

# “Helpful, deprived, insulted, vengeful”: The use of Norse mythology in Tolkien’s representation of Dwarves

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**D**warfs, or Dwarves as they are referred to within Tolkien’s work (a difference he explains as “a piece of private bad grammar” [*Letters* 17]) [*See our final article - Ed.*], are notoriously hard to define due to their differing origins, attributes and activities. It is clear that Tolkien uses the figure of the Norse dwarf as the original basis for his creation of Dwarves but the idea of the dwarf progresses and Tolkien’s representation of the race throughout his works changes and develops until he has created an entirely new idea of Dwarves. In this essay I will use Tolkien’s “private bad grammar” to differentiate between my discussion of Tolkien’s Dwarves and Norse mythology’s dwarfs.

The similarities between the dwarfs and the Dwarves does not end at the names, which Tolkien took from the ‘*Völuspá*’ section of the *Poetic Edda*; “There was Motsognir | the mightiest made/Of all the dwarfs, | and Durin next” (10:1-2). This clear borrowing from the Norse dwarf creation story is not the limit of Tolkien’s engagement with the *Poetic Edda* and its companion, the *Prose Edda*, in his early representations of the Dwarves. Despite the eventual development of his own distinct ‘dwarf’ later in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*, remnants of the earlier concepts remain in *The Hobbit* and other parts of the legendarium. Jakobsson, in his essay ‘Dwarfology’, opens with “When trying to understand Old Norse dwarfs, one problem is knowing too much.” (52). It is easy to bring preconceived notions of what the dwarf is from other myths, fairy tales, novels, games and even films and it is important to have a clear definition of the Norse dwarf.

Motz defines every dwarf as an underground smith figure, “a craftsman who lives mysteriously in stone and rock in distance from the community he may serve and whose position before gods or heroes may be described by one or more of the following adjectives: helpful, deprived, insulted, vengeful” (49). Even this definition can be considered an over-generalisation. The few named dwarfs within mythology make it hard to make any statement that unifies them, but this definition is particularly important in its lack of detail. The dwarfs are ambiguously and inconsistently defined, which emphasises the importance of identifying specific examples to explore the similarities and differences between dwarfs and Dwarves.

## Smaller?

One aspect of ‘the dwarf’ that has become an assumed trait is their smaller size. Tolkien uses this feature in his own descriptions, and pictorial representations of the dwarfs

of fairy tales are often diminutive (possibly this is due to the association with the medical condition of dwarfism). However, within Norse mythology dwarfs are not consistently physically described. Litr, a figure within the *Prose Edda* who makes a brief appearance in ‘*Gylfaginning*’, is the only example of a dwarf to be explicitly described as being very small and this was potentially just to make it easier for Thor to kick him into a funeral pyre (74). The dwarf’s interchangeability with giants within the myths indicates that size is not their defining feature; even Litr is described elsewhere in ‘*Ragnarsdrápa*’ as being a giant (15:48). In the *Prose Edda* the ambiguity continues as three variants of Elf are identified: Light Elves, Dark Elves and Black Elves. Of these only the Light Elves are completely distinct; “there is yet that place which is called *alfheim* (Elf-World); there lives that people, which is called light elves, but the dark elves dwell down in the earth, and they are unlike in appearance and much more unlike in experience.” (*Gylfaginning*). However, the Dark Elf and Black Elf distinction is often harder to separate as the terms are sometimes used interchangeably whilst they are referred to as different races elsewhere in the mythology. The differences remain hard to define. For example, Black Elves are - in the tales concerning the sons of *Invalidi* who crafted *Sif*’s hair - considered to be, and described as, dwarfs.

Various solutions have been offered to resolve this seeming inconsistency. Some suggest they are the same; an idea further confused by references which describe dwarfs living in the world of the Black Elves, which implies they are distinct from the Black Elves even if they do occupy the same realm. The Black Elves and Dark Elves are also described as living underground, their size and appearance are often not mentioned and the words are so frequently interchangeable that it calls into question the existence of the race of the dwarfs within Norse mythology. Wilkin claims Tolkien engages and solves this quandary within his work and “rather than equating dark elves with black elves, Tolkien has instead disregarded the latter term, favouring the less ambiguous name - ‘dwarves’ while giving to the term ‘dark elves’ a new distinction of its own” (75). There is less ambiguity with the Dwarves of Tolkien and they are better, or at least more extensively, described. While most of their attributes change over the course of Tolkien’s works from his original concept, these changes are well documented through Tolkien’s extended writings and it is possible to track the common features of Gold Lust, Craftsmanship, Creation, Death and Martial Prowess through their progression from Norse mythology to something of Tolkien’s own.

