

# WARG, WEARG, EARG

## AND WEREWOLF

A NOTE ON A SPECULATIVE TOLKIEN ETYMOLOGY

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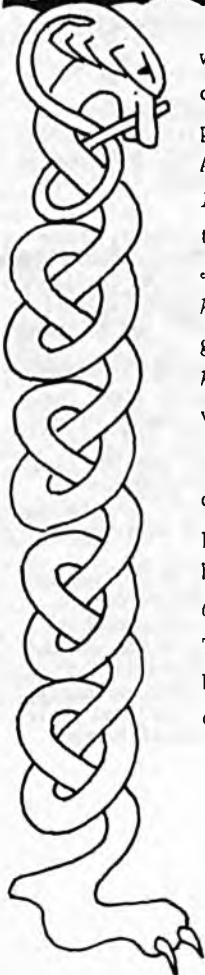
**he word *vargr*** had a double significance — it signified a wolf, and also a god-less man. Sabine Baring-Gould, *The Book of Were-Wolves*, 1865, p.48.

*Wargs* In the Third Age of Sun in Rhovanion, there lived an evil breed of Wolves that made an alliance with the mountain Orcs. These Wolves were named Wargs and often when they set off for war they went with the Orcs... In the battles of the War of the Ring, the Wargs were devastated... and the histories of Middle-earth speak no more of these creatures. David Day, *A Tolkien Bestiary*, 1979, p.236.

*wearg* (-h), -es. *m.* (of human beings) a villain, felon, scoundrel, animal. II (of other creatures) a monster, malignant being, evil spirit. J. Bosworth and T.N. Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 1898, p.1177.

Most readers of Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, (1937) and of *The Lord of the Rings*, (1954-55), will remember the *wargs*<sup>1</sup>, the wolf-creatures which pursue Gandalf, Bilbo and the Dwarves in chapter VI of the former — which are led by 'a great grey wolf' (p.112), fear fire, fight and plunder with the Goblins (i.e. Orcs), and which are routed in the climatic Battle of the Five Armies (p.259). They will also recall the Warg chase of the members of the Fellowship (*LotR I*, 310, 312) when the Wargs have come west of the Mountains, led by 'a great dark wolf-shape', the 'Hound of Sauron'. In the former text Gandalf feared the Wargs, but in the chapter 'A Journey in the Dark', (1954) he is powerful enough to rout the 'great host of Wargs (which) had gathered silently and was now now attacking them from every side at once' (p. 312). In his gloss on these creatures Robert Foster observed<sup>2</sup> of the Wargs of *LotR*: 'They do not seem to have been true Wargs, in that they were west of the Misty Mountains and were not real—' a view born out in that Gandalf is able to combat them relatively easily.

It is the contention of this note that Tolkien was indulging himself with this word and concept in both etymological speculation and in restoring to the living English language a pattern of meanings long forgotten. As T.A. Shippey was to point out much later, in 1982, in his *The Road to Middle-earth* — " 'Wargs' are a linguistic cross between Old Norse *vargr* and Old English *wearg*, two words showing a shift of meaning from 'wolf' to 'human outlaw'." (p.50). This is both true and simplistically confusing in that the thought associations are also blended to some extent with the concept 'werewolf', on which form the following entry is excerpted from C.T. Onions (ed.) *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, (1966), " 'werewolf'.



person transformed or capable of transforming himself into a wolf. Late O. English werewolf (once). Low German werwulf; c.f. W. Frisian waerūl; Swedish varulf, the latter perhaps representing Old Norse \*varulfr, whence Old North French garwall (Marie de France<sup>3</sup>), later garoul (in Modern French loup-garou). 'The first element is doubtful, but it has been identified with Old English wer (= latin vir), man.' After the Middle English period the word was chiefly Scandinavian until its revival through folklore studies in the nineteenth century. (p.1000).



