Before puck~ The pukel~men and the puca

J.S.RYAN

In memory of Kathleen M. Briggs

. . . languages (like other art-forms or styles) have a virtue of their own, independent of their immediate inheritors.   [p.12]

. . . far off and now obscure as the Celtic adventures may seem, their surviving linguistic traces should be to us . . . of deep interest . . . Through them we may catch a glimpse or echo of the past which archaeology alone cannot supply, the past of the land which we call our home.   [p.15]

> J.R.R. Tolkien, 'English and Welsh', *Angles and Britons: O'Donnell Lectures* (1963)

The Púkel-men *before Dunharrow**

In the third chapter, 'The Muster of Rohan', in *The Return of the King*, the hobbit Merry comes, when squire to King Théoden, with his lord, to the ancient fortress or Hold of Dunharrow. As they climb the steep path from Harrowdale, the Riders of the Rohirrim pass at each turn of the road:

> "great standing stones that had been carved in the likeness of men, huge and clumsy-limbed, squatting cross-legged with their stumpy arms folded on fat bellies . . . The Riders hardly glanced at them. The Púkel-men they called them, and heeded them little: no power or terror was left in them; but Merry gazed at them with wonder and a feeling almost of pity[1], as they loomed up mournfully in the dusk".   [p.67]

Although these statues are not named again, they, or similar memorials, are presumably referred to[2] twice more, first on the following page as:

(*) Full details of works referred to in the text can be found in the bibliography at the end of the article.

(1) Cp. Ryan (1969), p.186.

(2) So Foster (1978), p.321. Tyler (1976), is vague on the second passage but links the third (p.381) concerning the 'Wild Men'.

-SL-

"a double line of unshaped standing stones that dwindled into the dusk . . . they were worn and black; some were leaning, some were fallen, some cracked or broken; they looked like rows of old and hungry teeth".   [p.68]

and again by the Wild Man, when talking to Éomer, in his reference to the earlier time when the 'Stone-house folk' "carved hills as hunters carved beast-flesh" [p.106].

As David Day comments in the text of his *A Tolkien Bestiary* (1979, p.206):

"The Púkel-men statues - have been compared to the Wild Men called the Woses of Druadan. Indeed it is likely that the Pukel-men were ancestors of the Woses . . ."

While *QS* did not refer to these stone figures, or help in any way with the problem posed by Tyler (1976, p. 381):

"What their relationship had been with the stonemasons of the White Mountains during the Accursed Years was never discovered"

- the recent issue by Christopher Tolkien of his father's *Unfinished Tales* assists us in various ways[3]. The editor tells us that the name Púkel-men is 'also used as a general equivalent to Drúedain' (p.460) and that they, presumably, held 'the great promontory . . . that formed the north arm of the Bay of Belfalas' (p.263). As any inspection of Christopher Tolkien's map of Middle-earth (such as that at the end of *UT* will make clear) the loose British geographic equivalent of this area may be seen to be, either the area of Devon and Cornwall, or the south and south-west of modern Wales.

Their Humanity

A further series of notes by both Tolkiens (*UT*, pp.382-387) identify the race as being:

tall, heavy, strong and often grim, sardonic, and ruthless;
having, or being credited with 'strange or magical powers';
as 'eating sparingly'...'and drinking nothing but water';
as remaining in the White Mountains (p.383);

---

(3) For example as in the confirming of the close association between the three passages linked by Foster from *RotK*.

as paying no heed to the Dark One (i.e. Morgoth);

and as being driven from the White Mountains by 'the tall Men' (p.383).

On this evidence, we must see these earlier people as being very much like

"'P-Celts' and among those [who were] the speech-ancestors of the Welsh". ['English and Welsh' p.14]

The many notes of the Drúedain in *UT* link them with 'the remote ancestors of Ghân-buri-Ghân' (p.382) and describe them as:

"at times merry and gay . . . but [with] a grimmer side to their nature and [they] could be sardonic and ruthless . . . with strange or magical powers [like] the Dwarves in build - in their skill of carving stone"   [p.382]

and we are told:

"that the identity of the statues of Dunharrow with the remnants of the Drúath (perceived by Meriadoc Brandybuck when he first set eyes on Ghân-buri-Ghân) was originally recognised in Gondor . . ."   [p.383]

As Ruth Noel (1980, p.133) stresses, *dru* is the word for *wose*[4], hence *Druadan Forest* is 'where the Woses lived', and so we are not surprised to find Christopher Tolkien's cluster of equivalents (*UT* p.429) as including *Drúwaith Iaur* ('the old wilderness of the Drú-folk' in the mountainous promontory of Andrast), *The Old Pukel wilderness* and *Old Púkel-land* (pp.384 and 261, 387).