Gold Lust is an attribute that has long been identified with the dwarf. Throughout Norse mythology dwarfs such as Andvari, later adapted into Wagner's Alberich within *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, channel the lust for Gold traditionally ascribed to their race. In the example of Alberich, itself a development from the Norse dwarf, this Gold Lust is shown through him forswearing love in order to be able to create a ring of power that allows him to gain more wealth.

In the earliest drafts of the *The Hobbit* Gold Lust, to the exclusion of all other emotion, is clearly in Tolkien's portrayal of the Dwarves. The entire company at some point or other show an overwhelming desire for the treasure even in the knowledge that there is a living dragon protecting it. However, this attribute of the Dwarves is downplayed in the second edition where the majority of the references to Gold Lust are embodied within Thorin as his fatal flaw rather than being established as a racial trait. This idea of Gold Lust is also shown through the effect Sauron's rings has on the Dwarves. It has a limited effect on the Dwarves when compared to the effect of the rings on the other races of Middle-earth. Whilst the rings given to the men turn them into wraiths and affect other races in dramatic ways, Sauron was frustrated that the Dwarves were harder to bring under his dominion. Unlike the, in this case, wiser Elves they wore and used their rings however, the effect was limited to exacerbating their Gold Lust "wrath and an over-mastering greed of gold were kindled in their hearts, of which evil enough after came to the profit of Sauron" (S 288).

### Sauron's Influence

Although not as extreme or immediate as the effect on men, it is nonetheless damaging. Excessive greed that removes the ability to have other emotion echoes Alberich's deal but the deal is made unknowingly by the Dwarves. The greed in Dwarves was kindled by Sauron's rings, indicating that greed, while innate, is not under normal circumstances a defining feature of the Dwarves' racial identity. In the same way as lust for power is seen as the fatal flaw for men despite not being displayed by all, Gold Lust is a flaw displayed when exacerbated for evil purposes; potentially inherent within all Dwarves but existing at low levels. It is telling that one of the most extravagant examples of Gold Lust by a dwarf was by Thrór who exhibited these traits whilst under influence of one of the rings. This detail was only added to *The Silmarillion* later on, suggesting that Tolkien was attempting to move away from the image of senseless greed portrayed in other representations of dwarfs. By moving away from greed as an almost defining feature Tolkien allows for greater depth in his representation of the race of Dwarves and encourages us to see a dwarf with Gold Lust as an individual peculiarity and not a damning trait of the whole race.

*The Hobbit* is the first time Tolkien shows us lengthy interactions within a group of Dwarves. The individual Dwarves have different personality traits and despite the different levels and manifestations of Gold Lust all are interested in the treasure to some extent. However, it is Thorin's intense desire that is seen as pernicious and not the greed of the

entire company. His excessive greed cannot be considered entirely genetic as his forefathers, though demonstrating Gold Lust, were under the influence of one of Sauron's rings. A ring which was taken back by Sauron and not passed on to Thorin. During the exploration of Erebor in *The Hobbit* the "...lust of it was heavy on him." (283). Here, Thorin is singled out as having extreme Gold Lust in contrast to his company, thus suggesting that this potentially an inherent predilection but ultimately evidenced as individual flaw.

Craftsmanship, and the importance of the association of craft with dwarfs, is shown through Motz's definition. The dedication of Dwarves to their craft was such that their already insular race becomes more introverted, distanced from other settlements due to their need to be close to the materials they work with. Their existence as craftsmen cannot be separated from their creator, Aulë who created them to have someone to teach his craft and also gave them another method of distance. Their language was created by Aulë at the moment of their creation, "he made it hard and harsh just like its speakers" (Åberg 1) and because of the manufactured nature of their language it shares few roots or similarities to the Elvish languages further distancing them from other races. This is further exacerbated by their unwillingness to share their language with outsiders, the only noted non-dwarf speaker of Khuzdul is the Dark Elf Eol, and is another manifestation of willingness to self-exclude shown by the dwarves.

Dwarfs often focus on their craft to the exclusion of everything else. In 'Völuspá' they are created in order to create the images of man for the gods to breathe life into and it is to the dwarfs the Gods come when they are in need of crafting expertise. This is shown in the story of Loki and Sif. After cutting off Sif's hair Loki, in order to replace it, goes to see the dwarfs who are described as "twisted creatures, who were both wicked and ugly, but who were the best craftsmen in the world." (Colum 32). Here their craft is what redeems them to the rest of the world and it is only their expertise that cause interaction. Loki tricks them by offering them a great reward which, of course, never appears.