As the last point makes clear, there was considerable academic interest in such human shape-changing in folklore studies in Europe in the later nineteenth century, as it was realised that notions of similar metamorphosis in classical mythology were paralleled widely in medieval, and, not infrequently, in later records of many of the Indo-European peoples. The depiction of wolves alongside the hunters was done in many cave-paintings of more than 50,000 years ago. In earlier classical Europe the wolf was especially associated by the Greeks with Apollo, and, probably, was originally worshipped or received offerings as was the case among the Letts<sup>4</sup>. As Frazer points out<sup>5</sup>, in the process of time the cult was associated with that of Apollo, and it was supposed that he had received his title (lúkios) from having exterminated wolves<sup>6</sup>. In Delphi, in the temple of Apollo, there was a bronze image of a wolf, which was explained as commemorating the finding of a treasure with the aid of a wolf. Like Romulus and Remus, many children of Apollo by human mothers were said to have been suckled by gentle wolves.



As the last dangerous animal to survive in many parts of Europe, the wolf has given its name to the group of beliefs (lycanthropy) based on the idea of the temporary or permanent transformations of living men in to wolves<sup>8</sup> or other animals. Yet these beliefs had, to a large extent, passed from English, though, as Baring-Gould explained:

"English folklore is singularly barren of were-wolf stories, the reason being that wolves had been extirpated from England under the Anglo-Saxon Kings, and therefore ceased to be objects of dread to the people. The traditional belief in were-wolfism must, however, have remained long in the popular mind, though, at present it has disappeared, for the word occurs in old ballads and romances. Thus in Kempion —

was it war-wolf in the wood?  
or was it mermaid in the sea?  
Or was it man, or vile woman,  
My ain true love, that mis-shaped  
thee?

(The Book of Were-Wolves, p.100)

Clearly, as with other such literary losses of folk-concept, Tolkien was concerned, to some degree, to reanimate the lost thought by showing the various meanings in action in his story constructs.

Related to this were-wolf notion is that of the link between the concepts of 'wolf' and 'outlaw', as referred to above by both the Bosworth and Toller dictionary and, more recently, by T.A. Shippey. As Baring-Gould put it in 1865—

"Vargr had double significance in Norse. It signified a wolf, and also a godless man. This vargr is the English were,<sup>9</sup> in the word were-wolf— (op. cit., p.48). He had also noted, a few lines above, that the Norse Vargr may be seen as u-argr, 'restless', the second element being a cognate of Old English earg. This last adjective is listed in classical Old English by Bosworth and Toller (op. cit., p.233) as having two main senses —

(I): inert, weak, timid, cowardly.

(II): Evil, wretched, vile.

The first sense is illustrated excellently by the Beowulfian half-line (1.254lb) comment on Beowulf's approach to the dragon:

"ne bið awylc earges sið! (Such is not the way of the coward!)

While Tolkien is not primarily concerned with the link between warg and earg, the warg cowardice is stressed in the contexts under discussion, and so there is left floating the possible etymological link which modern scholarship prefers not to stress, despite Baring-Gould suggestion (p.48).

The actual word form warg is an interesting one, since it is earlier<sup>10</sup> than those occurring in written Old English, where the word shows the sound-change, breaking, and is spelt wearg. There are, however, various early forms extant which show Tolkien's lexical source, such as:

(i) Gothic vargs, a fiend;

(ii) Pluquet in his *Contes Populaires* which tells that the ancient Norman laws said of criminals condemned to outlawry for various offences: "Wargus esto!" "Be an outlaw!"

(iii) The *Lex Ripuaria*, tit.8: "Wargus sit, hoc est expulsus."<sup>11</sup>

or (iv) The Salic Law<sup>12</sup>, tit.57, which orders:—"Si quis corpus jam sepultum effoderit aut expoliaverit, wargus sit." ("If any one shall have dug up or despoiled an already buried corpse, let him... warg.")

In his own elaboration on these forms, their semantics and sense implications, Baring-Gould notes from Palgrave's *Rise and Progress of the English Commonwealth* that among the Anglo-Saxons an outlaw 'was said to have the head of a wolf' and he then concludes:

"If then the term vargr was applied at one time to a wolf, at another to an outlaw who lived the life of a wild beast, away from the haunts of men — 'he shall be driven away as a wolf, and chased so far as men chase wolves farthest' was the legal form of sentence — it is certainly no matter of wonder that stories of out-laws should have become surrounded with mythical accounts of their transformation into wolves. (p.49).

