are meant to be a kind of medieval Byzantium, and so forth. We can be fairly sure that Rider Haggard's She series had a considerable influence on Tolkien⁴ -- for one thing Tolkien said so⁵ -- but knowing that Haggard's description of Kôr also fits Tolkien's Gondolin does not tell us much about Gondolin, nor does knowing that Ayesha's water-scry add much to our knowledge of Galadriel herself. What it does do is show us something about the way Tolkien used his sources

-- "with the book closed", as the saying goes. What I would like to do in this paper is not to start with a particular work and then to show all the possible ways in which it might have influenced Tolkien, but to start with a particular point in Tolkien's work -- in this case, the character of Gríma Wormtongue as he appears in *LotR*, Book III and VI -- and then to look at some of the sources which Tolkien seems to have drawn upon.

In taking a closer look at Wormtongue's character, it seems to me that three distinct elements went into its makeup, two of them external sources taken from other works and the third a marked similarity to another of Tolkien's characters in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. The first of these source-elements is to be found in *Beowulf*, a work which Tolkien read, taught, wrote about, and translated. Not only do the Rohirrim, or Eorlingas, speak Old English, but, as Dr. Rhona Beare pointed out in her essay on Tolkien's *Beowulf* borrowings in *LotR*, the entire chapter in which Gríma appears (*LotR*, Book III, Chapter 6, "The King of the Golden Hall") is full of echoes of *Beowulf*, in the description of Meduseld (literally, "Meadhall"), very like Hrothgar's great hall Heorot, in the prediction of its ultimate fate (like Heorot, destruction by fire -- Théoden says: "Not long shall the high Hall which Brego son of Eorl built. Fire shall devour the high seat."), in the visitor's disarming before entering the meadhall itself, in the challenges of Théoden's guards and the Danish coast watcher upon first encountering the heroes, in the guide's parting words: in *Beowulf*, "It is time for me to go back. The All-wielding Father in his grace keep you safe in your undertakings. I shall go back to the sea to keep watch against hostile host."⁷ in Tolkien, "There are the doors before you," said the guide. "I must return now to my duty at the gate. Farewell! And may the Lord of the Mark be gracious to you!"⁸ in the proverb used by both Háma and the coast watcher, "In doubt a man of worth will trust to his own wisdom"⁹ in the descriptions of the feast that follows. And in the characters of Unferth and Gríma.

Like Unferth, Wormtongue is the old King's counsellor; like Wormtongue, Unferth taunts the visitors, who after all have come to save his people and deliver the land from its peril. Both are soundly put down by their opponent, and accused of treachery -- Unferth of betraying his kin; Gríma of betraying not only his people but the King himself. But along with these similarities, there are differences as well -- Gríma is revealed to be a spy for Saruman, seeking to destroy King Théoden and usurp his place, while Unferth is in no sense an ally of Grendel but in fact a loyal follower of Hrothgar, whatever his faults. Also Unferth repents of his rudeness and loans Beowulf his sword for the fight with Grendel's dam, while Gríma, when Théoden gives him a chance to redeem himself, hesitates and then chooses to leave the King and return to his true master, Saruman. Gríma is, in essence, a further development of Unferth as Tolkien saw him (he once referred to him as "the sinister counsellor"¹⁰ of King Hrothgar) -- Gandalf explicitly says of Wormtongue: "See Théoden, here is a snake! With safety you cannot take it with you, nor can you leave it behind. To slay it would be just. But it was not always as it now is. Once it was a man, and did you service in its fashion..." (*LotR*, Bk.3, Ch.6, Pt.IX, Par.17, emphasis mine). It seems to me that, in creating his own character, Tolkien adapted some elements of Unferth's personality (such as his insults to the visitor's chief), suppressing others (such as Unferth's repentance) and amplifying a select few (such as the hint of Unferth's treachery).