Throughout Norse mythology bullying and trickery are used to get artefacts or services from the dwarfs. In contrast Tolkien seems to consciously try and keep the balance between the Dwarves and their clients as far more equal. Dwarves receive food and other payment in return for their services, however, the element of trickery remains in the earlier versions of stories. This is shown in the story of the Nauglafring, the Dwarf Necklace, told in *The Book of Lost Tales, Part 2*. Here King Tinwelint (later changed to Thingol) scornfully pays the Dwarves six gold pieces after forcing them to remain within his kingdom for months to craft the Nauglafring out of cursed gold. This treatment of Dwarves and their craft shows the early drafts of *The Silmarillion* were influenced by the dwarfs of Norse mythology and their treatment by the Gods. Of course, the deed does not go unpunished as the Dwarves murder Tinwelint and contribute to destroying his kingdom.

## Tolkien takes over

In the later version of this tale the Dwarves attempt to take the necklace from Thingol despite handsome payment and murder him in the struggle. This version is far less flattering to the Dwarves but it does show the Dwarves as being far more willing to create items of value for other races even if, on this occasion, they were overwhelmed by the strength of the curse on the necklace (described as akin to the influence of Sauron's rings). This change in the function of the Dwarves within the story, though pejorative, shows Tolkien moving away from the precedents set within Norse Mythology.

In *The Book of Lost Tales* it is said of the Dwarves 'Old are they, and never among them comes a child.' (LT2 224). This apparent lack of procreation, and female equivalents to procreate with, is changed in Tolkien's later work although they are still portrayed as primarily interested in their craft. A third of the Dwarf population are female but Tolkien writes that more than a third of men "do not desire marriage, being engrossed in their craft" (*LOTR III* 447). But the earlier lack of female counterparts within their race, and therefore lack of procreation within their race described in the early editions of Tolkien's work, does not mean that sexuality is not a feature of the Dwarves, and this is where the events of *The Silmarillion* echo those of Norse mythology once again.

The dwarf Alvis was promised he could marry Thor's daughter in exchange for a service he rendered the other gods. Thor tricked him into reciting words in several languages to show off his knowledge until the sun rose at which point Alvis turns to stone. This is similar to the Dwarves' request of Tinwelint. When they are finished creating the necklace they request "a fair maiden of the woodland elves" (*Lost Tales II* 228) alongside various monetary rewards. Tinwelint, already unwilling to share his hoard, could never "deliver maidens of the Elves unto ill-shapen Dwarves without undying shame." (229). This unusual association of dwarfs with sex, in early versions of the story, is more comparable to the characteristics of the fairy tale dwarf in a tale such as *The Yellow Dwarf*, who helps a desperate maiden on the understanding that she will marry him. The dwarfs are shown to be interested in women of other races through Alvis, but the inclination was removed from the dwarves in *The Silmarillion* through the late addition of dwarf women and the removal of the above episode from the tale of Nauglafring.

This shows Tolkien, again, moving away from the traditional view of the dwarf. Aulë is said to have created thirteen Dwarves in the beginning, six pairs, male and female, and Durin to represent the seven houses. By creating the dwarf women Tolkien gives Dwarves a means for propagation as well as a more rounded society than is portrayed in Norse mythology. Jakobsson claims the dwarfs' lack of ability to propagate shows that "They are losers. They are small, they disappear, they do not propagate." (69). While this is an overstatement it is certainly true that in the dwarfs we see a lesser species; bullied and used by the Gods, the Giants and Men. This is however, untrue of the Dwarves, their staunch

resistance to influence from the rings of power as well as their aggressive defence of the race against intruders, while perhaps being xenophobic, proves the strength of their race.

The death and creation of any race is important. It is particularly important in light of the strange and complicated nature of the creation of the Dwarves and the uncertainty lingering around their deaths. The creation of both the Dwarves and the dwarfs was asexual and they were, in one way or another, created for their crafting abilities. For the dwarfs this skill was far more elemental as their purpose was to craft the images of man; an instrumental part in the creation of another species. Dwarves on the other hand were initially created by Aulë to be his children and a people with which to share his knowledge and skills. Like Melkor's creations, Aulë's children were a weak imitation of the Children of Ilúvatar and were bound to his will. When discovered and confronted by Ilúvatar, Aulë offered to destroy his creations but as he raised his hammer the Dwarves flinched from him showing that Ilúvatar had given them free will and therefore, life.