While the linguistic speculation by Tolkien is perhaps most clear in his earlier references to wargs, the notion of the were-wolf was probably present initially in his thought as in the account of Sauron's wolves on the Guarded Plain in *The Silmarillion*. These creatures are there variously referred to as 'wolves' and 'werewolves' and their mightiest stand strongest is a wolf form of Sauron

himself, who, when seized by Huan, shifts his shape from wolf to serpent and then back to his usual body, finally flying away in the form of a vampire dripping blood, (*The Silmarillion*, p.175). As we have been told a little earlier Sauron had made various strongholds of evil, such as "the fair isle of Tol Sirion" which "became accursed, and it was called Tol-in-Gauroth, the Isle of Werewolves." (p.156).

As the Appendix on elements in proper names tells us (p.359), in this name gaur means 'were-wolf', and it comes from a root ngaw- 'howl'.

(It seems to have escaped the eye of Mr. Ryan that the two words gaur and warg might be cognate in the mind of the author, the second being the Westron translation of the first and, indeed, a metathesis of it: gaur → gaw → warg, and I wished to emphasise this point since it furthers Mr. Ryan's theory. Ed.)

In a similar note, in *Unfinished Tales*, (1980), the \*Gaurwaith are defined thus:

*The outlaw-band on the western borders of Doriath that Túrin joined and of which he became the captain.... [The name is] translated Wolf-men, pp.85,90. (p.440).*

The first of these passages gives an excellent gloss on the concept of outlaws (the section is entitled *Turin among the Outlaws*:

*... all that region lay under the fear of Orcs, and of outlaws. For in that time of ruin houseless and desperate Men went astray: remnants of battle and defeat and lands laid waste; and some were Men driven into the wild for evil deeds. Tolkien continues: They hunted and gathered such food as they could; but in winter when hunger drove them they were to be feared as wolves, and Gaurwaith<sup>13</sup>, the Wolf-men, they were called by those who still defended their homes.... they were hated scarce less than Orcs, for there were among them outcasts of heart, bearing a grudge against their own kind.*

Although it is not at all obvious from the passage in *The Hobbit* where there is 'a great grey wolf' as leader, or that in *The Fellowship of the Ring* with 'the Hound of Sauron', in the van, the section in *The Silmarillion* certainly shows that Sauron (or 'the Necromancer') was leading the wolf-outlaw pack in all cases, and that the notion of (temporary) shape changing is implied in most, if not all, the references to outlaw/wolves/werewolves throughout the canon.



The ancient notion of actual shape-changing is, however, more thoroughly explored in another place - in the character of Beorn in *The Hobbit*. In discussing this problem of enigmatic humans in Tolkien, Shippey observes of Turin in *The Silmarillion*:

*"He is only half a man. this idea Tolkien clearly took from the famous Saga of Egill Skallagrims-son. In that saga Egill's grandfather is Kveld-Úlf (Evening-Wolf), not entirely human, 'a great shape-changer', very like Beorn in The Hobbit." (The Road to Middle-Earth, p.198).*

Earlier he had noted that Beorn "is a were-bear, who changes shape, or 'skin' as Gandalf calls it,

every night." (p.62).

This last is in accord with general nineteenth century theory of lycanthropy, as in Professor J. A. McCulloch's definition:

(1) *It may indicate merely a form of madness in which the patient imagines that he is an animal, especially a wolf, and acts as such.*

(2) *It indicates the popular belief that on occasion a human being can actually transform himself, or be transformed into a wolf or some other animal. In this form he slays and eats men.*

As McCulloch and others<sup>15</sup> stressed, while the superstition is practically world-wide and the wolf transformation has been the most usual one in all parts of Europe and in North Asia from early times, in the Northern parts of Europe the bear form is also general. For example Boniface, Archbishop of Mayence, in the 8th century, mentions the belief, (*Sermo XV*).

The change was caused by a man himself - e.g., by donning a wolf-skin (Ulfhamr, hence the name 'skin-changer') or a wolf-girdle. In such cases, the man was a wolf or bear by night, and a man by day, howling and devouring like the actual animal. Such persons were said to be eigi einhamr, 'not of one form'. In later times the Scandinavians thought that Finns, Lapps or Russians had the power of changing others to wolves or to bears at will<sup>16</sup>. McCulloch also suggested the point of linked thought and association:

*The belief was apparently much mingled with and probably influenced by the fact that wild warriors and outlaws - e.g. the bersekr - wore wolf-skins or bear-skins over their armour or clad themselves in these, while they were often victims of ungovernable passion and acted as if they were animals.' ('Lycanthropy', p.208).*

Many Scandinavian instances of this are to be found in classical Norse literature, e.g.:

- the account of Sigmund and Sinfjötli donning skins and becoming wolves (*Volunga Saga*, chaps. 5-8).