Anglo-Saxon Púcel

In his final annotation to these references in *UT*, Christopher Tolkien comments:

"It seems that the term 'Púkel-men' (. . . a translation; it represents Anglo-Saxon *púcel* 'goblin, demon', a relative of the word *púca* from which Puck is derived) was used only in Rohan of the images of Dunharrow".   [n.14, p.387]

This clue, which is more linguistically and culturally significant that the frequent easy scholarly identification of a word used by the Rohirrim with a

---

(4) *Wose*, a word found in western Middle-English texts. Thus in *Sir Gawayn and the Green Knight*, *wodwos* (L. 721), n. pl. 'satyrs, trolls of the forest', from Old English *wudu-wása*. Compare *wudewasan* for *faunos*, Bosworth-Toller's *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (1898), p.779.

form in Old English[5], opens up a whole world of thought and exploration in linguistic aesthetics which is typical of so much of the sub-text of the so-called 'creative writing' of the late Professor Tolkien. It also fits well the unexpected reference to *The Lord of the Rings* in the opening paragraph of his Oxford oration, 'English and Welsh':

> ". . . the years 1953 to 1955 have for me been filled with a great many tasks, . . . the long-delayed appearance of a large 'work', if it can be called that, which contains, in the way of presentation that I find the most natural, much of what I personally have received from the study of things Celtic" [p.1]

The 'way of presentation' in this context is not so much the mode of fantasy as his ever-present habit of etymological speculation and of searching for the cultural aesthetic behind surviving linguistic forms.

Puck's Antecedents

We are all familiar with Puck[6], the sprite, otherwise called Robin Goodfellow, who first appears in Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Act II, scene 1, 1. 40), and who categorises himself as a 'hobgoblin' in his speech to Titania's fairy, beginning

> "I am that merry wanderer of the night" (1. 43)

This dramatic usage may be held to have given the sprite an individual character, so that it no longer seems natural to talk, as Robert Burton does in *The Anatomie of Melancholy* (1621), of *a* puck instead of 'Puck'. As is said of him,

> "human follies are his perpetual entertainment, - like all hobgoblins, he has his softer moments, his indignation is always raised against scornful lovers -. Puck in Drayton's account of diminutive fairies in *Nimphidia* (1. 283) shows many of the same characteristics. For the rest, we shall find that Puck's traits correspond with those to be found in the Celtic

parts of these islands, in the PWCA, PHOUKA and PIXIES[7].

Dr Briggs also gives there many other details about these hobgoblins such as:

> Pwca (pooka) being the Welsh version of English *puck* (p.337);
> pwca as a *will o' the wisp* (p.338);

or *pouk-ledden*[8], as 'the Midland equivalent of *pixy-led* (p.333).

She also quotes (pp.342-343) the mention of Robin Goodfellow, in 17th century literature, as in Rowland's *More Knaves Yet*:

> "Amongst the rest, was a good
>   fellow devill,
> So called in kindness, cause he
>   did no evill,
> Knowne by the name of Robin (as we
>   heare). . ."

Pouk ≡ The Devil

This last quotation is of particular interest, since, as she stresses earlier (p.333):

> "In medieval times 'Pouk' was a name for the Devil. Langland speaks of *Pouk's Pinfold*[9], meaning Hell. By the 16th century,

---

(5) See John Tinkler's 'Old English in Rohan' in Isaacs & Zimbardo (eds.) (1969), pp.164-169.

(6) "The earlier form was 'Pouke'; the Shakespearean text is the earliest evidence for the modern form" (C.T. Onions, *A Shakespeare Glossary* 2nd edition, 1958 reprint, p.171).

(7) Kathleen Briggs (1976, p.337). See also in this work pp.33, 336 and 338. Dr Briggs had first gone to Oxford in 1920 and attended Tolkien's lectures over many years from 1925 onwards. Her general sympathy with his work can be found in many places in her publications in the field of British folklore. See in particular her *The Anatomy of Puck* (1959) or pp.55-56 of *Folktales of England* (1965), ed. K.M. Briggs and R.L. Tongue.

Nancy Arrowsmith (1977) observes of hobgoblins in England: "They have become so rare that most people are only acquainted with them through stories and poems" [p.120]; and "At one time they were known throughout England and into the Scottish lowlands" [p.122].