In the early version of Tolkien's creation myth the Dwarves were still soulless and upon their demise they returned to the earth. This is consistent with the way the dwarfs are depicted as dying. An example of this was Alvis, who turned to stone when the daylight hit him. Gould maintained, after researching the links between dwarf's names and death, the dwarfs were not truly living; "The dwarves are the dead; they are one phase of the Living Corpse, the draugr, that has experienced the First Death and will experience the final and Second Death when the body disintegrates" (959). While this theory has more recently gathered support from scholars such as Vries and Turville-Petre, it could be taking the link between names and existence too far. The lack of a soul implies for dwarfs of both kinds that they are supernatural beings that merely exist rather than live.

## Tolkien takes over again!

In *The Lost Road* the Dwarves are described as "have[ing] no spirit in-dwelling, as have the Children of the Creator, and they have skill but not art; and they go back into the stone of the mountains of which they were made." (129). Lacking a soul severely affects the Dwarves in their crafting activities as well as removing any possibility of an after-life. As the status of the Dwarves progressed the myth was adapted to incorporate the Dwarves having souls; "Aulë the Maker, whom they call Mahal, cares for them, and gathers them to Mandos in halls set apart; and that he declared to their fathers of old that Ilúvatar will hallow them and give them a place amongst the Children of Ilúvatar." (S 39). This is another example of the initial parallel treatment of Tolkien's Dwarves and dwarfs and their subsequent divergence as Tolkien rewrites the race of Dwarves to have souls and a distinct identity.

The Dwarves are a warlike race due to necessity, "Since they were come in the days of the power of Melkor, Aulë made the dwarves strong to endure." (S 39) This strength

is where the main difference between the Dwarves and the dwarfs lies. The dwarfs are known to be weak, considered misshapen by the gods and bullied and tricked as demonstrated through previously discussed examples. Jakobsson describes them as “unimaginative and uncreative, apart from their skills as artisans . . . not particularly dangerous and not very hard to fool.” (61) This assessment may be damning but elements of it are also true - although calling the dwarf uncreative, when their primary reason for being is the creation of the images of man, is problematic. The dwarfs were far from ideal fighters and while there were instances of violence committed by dwarfs, this was not considered a strength nor was it celebrated. Bragg traces the derivation of dwarf as “probably a word meaning ‘the damaged one’ or ‘crippled.’” (15).

This interpretation of the dwarfs being crippled is supported through the language earlier used by Loki describing them as “twisted creatures” (Colum 32), and is supported within Tolkien by Tinwelint’s description of the “illshapen Dwarves” (*Lost Tales II* 229) however, this early incarnation of the ‘crippled’ dwarf is eclipsed later on in *The Silmarillion* by the Noegyth Nibin, or Petty-Dwarves, who were possibly created in part to explain the difference between the early drafted Dwarves and the Dwarves of Durin we see in the later books. The Petty-Dwarves are a mixture of various houses of Dwarves and are described in *The War of the Jewels* as having been “driven out from the Communities, being deformed and undersized, or slothful and rebellious” (388). And thus by Bragg’s definition of dwarf we see the true Norse dwarfs of Tolkien’s world; the ‘crippled’ Dwarves display many of the dwarf characteristics previously discussed. At the time of the War of the Jewels they have been hunted almost into extinction by Elves, who believed them to be animals, and there are only three remaining - Mim and his two sons - all of whom have died by the beginning of the Third Age. And so we see a group driven from others of their race, potentially due to their disabilities, a form of eugenics, and then hunted to extinction by the Elves.

Petty-Dwarves were potentially used by Tolkien to be the scapegoats of the Dwarves, in order to ameliorate the representation of the Dwarves to allow them to become the warrior race we see in *The Lord of the Rings*, the great crafters of Middle-earth, resistant to Evil and not the greedy Dwarves of the first ages. The undesirable elements of the early Dwarves are then absorbed by the Petty-Dwarves and we see them as a doomed race; unable to propagate, crippled, greedy and easily manipulated and bullied. Whilst this is perhaps an extreme view of the significance of the Petty-Dwarves when there are also other existing potential explanations within the extended legendarium of Tolkien for the ‘Wicked Dwarves’. However, their significance as a contrast to the later Dwarves emphasises Tolkien’s development of their race in to something quite different from his original concept.

Tolkien has established a new tradition of Dwarves that originates in the traditional Norse mythologies. The early representations of dwarfs in *The Hobbit* and parts of

his legendarium are immature, aligned with the depiction of the Norse dwarf but, it is through Tolkien’s adaptations that we see a significant divergence culminating in the Dwarves eventual involvement in saving Middle Earth. Some of the essentials remain - the Dwarves’ focus on crafting, a tendency to avarice, their underground cities and the insulated social structure. However, Tolkien’s Dwarf is “stone-hard, stubborn, fast in friendship and in enmity” (S 39) possessing a distinct identity from which we can see the foundation for the modern dwarf of fantasy fiction, video games and films.

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