But this explanation of Gríma's character and its source is incomplete. There is nothing in *Beowulf* to account for Wormtongue's motives for his betrayal of King Théoden -- greed, for the King's treasure, and lust for his niece, Princess Éowyn -- not for the fact that Gríma is in fact responsible for the King's plight. It is not Unferth's fault that Grendel terrorises the Danes, nor is there anything he can do to stop it, whereas Wormtongue is directly responsible for the fact that Théoden has slipped into despair and dotage, for the death of the King's son, and for the unpreparedness of the Eorlingas when Saruman finally invades their land. While the borrowings from Unferth are there, it is not enough to say 'Wormtongue is based upon *Beowulf*'s Unferth', we must look further. And,

if we are willing to look in some unlikely places, a striking parallel soon appears -- Uriah Heep.

In Dickens' character from *David Copperfield* we find several of the elements missing in Unferth: an advisor who has wormed his way into his master's confidence and used his position to drive his master into dotage and despair -- in Mr. Wickfield's case, through blackmail and drink, in King Théoden's, through age and ill counsel. Both are usurpers: Uriah gains control over all Mr. Wickfield's affairs, while Wormtongue achieves such power that he is able to issue commands "in the King's name" and, after the death of Prince Théodred, is even able to have Éomer, the King's nephew (and heir), thrown into prison -- although universally unpopular, both are undeniably powerful. Much is made of Uriah's 'umble origins, while we are not told of Wormtongue's -- merely that he is the son of Galmód. It seems unlikely, however, that he was a member of the royal house, and if he had been a relative of the King's we surely would have been told of this important fact. In any case he would not have been a close relative, for we are told that Éomer and Éowyn are 'the last of the House of Eorl' and that Théoden's mother had not been of the Rohirrim at all but a woman of Gondor. Added to this is the matter of motive, major point unaccounted for by the Unferth parallels. Gríma and Uriah have exactly the same motives, however: both wish to gain their master's wealth and both desire their master's daughter -- in Uriah's case, Mr. Wickfield's actual daughter, Agnes; in Wormtongue's, Théoden's niece (and adopted daughter) Éowyn.¹¹ Both fail in their plots and their downfall is equally swift after their true natures are revealed. One final point which may be significant hangs upon Tolkien's choice of a name for his character -- his villain was apparently always named Wormtongue, but Gríma son of Galmód is a later substitution for the original Frána son of Fremdā¹² ('Mask' son of 'wanton', for 'Asker' son of 'Unfriendly Stranger'). This is important because 'Mask' does not fit Unferth (whereas 'Asker' would), but it is a very good epithet for Uriah Heep -- who is twice described by Dickens as having a face "like a mask" -- and, of course, for Wormtongue, since his power depends upon keeping his true nature hidden behind the mask of faithful counsellor to the King.

There are undoubtedly other sources in addition to these lying behind Tolkien's character -- neither *Beowulf* nor *David Copperfield* provides us with a source for the idea that Wormtongue was merely an agent for another, greater evil, for instance -- but most of Gríma's actions can be found paralleled in these two works.

There is, however, another significant element in Gríma's make-up, which, so far as I know, has not been noted by any commentator: his marked similarities to Sméagol the Gollum. This is not necessarily deliberate on Tolkien's part (although it probably is), for both Wormtongue and Gollum seem to represent Tolkien's idea of what happens to people who choose to be evil -- certainly, in the 'gollumisation' of Wormtongue we have a vivid picture of the process. The similarities are striking: both are described as being in some way warped or twisted creatures, both have a marked tendency -- alone of any of Tolkien's characters to refer to themselves by their proper names rather than by the correct pronoun, which is to some degree mocked at some point by those around them:

'Mercy, lord,' whined Wormtongue, grovelling on the ground. Have pity on one worn out in your service. Send me not from your side! I at least will stand by you when all others have gone. Do not send your faithful Gríma away!

'No, not one shall be left, not even Gríma. Gríma shall ride too. Got You have yet time to clean the rust from your sword.'

[said Théoden.]
(*LotR*, III.6.ix.9&10)

'No, no, master!' wailed Gollum, pawing at him and seeming in great distress. 'No use that way! No use! Don't take the Precious to Him! He'll eat us all, if He gets it, eat all the world. Keep it, nice master, and be kind to Sméagol. Don't let Him have it. Or go away, go to nice places, and give it back to little Sméagol. Yes, yes, master: give it good, eh? Sméagol will keep it safe; he will do lots of good, especially to nice hobbits...'