- Björn (in *Hrolfs Saga Kraka*) being transformed into a bear by his stepmother, who shook a wolf-skin glove at him. He lived as a bear and killed many of his father's sheep, but by night he always became a man.

- the statement by the hag, Ljot, in the *Vatnsdala Saga*, that she could have turned Thorsteinn and Jokull into boars<sup>18</sup> (ch. xxvi).

or - the account of Thorarinn becoming a boar when pursued and afraid (*Eyrbyggja Saga*, ch. xviii).

Of this mix of fable and romance relative to such transformation into wild beasts, Baring-Gould well observed:

*among the Scandinavian nations there existed a form of madness or possession under the influence of which men acted as though they were changed into wild and savage brutes, howling, foaming at the mouth, ravening for blood and slaughter, ready to commit any act of atrocity, and as irresponsible for their actions as the wolves and bears in whose skins they equipped themselves. (op.cit., p.51).*

The Beorn of *The Hobbit* in the late Third Age was the chieftain of the clan of Northern Men whose traditional duty it was to maintain the safety of the trade routes from Eriador to Mirkwood. As presented in Chapter VII (*'Queer Lodgings'*) he is someone of appalling anger (p.126), 'a skin-changer' (p.126), perhaps 'descended from the great and

ancient bears'<sup>19</sup> (p.127), normally very inhospitable (p.136), indifferent to gold and silver<sup>20</sup> (pp.137-8), at night 'like some great beast' (p.139), but who 'loves his animals as his children' (p.147).

Thus while Beorn conforms to all the usual berserkr qualities, Tolkien has made him a distant blood relative<sup>21</sup> of the Edain of the First Age, and the *Quenta Silmarillion* relates how some of that stock were skin-changers, the greatest of whom was Beren. Further, as Gandalf makes clear, Beorn comes from ancient stock and 'is under no enchantment but his own'<sup>22</sup> (p.127). Yet some of the traditional ruthless violence is allowed by Tolkien to his creation:

"What did you do with the Goblin and the Warg?" asked Bilbo suddenly.

"Come and see!" said Beorn, and they followed round the house. A Goblin's head was stuck outside the gate and a Warg-skin was nailed<sup>23</sup> to a tree just beyond. Beorn was a fierce enemy. (p.143)

(In the light of what has been said above, notice the particular hatred that Beorn, a shape-changer bears for the Wargs. Ed.)



Any careful reading of the Baring-Gould<sup>24</sup> study of werewolves will indicate Tolkien's close indebtedness to this collection which he follows very closely for its chapters I-IV, and VIII (i.e. the period prior to the Middle Ages. He is also in sympathy with the earlier parts of Chapter X, *Mythological Origin of the Were-Wolf Myth*, particularly those concerned with metempsychosis or sympathy (and communication) between men and beasts. While he could not, as Christian, have subscribed to the ancients' belief in a soul-endowed animal world, yet transformation into beasts was a part of Greek mythology, while in Scandinavian mythology Odin changed himself into the shape of an eagle, and Loki into that of a salmon. As Baring-Gould puts it of such transformations and communicating —

*the line of demarcation between this and the translation of a beast's soul into a man, or a man's soul into a beast (metempsychosis) is very narrow.*

*The doctrine of metempsychosis is founded on the consciousness of gradation between beasts and men... in this myth... we trace the yearnings and gropings of the soul after the source whence its own consciousness was derived...* (pp.153-4)

At many points in *The Hobbit* there is much such communication between various orders of rationality, a possibility which has largely passed by the time of Frodo's quest. Thus, in the earlier text -Bilbo understands the dragon, the great spiders, and the eagles; Gandalf can follow the speech of the Wargs<sup>25</sup>; both thrushes and ravens speak to the Dwarves; and Beorn has the ability to talk to his animals, ponies and dogs. This primitive sympathy for the state of animals is something which Tolkien allowed himself in the sphere of myth, as opposed to the more history-like mould of the later Third Age in *The Lord of*

*the Rings*. What were perhaps, mythological stories early in *The Silmarillion* have gradually deteriorated into attitudes alien to superstition, blood-thirstiness, cruelty and even cannibalism by the later times of *The Lord of the Rings*. Perhaps naturally fables and fears are seen for what they are in the face of the morality and theology at the end of the Third Age.