(8) Compare the *pokey-hokey*, a frightening figure, mentioned by Mrs Elizabeth Wright (wife of Tolkien's teacher, Professor Joseph Wright) in her *Rustic Speech and Folk-lore* (O.U.P., 1913). Tolkien was visiting the Wright's home regularly from from 1911 to 1915 to learn philology, and in the process he acquired from the editor of the *English Dialect Dictionary* his own love for these folk forms and meanings of the language.

(9) This *Piers Plowman* association is discussed by Thomas Keightley (1880). In W.W. Skeat's edition (1886) of *The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman*, this is C-text, Passus XIX, 1.282, in the glossary to which (Vol. II, p.416) Skeat observes of *pouke*: "A common word in Ireland, especially in the West, in such phrases as - 'What the *puck* are you doing?'"

however, Pouk had become a harmless trickster, and only the Puritans bore him a grudge".

Yet Langland's vision, of Abraham showing this Lazar place controlled by the *pouke* to the Dreamer, has many later parallels, as with Golding's use of the word in an addition, which he makes in the ninth book of his translation of Ovid, to the account of the Chimaera:

> "The country where Chymaera, that
> same pooke,
> Hath goatish body, lion's head and
> brist, and dragon'd tayle"

Similarly Spenser had used the word in the prayer:

> "Ne let the *pouke* nor other evil
> sprites, . .
> Fray us with things that be not"
> (*Epithalamion*, II.341-344);

while in Ben Jonson's play, *The Devil is an Ass*, the fiend of the title is called Pug.

Linguistic Cognates

In his most comprehensive manual Thomas Keightley (1880) gives many of the linguistic cognates to the *Pooke-Puck* root, viz.:

> Slavonic *Bŏg*[10], 'God' (p.315);
> Icelandic *Puki*, 'an evil spirit'
> (ibid.);
> Friesland *Puk* (pp.233, 316);
> Irish *Pooka* (p.316);
> Welsh *Pwcca* (p.316);

and with the Northern German s-, the cluster

> Swedish *spŏka*, *spŏke* (a ghost);
> Danish *spŏge*, *spŏgelse* (p.316)[11];
> Dutch *spook*; Low German *spoke* (ghost).

Keightley, following Sir Francis Palgrave, also indicates the links with

> Yorkshire *Boggart* (name and noun);
> the old English name *Puckle* (meaning 'mischievous' as in *Peregrine Pickle*, the Scotsman Smollett's name for one of his heroes);

and from *Bug*, *Bugbear*, *Bugleboo*, and *Bugaboo* (p.316).

In addition to these many derivatives

found in mediaeval, Renaissance, and later dialectal usages in Western and Northern Germanic languages, there is a most considerable use of the element *pūc-*, as in *pūca*, *pūcel*, 'goblin, demon' in Old English[12]. These words which do not appear in 'classical' Old English verse, and only occur in odd places in the prose, are quite a feature as an element in place names. In 1924, Allen Mawer had noted in his survey[13] of place-name elements

> *pūca*, O.E., 'goblin, *puck*, dial.
> *pook*',

and gave as examples Poughill, Pophlet Park (Derbyshire) and Pownall (Cheshire). A similar note was provided in the revision of this work in 1956:

> "*pūca*, O.E., 'a goblin', surviving as *puck*, *pook* as in Parkwalls (Cornwall); Pock Field (Cumberland); Poppets (Sussex); Puckeridge (Hertfordshire); Puckshot (Surrey); Purbrook (Hants.) [and] it is also found in M.E. minor names (Derbyshire, Essex, Sussex and Wiltshire).
> *pūcel*, O.E., 'a goblin'. (a) Popple Drove (Cumberland); Putshole (Devon); Puxton (Worcestershire)"[14].

Indeed, many modern surveys of English place names include toponyms of this type. Thus the more popular book, *English Place-Names*, by H.G. Stokes, suggests that the early people pondered on

> "Picklenash (The Fairies' Ash); Shuckburgh (The Goblins' Home), Puckeridge (The Goblins' Stream), Pokesdown (near Bournemouth) - and if we accept [it] that Pucklechurch was 'The Goblins' Church'"[15].

Kenneth Cameron in his *English Place Names* comments that the syllable, *puck*, *pook* (goblin) is especially common in the South of England, quoting Pockford (Surrey), 'ford', Puckeridge (Herts.) 'stream', Pucknell (Wilts.) 'spring' and Purbrook (Harts.) 'brook'.

---

(10) In his *A Concise Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (1882), W.W. Skeat gives as immediate cognates for *bug* (1) a spectre:
 Welsh *bwg*, hobgoblin, spectre; cp. Scott *Bogle*;
 Gaelic, Irish *bocan*, a spectre;
 cp. Lithuanian *bugti*, to terrify.