(*LotR*, IV.3.iii.7)

'Sméagol'll get into real hot water, when this water boils, if he don't do as he's asked,' growled Sam. 'Sam'll put his head in it, yes, precious... But be good Sméagol and fetch me the herbs, and I'll think better of you.'

(LotR, IV.4.vii.19&21).

Both Gríma and Sméagol are universally known by their epithets ("Wormtongue" and "Gollum"), again, unlike any of Tolkien's other characters -- even the Wizards' epithets are designations (i.e. Gandalf the Grey, Saruman the White, Radagast the Brown), not used as proper names. As both have the simile "like a dog" applied to their actions at some point; so far as I am aware, the only times Tolkien ever uses this imagery. Further evidence that the two were somehow linked in Tolkien's mind can be found in "The Hunt for the Ring" in Unfinished Tales:³ the Nazgûl (Ringwraiths) ride forth seeking Gollum to find out from him where the Shire lies, and instead come upon... Gríma Wormtongue, who in terror tells them all the information they were seeking and more. Finally it should be noted that Gríma grows to resemble Gollum by the end of the story much more than at his first appearance. Thus, "Wormtongue" becomes plain "worm" in the end, as the one-time counsellor of the King of Rohan becomes progressively the doorkeeper of his own prison, then a beggar, then a murderer and (probably) a cannibal. This "gollumisation" of 'poor Gríma' repeats the same process that five hundred years earlier turned an inquisitive hobbit named Sméagol into the Gollum. Even their deaths contain a similar element: in the end, both suddenly go completely, violently mad and, in their deaths, bring about the destruction of their true master and tormentors as well -- for Wormtongue murders Saruman seconds before he is killed himself, and Gollum takes the Ring with him into the fire.

It might also be pointed out that while Dr. Beare finds the source for Gandalf and Wormtongue's verbal duel in Unferth's exchange with Beowulf, Dr. Bonniejean Christensen⁴ picked this same scene in Beowulf as the origin of Bilbo and Gollum's riddle-game in The Hobbit, Chapter 5, "Riddles in the Dark". It might also be commented that Frána ('Asker'), Wormtongue's name in the original manuscript, would be an equally good epithet for Unferth (because of his taunting 'do-you-still-beat-your-wife' type of question to the hero) or for Sméagol ('Snouper'), especially before the Ring came to him, when he was 'a great seeker after secrets'. Sméagol became the Gollum largely because of the murder of his friend Déagol,⁵ while Beowulf predicts that Unferth will be damned because he is a "kin-murderer", and Worm is prevented from accepting Frodo's pardon in the end because he has killed (and we have strong reasons to believe, eaten) Frodo's cousin Lotho. The influence is therefore ouroubours: Gríma is partly derived from Unferth, as is Gollum, and studying them helps us to arrive at an idea of Tolkien's conception of Hrothgar's counsellor, while Gollum's character in turn influenced that of Wormtongue, and Gríma's decline provides us with an example and better understanding of Gollum's.

Unferth, Uriah, Sméagol/Gollum, all contributed to the character of Gríma the Wormtongue, but by examining the nature of these contributions it becomes clear that Tolkien has not used his sources to create a patchwork effect but has synthesized the elements borrowed into a new whole: old threads woven into a new pattern. This is something he achieved over and over throughout The Lord of the Rings: whatever Tolkien borrowed he made his own, whether by transforming a somewhat silly episode of The Kalevala into the Leaf-like "Tale of the Children of Húrin", or by creating a character like Galadriel the Elvenqueen -- Galadriel may, as I have suggested elsewhere,⁶ be partially derived from Ayesha, She-who-must-be-obeyed, or she may, as many have suggested, be meant to remind the reader of the Blessed Virgin Mary, or she may, as Elizabeth Holland has suggested,⁷ have lived in Galatia, but none of these facts, whether true or false, will enable us to understand who she is or why she acts as she does; only reading Tolkien's books will do that. Studying Tolkien's sources and how he used them helps us to learn a great deal about the way Tolkien wrote, but I believe it is a fallacy to try to explain the actions of his characters in terms of those of his sources.⁸ Certainly, Tolkien borrowed heavily from a great variety of sources in his writing, but to sum

his borrowings up, as Dr. Robert Giddings did, by saying "Tolkien... was a great plagiarist" seems to me to miss the point. It is not the fact that he used sources, but the use he put those sources to, that is important. As Pr. Tolkien said of his works: "It is not about anything but itself"⁹ and I believe that this is not only true, but that it is also precisely the reason why The Lord of the Rings is a great work. 'From the top of that tower, the man had been able to catch a glimpse of the Sea'.