In a similar antiquarian vein Tolkien allowed himself the inclusion in skeletal form, at least, of the vampire concept. While both werewolf and vampire have a liking for human flesh and blood, there is a marked difference in them. Whereas the former is a living person assuming animal form, the latter is a resuscitated corpse which rises from the grave to prey on the living. Despite his use of the vampire idea, Tolkien seems not to be influenced by post-medieval Balkans (and especially Rumanian) story, but rather to be drawing on his classical knowledge of such antecedent beings as the blood-consuming ghosts in the *Odyssey*, in Ovid and elsewhere. There may also be echoes of the demonic Hlith of ancient Hebrew legend, who had many vampire traits, or of the Roman lamia which enticed men sexually<sup>26</sup> and then feasted on their blood.

The brief Tolkienian account of the phenomenon occurs in *The Silmarillion* in the account of Thuringwethil, a creature of monstrous evil and perhaps one of the corrupted Maiar, described thus as

*...the bat-fell of Thuringwethil. She was the messenger of Sauron, and was wont to fly in vampire's form to Angband; and her great feathered wings were barbed at each joint's end with an iron claw.* (p.178)

Typically she is the companion of 'the ghastly, wolf-hame of Draugluin' (ibid), whose name and description imply some form of obscene misgenation.

(A further study on vampires by Michael Burgess was published in *Amon Hen 75*, p.15-7, and is, fittingly enough, a reply to a previous article by J. S.Ryan himself! Ed.)



While Tolkien's thoughts about ancient vampirism are suitably enigmatic, the same cannot be said about his views on the related phenomena of male cruelty, outlawry and preying in cannibalistic fashion on other humans. As with his other such investigations of Ancient Indo-European and Germanic thought, the clue is as always in the words used and in what is said in his stories about these seemingly strange and fabled forms of being. While he would not have accepted that he was conducting an anthropological interpretation of sadism, masochism and lycanthropy<sup>28</sup>, there is no doubt that Tolkien has tried to trace the idea of the werewolf back to (germanic) pre-history. If he does not quite see its origin as Eisler does, in primeval



clash of cultures between peaceable vegetarian early man and the brutal, fur-wearing carnivorous creature that he was forced to become (by, say, an Ice Age) to become, yet his stories do inculcate similar probing thought about

- the stern autonomy of ancient figures like Beorn;
  - the nature of the cowardice and aggression of outlaws (O.E. earg/wearg);
  - the ancient and vindictive laws which made solitary men 'wargs';
- and the revulsion felt by even the most elemental of men, like Turin or Beren, in the presence of the obscene, mindlessly malevolent and the grotesque travesties of humanity created by Sauron.

As on many other occasions<sup>29</sup>, Tolkien has extended the folk-memory by exploring and reanimating old words for too long lost to the English-speaking peoples, so that, like our forebears we 'recover' the freshness of words and in so doing make for ourselves