(11) Cp. Danish, *pokker*, 'devil, deuce', Norwegian *pauk*.

(12) Old English **Pūca* is thought to be a nickname from *pūca*, 'goblin', and as such to be found in the Somerset place-name, Puckington. Similarly, the diminuitive, **Pūcela* is believed to occur in the ancient Gloucestershire name, Pucklechurch, found in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in 946. See p.357 of E. Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, 3rd edition, 1951 reprint.

(13) *The Chief Elements in English Place-Names* (1924), p.49.

(14) A.H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, Vol. II (C.U.P.), p.74.

(15) First edition 1948, revised edition, 1949, from which this passage, p.53.

Celtic Interface

This last reference to the southern regional frequency of the element is of particular interest, in view of the exhaustive survey of some 132 words/elements[16] identified for 'monster/demon' in English place names. R.A. Peters finds that 23 of the 132 Old English words so used occur in some 271 past and present English place names. The only words to occur in 10 or more instances are: *Grendel* (12); *scucca* ('demon/devil')(17); *þyrs* ('giant/demon')(23); and *púca* ('spectre/evil spirit/demon')(103), with seven examples of *pucel*. A careful analysis of the names listed reveals that, of the 110 cases of *púc-*, more than half occur in five counties, viz.: Cambridgeshire, 5; Essex, 14; Kent, 5; Surrey, 32; and Wiltshire, 17. Even more significantly, only one county not on this list (Derbyshire)[17] has a high number of monster words. While the common gloss of *púca* is 'goblin' or 'demon', any analysis of the glosses from Latin where the word is listed, suggest a sense of 'evil spirit', with a Primitive Germanic antecedent form **púkõn*. Whether the word was first in the Germanic languages and then borrowed into the Celtic, or whether it was in both clusterings from a very early date, it seems clear that its very frequent occurrence in southern areas of England is partly explained as Christianity's designation for non-Christian spirits, perhaps even surviving Celtic superstitions which would have been anathema to the missionary church. Then, too, the distribution of the element *púc-* may or may not relate to Tolkien's point that the south and east (as landbridge) "must once, have been the most Celtic, or British, or Belgic"[18].

Etymology alone cannot explain the preference for the *púc-* elememt or its peculiar distribution pattern which may well also indicate that it was used within the areas of the first converted Angles and Saxons in a dismissive way of a range of supernatural beings from Celtic folklore including goblins, banshees, ogres and others, as well as such supernatural powers as the Celtic *Deae Matres*. Certain it is that many varieties of local belief must have been lumped together under this head. In *The Return of the King*, the Rohirrim (i.e. early Angles and Saxons) are similarly dismissive – "The Riders hardly glanced at them . . . and heeded them little", whereas we are told that Merry "gazed at them with wonder and a feeling almost of pity" (*RotK*, p.67).

Lost Gods

Although the Púkel-men do not have a central place among the objects of veneration in Middle-earth, they once meant much more that they would seem to for Théoden's knights. Even before we learn from the *woses* of their earlier importance, Merry shows us that, for the sensitive viewer, and in their own place, they still possess an awesome and numinous power which may be intuited by one of a later and different race. Since they have faces, albeit battered, and a human shape, they were once intended to evoke human emotions of solemnity. Whether or no we accept the gloss on *priapos* of *pucelas*[19], a link with the better sense of Priapus as the 'god of gardens and vineyards', it is one of the associations known to Tolkien and it makes good sense in the context both of the ancient gardens[20] below Dunharrow and of the thoughts of the ancient men of the woods.

This 'important branch of study'

While the above is no more than an essay in valid philological speculation, it may be held to fit Tolkien's definition of his text as that "important branch of study" with "no obvious practical use" (*FotR*, (1954), p.8). This ironic view of philology - or of the meaning behind the modern Puck - was not, of course, held seriously by Tolkien who would have agreed with his friend and fellow-Inkling, Owen Barfield that:

> "The more common a word is and the simpler its meaning, the bolder very likely is the original thought which it contains . . ."
> (*History in English Words*, 1956,p.14).

Whether we are dealing with Proto-

---

(16) This data is largely derived by the present writer from the many localized examples listed in Robert Anthony Peters (1961), esp. pp.165-66; 203-204; 223-26; 234-35.

(17) With *draca* 6; *scucca* 5; and *wyrm* 12, in a total of 37.

(18) 'English and Welsh', p.11.