Notes

1. "An Interview with Tolkien" (March 2nd, 1966), by Henry Resnick. Niekas 18, Spring 1967, p.33.
2. J.R.R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics", London: Oxford University Press, 1936, pp.6-7. Reprint in The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983, p.7-8.
3. J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories", reprint in Tree and Leaf, Boston, Houghton-Mifflin Co., 1964, Part III, Par.3.
4. H. Rider Haggard, She: a History of Adventures (1887), Ayesha: the Return of She (1905), She and Allan (1921), Wisdom's Daughter (1923). For more on Tolkien's possible borrowings from this series, see my article "She and Tolkien" in Mythlore XXVIII, Summer 1981, pp.6-8.
5. Resnick, p.40.
6. This essay remains unpublished. I unfortunately have been unable to locate a copy to refresh my mind of its contents, but have summarised its major points (with some additions of my own) in the remainder of this paragraph.
7. Beowulf, trans. E. Talbot Donaldson, in Beowulf: The Donaldson Translation -- Background and Sources -- Criticism, ed. Joseph F. Truoro, New York: W.W. Horton & Co., 1975, pp.6-7.
8. J.R.R. Tolkien, The Lord of the Rings, 2nd Edition, III.6.v.1.
9. This detail is mentioned in Pr. T.A. Shippey's "Creation from Philology", in J.R.R. Tolkien, Scholar and Storyteller: Essays in Memoriam, eds. Mary Salu and Robert T. Farrell. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979, p.307.
10. J.R.R. Tolkien, "Prefatory Remarks on Prose Translations of Beowulf", in Beowulf and The Finnesburg Fragment, tr. John R. Clark-Hall, rev. C.L. Wrenn. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1940, p.xiii. Reprinted in The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays (see note 2 above) under the title On Translating Beowulf, p.52, line 7.
11. As Dr. Beare points out (letter to the author, Nov. 3rd, 1981), Wormtongue had failed to take into account that Éowyn was not the type of person to take her uncle's and brother's murders lightly. I fully agree: King Gríma, I think, would not have enjoyed his victory for very long. [This calls to mind the character of Kriemhild, the archetypal warrior-maid in The Nibelungenlied, who incited her new husband Etzel (Attila), to murder her brother and kin for having caused the murder of Siegfried. Could Kriemhild be a source for the fiery Éowyn? Ed.]
12. J.R.R. Tolkien, The Lord of the Rings, Manuscript in the Marquette University Memorial Archives.
13. J.R.R. Tolkien, Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth, ed. Christopher Tolkien. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980, 3.IV.i.13-17.
14. Bonniejean Christensen, "Beowulf and The Hobbit: Elegy into Fantasy in J.R.R. Tolkien's Creative Technique", (1969 dissertation). DAI, Vol.30, N° 9-10 (1970), p.4401-A.
15. The murder is not in the original manuscript of this chapter, where Sméagol (originally called Dígol ('Hidden'), then Déagol ('secret') merely finds the Ring on the riverbank. [See Vol. VI of HoME, The Return of the Shadow, London: Unwin Hyman, 1988, pp. 78, 86, 261. Ed.]
16. She and Tolkien. See note 4 above.
17. Elizabeth Holland, "Notice to Travellers: You are here", The New Tolkien Newsletter, eds. Dr. Robert Giddings and Elizabeth Holland. Vol. 1, Number 1 (August 1980), p.13.
18. This viewpoint is not shared by the editors of The New Tolkien Newsletter.
19. J.R.R. Tolkien, The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien, ed. Humphrey Carpenter with Christopher Tolkien. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981. Letter 165 (June 30th, 1955), p.220.