'a discovery in the inner world of consciousness.'<sup>30</sup>



#### Footnotes

1. '...the wild Wargs (for so the evil wolves over the Edge of the Wild were named...)' *The Hobbit*, Second edition, p.112.
2. *The Complete Guide to Middle-earth*, (1978), p.415.
3. This 13th century text is, specifically, her 'The Were-Wolf' lai. (*Bisclaveret*), translated into English in Vol.4 of *Arthurian Romances Unrepresented in Malory's Morte d'Arthur*, 1900, pp.81-94. The work was reproduced in facsimile by AMS in 1970. The title word, *bisclaveret* is held to come from *bleiz* ('Wolf') + *garou*. The story itself is found in other literary versions, such as the 14th c. *Roman de Renart*, by the clerk of Troies.
4. Sir James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, (1901), vol. 2, p.249.
5. *Ibid.*
6. The Warg attacks and their repulsion by Gandalf may be held to be a witty recollection of the epithets used by Homer of Apollo (*Iliad*, iv, 101, 119) which may be glossed as either 'twilight-born or wolf-born'.
7. Andrew Lang, *Myth, ritual and Religion*, (1899), vol. 2, p.220.
8. For myths and folk-tales of the wolf, see A. de Gubernatis *Zoological Mythology*, (1872), vol. II, pp. 142-9. S. Baring-Gould presents many like legends in her overview study, (*op. cit.*).
9. This identification is not certain - see the quotation above from C.T.Onions (*op. cit.*).
10. Pp. 47, 49, 53-4 of J.S. Ryan, 'German Mythology appied' - *The Extension of the Litterary Folk Memory, Folklore*, Vol. 77, Spring 1966.
11. I.e. 'Let (a man) be an outlaw, this man is driven out'.
12. Quoted by Baring-Gould (*op. cit.*). There is some possibility of confusion with vampires

here.

13. One assumes a recollection of a root \*Gaur-, which might be postulated to lie behind the ONFr. *garwall*. (See Onions, above). Norman *guarwolf* is also cited in various etymological dictionaries as an occurring form. A. Brachet's *Etymological Dictionary of the French Language*, 3rd Edition (1882), derives M.French *garou* from O. Fr. *garoul*, from Med. Latin *gerulphus*, a word of Scandinavian origin (p.179).
14. In his article on 'Lycanthropy', p.206, of vol. VIII (1915) of *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethica*, edited by James Hastings.
15. e.g. Robert Eisler, *Man into Wolf*, London, Spring Books, 1949. Enid Starkie, 'Petrus Borel the Lycanthrope': *his Life and Times*, London, Faber & Faber, 1954. Ian Woodward, 'The Werewolf delusion', New York and London, Paddington Press, 1979.
16. J.Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, (1882), p.1097. G. W. Dasent, *Popular Tales from the Norse*, (1888), pp. lxi. G. Vigfusson and Y. Powell, *Corpus Poeticum Boreale*, (1883), vol. I, p.425.
17. Cp. Sir Walter Scott, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, 1802, (1839 Edition), p.354.
18. The expression *verða at gjalti* 'to become a boar' is often met with in the Sagas.
19. Presumably also the lord of all the bears which came to dance at night (p.141).
20. This suggests that he came from a time before the lust for wealth and possessions inspired malice among the dwellers on Middle-earth.
21. This background is neatly summarised by David Day, *A Tolkien Bestiary*, (1979), pp.30-1.
22. This ancient strength and his various marvellous deeds liken him to Bombadil in LotR.
23. This is very similar to the nailing of Gundel's claw to the gable of Heorot in *Beowulf*. (11.883-36).
24. Tolkien referred with approval to his scholar's studies in the field of folklore in various lectures and seminars attended by the present writer in the years 1954-1957. Tolkien was also aware of the many Oxford lectures in the area of French Lycanthropy by Dr. Enid Starkie, some of which were later included in her book on *Petrus Borel*.
25. This must remind us inevitably of Montague Summers, in his *The Werewolf*, discussing: *certain fantastic beings known (in Normandy) as lupins or lubins. They pass the night chattering together and twatling in an unknown tongue*, (Quoted, p.3012, by Douglas Hill in his article on *Werewolves*, pp.3008-3012, *Man, Myth and Magic*, no. 107, (1971).
26. Cp. 'he saw upon his flank a bat-like creature clinging with creased wings', (*The Silmarillion* p.179).
27. The second element may well be connected with the dialect verb *hame*, 'to have sexual intercourse with', from Old English *hæman*, 'concubere, coire, nubere' (See J. Wright. *The English dialect Dictionary*, (1905), Vol.III, p.39).
28. The subtitle of Robert Eisler's *Man into Wolf* (1949).
29. See, for example, J.S. Ryan, *German Mythology Applied*, as quoted in footnote 10 (*supra*), or his *Before Puck — the Pukel-men and the Pucca*, (*Mallorn* 20), September 1983, pp.5-10.
30. Owen Barfield, *History in English Words*, 2nd Edition, (1954), p. 82.