(19) 'Die Bouloneser angelsächsischen Glossen zu Prudent', Holder, p.394. See also H.D. Merit, *Fact and Lore about Old English Words* (1954).

(20) The first description of the statues with their fat bellies is very much like those of fertility or vegetation deities or symbolic representations. See also the link with *faun* (above), and n.6.

Celts, Druid-figures[21], or some form of roadside fertility deities - or indeed a combination of all three - Tolkien's statues are not merely survivals from a distant past, but they suggest to us, as to the sensitive Meriadoc something of the intense and even poetic effort which went into their making as concepts and as statues. The *pūc-* word's Eastern European cognate forms from Slavonic and Lithuanian would imply that the root word may well have been Indo-European, with possible and plausible vegetation associations in both Italo-Celtic and Germanic, and as such it may well go back to the ancient notion of tree-gods which is held to be the possible etymology of the word Æsir[22]. It is also equally plausible that he is drawing attention to the tragic misunderstanding of Celtic religion[23] by the Angles and Saxons.

It is such etymological explorations as the above which are most in sympathy with Tolkien's continual assertion that the core of his work was language. For they are not only illuminating of his subtle use of aesthetic but are deeply luminous and satisfying in their own right. Again, as with such forms as *middle-earth* and *mathom*, Tolkien has rescued otherwise lost words and significances and made them available for the modern reader's speculation and aesthetic satisfaction.

*   *   *   *   *

APPENDIX

It should be understood from the body of the article, that Tolkien's use of 'the pūkel-men' phrase (a) refers backwards from the Old English type society of Rohan; (b) relates imaginatively to the period of early contact with the Celts by the Angles and Saxons in the south and south-east of Britain; and (c) is largely independent of the considerable early modern (Celtic) speculation about the survival of *puc* - legends.

---

(21) The stones are much too human to be of the type in the circles of standing monoliths of the sort at Rollright or Avebury. Yet note of the following item from Kathleen Briggs concerning the style of Midland fairies:
"The last recorded Oxfordshire fairies are said to have been seen going down a hole under the King-stone at the Rollright Stones." *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* (1967), p.91.

(22) That is, Æsir from *ás* (beam, standing post), (i.e. the gods were once trees).

(23) Cp. "in Celtic Ireland [pagan] dealings with the unseen were not regarded with such abhorrence, and indeed had the sanction of custom and antiquity" (St. John D. Seymour, *Irish Witchcraft and Demonology* (1972), p.4 - in reference to the earliest periods of Christianity there.)

The article was dedicated to the memory of the late Dr. Kathleen Briggs, a fellow folklorist, not least because of her emphasis on the literary use of beliefs about fairy creatures in Part Three of her *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* in which she refers to Tolkien's works as:

"the best of all the modern writings on fairy people" [p.209].

*   *   *   *   *

BIBLIOGRAPHY

N. Arrowsmith: *A Field Guide to the Little People*, 1977.

K. Briggs: *A Dictionary of Fairies, Hobgoblins, Brownies, Bogies and Other Supernatural Creatures*, 1976.

R. Foster: *The Complete Guide to Middle-earth*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1978.

N.D. Isaacs & R.A. Zimbardo (eds.): *Tolkien and the Critics*, 1969.

T. Keightley: *The World Guide to Gnomes, Fairies, Elves and Other Little People*, 1880.

R. Noel: *The Languages of Tolkien's Middle-earth*, 1980.

R.A. Peters: *A Study of Old English Words for Demon and Monster and Their Relation to English Place Names*, (University Microfilms, Inc.), 1961.

J.S. Ryan: *Tolkien: Cult or Culture?*, 1969.

J.R.R. Tolkien: *The Fellowship of the Ring*(first edition), 1954.
- *The Return of the King*, (2nd edition), 1966.
- *The Silmarillion* (ed. C. Tolkien), 1977.
- *Unfinished Tales* (ed. C. Tolkien), 1980.
- the essay 'English and Welsh' can also be found in *The Monsters and the Critics*, 1983, pp.162-197.

J.E.A. Tyler: *The Tolkien Companion*, 1976.

Further Reading

Among the many works containing references to 'the Pooka' are:
D.R. McNally Jnr., *Irish Wonders*, Boston, 1888. Facsimile edition published 1977 by Weatheware Books, New York.
W.B. Yeats' two collections, *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, 1888 and *Irish Fairy Tales*, 1892. Given a modern format as *Fairy and Folk Tales of Ireland* (Colin Smythe, 1973).
P. Haining, *The Leprechaun's Kingdom*, 1979.
M.A. Murray in *Folklore*, Vol. LXIV, June 1953, pp.351-354.