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Nordic Roots in Tolkien's Writings

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Introduction

The social cataloguing website, Goodreads, in accord with Amazon, ranks *The Lord of the Rings* as the third best-selling book of all time, and *The Hobbit* as the fourth. This statistic is also confirmed by Facebook's 2014 data analysis of over 130,000 accounts for finding the top 100 most popular books. Sophie Hinger believes that this success stems from Tolkien's different attitude towards his writing. She suggests that Tolkien has pictured "Middle-earth as a mythological version of Europe, rather than creating a new and separate world as many fantasy authors after him did" (3). Her view is perhaps shared by many of the scholars who are searching for the outside influences of Tolkien's works. So far, as different sources as Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, Viking, Old Norse, Finnish, Arthurian, and biblical have been suggested by scholars like Thomas, Atherton, Hinger, Birkett, Tarkka, and Carpenter. Yet, the Nordic side of the argument seems to be better recognized. Many articles and books have established their aim to find these Nordic references; still, none seems to consider Scandinavia as a concrete place. Therefore, articles on different aspects of the culture like the mythology, literature, and specific people, like Vikings, and Finnish are popular in Tolkien studies. The present paper, however, does not discriminate between the different aspects of the concept; therefore, words like Norse, Nordic, Icelandic, Northern, and Scandinavian have all been used by the researchers to refer to the same thing, meaning the culture and literature of the Northern Germanic people. While the aim of the paper is not to mention all the parallels between Tolkien's and the Scandinavian world, by citing the most obvious ones, it has tried to demonstrate the close affinity between the two. In doing so, Tolkien's interest in the culture, and the use of particular creatures and personalities, as well as themes and motives, in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, have been points of illustration.

Tolkien's Interest in The Culture

Perhaps the most credible person to comment on Tolkien's ideology would be his biographer, Humphrey Carpenter, who states that, "Old Norse literature and mythology had a profound appeal to his [Tolkien's] imagination" (Clair 1). A closer look at Tolkien's roots and actions would justify this view. As it can be speculated from his family name, Tolkien, which is driven from the German word *Tolkübn* (foolhardy), his ancestry comes from Germany, wherefrom his great-grandfather immigrated to England in the mid-eighteenth century. Despite living in the era of the great tension between England and Germany (the First and the Second World Wars), he has never failed to acknowledge his ancestry. In a letter to the German book publisher, Rütten & Loening Verlag, Tolkien affirms that he "[has] been accustomed [...] to regard [his] German name with pride [...]" (*Letters* 30). Yet, he did not consider Germans much different from Anglo-Saxon English and Norse Icelandic people. This attitude is discernible in his 1941

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letter in praise of Icelandic literature, where he explains that "[he has] spent most of [his] life [. . .] studying Germanic matters (in the general sense that includes England and Scandinavia)."

Perhaps it was this view that pushed him towards Nordic literature quite early in life. In fact, his interest in the subject goes back to his teenage years at King Edward's school, when the schoolmaster lent him an Anglo-Saxon primer at the age of sixteen. From that he proceeded to study some of the Middle English literature including *Beowulf*. Later on, he used his school's Skeat Prize for English to buy a translated copy of *Völsunga Saga*. Tolkien, then, went on to learn Gothic, a Germanic language. At this point his interest in the literature was already well established, as he started to tell his school mates Old Norse stories at the school's tea club. He later entered Oxford University to study classics, but switched to English literature, to which Old Norse was a special secondary subject. Pursuing his studies, Tolkien became an English professor at Leeds University, where he established a Viking club for undergraduates, a club to drink beer and read Icelandic sagas. He later mentions this club in his application for Anglo-Saxon professorship at Oxford University, where he announces Old Icelandic as his "point of special development" (*Letters* 7). The beginning line of this letter can reflect Tolkien's interests quite clearly, for he announces, "A Chair which affords such opportunity of expressing and communicating an instructed enthusiasm for Anglo-Saxon studies and for the study of the other Old Germanic languages is naturally attractive to me." (*Letters* 7) While at Oxford, he found Kolbítar, another club for the study of Icelandic sagas, this time in their original language. He also suggested to replace Snorri Sturluson (an Icelandic poet) with Shakespeare in the English major's syllabus (Hinger 21). His later works, like essays "On Fairy Stories", about Norse gods, and "The Monsters and the Critics", on *Beowulf*, as well as his election as an honorary member of the Icelandic literary society indicates the continuation of his interest in the literature of Old Norse.

Creatures and Personalities

Elves

Though originated from Germanic mythology, elves are widely known all over the globe. Still, their representation largely differs from one culture to another. In Germany, they have traditionally been associated with dwarves, in English-speaking countries, with Greek fairies during the Elizabethan era, and with Christmas in the contemporary popular culture. Yet, perhaps no closer relative than Norse elves can be found for Tolkien's, for in the first place, unlike other cultures, which assume elves to possess diminutive figures, Tolkien, in accord with the Nordic concept, has pictured them as human sized creatures. In fact, the appearance of the Norse elves is very similar to that of the human race, only, elves are more beautiful to look at. In Tolkien's works, the elves have been constantly portrayed with humanlike features; their fairness can also be perceived from Tolkien's descriptions. Consider Glorfindel, about whom Tolkien says,

[he] was tall and straight; his hair was of shining gold, his face fair and young and fearless and full of joy; his eyes were bright and keen, and his voice like music; on his brow sat wisdom, and in his hand was strength. (*Fellowship* 295)

Elrond's depiction in *The Fellowship of the Ring* is another case in point,

The face of Elrond was ageless, neither old nor young, though in it was written the memory of many things both glad and sorrowful. His hair was dark as the shadows of twilight, and upon it was set a circlet of silver; his eyes were grey as a clear evening, and in them was a light like the light of stars. (295)

The notion of marriage between elves and humans, present in Tolkien's works, to which Aragorn's marriage to Arwen is a good example, is Norse too, at heart. Additionally, the idea of human-elf friendship and alliance, popular in the Old Norse literature, specially illustrated in "Sogubrot af

Nokkrum Fomkonungum i Dana ok Svía Veldiduring", is the underlying assumption throughout Tolkien's works, as in the war of the Ring, in which elves fight side by side with humans.

Besides, in Norse mythology, the power of healing has been attributed to elves, for example, they have saved Thonrard from his death. Likewise, Frodo, wounded by black riders, was saved by Elrond. The ring Nenyá is also used as a mean for healing purposes. Such titles as "The lord of elves" in the poem "Volundarkvitha", used for the Norse Smith god, Volund, could have been Tolkien's source of inspiration for introducing elves as powerful smiths, responsible for the creation of the one ring.

Tolkien has further Northernised his elves by adopting the concept of light and dark elves from Norse mythology. In *Poetic Edda*, elves are divided into light and dark. The light ones being lighter than Sun, occupy Alfheimar, an abode of heaven. Whereas, the dark ones dwell on earth, and are blacker than pitch. Three groups of Tolkien's elves, who were recalled to their first home from middle earth, were able to pass into The West, and were titled Calaquendi (elves of light), while the two other groups, who were either unwilling to answer Valar's call for return, or were lost on the way, were labelled Miriquendi (elves of darkness). Though Tolkien's elves do not demonstrate the extreme differences in the look and behaviour of the Norse light and dark elves, his dark elves are presented as less wise, as well as less beautiful (Wilkin 76). Consider the woodland's king, Thrunduil, whose unwise actions have contributed to Sauran's empowerment. Though, being less fair has never been pointed to explicitly, none of the wood elves, who fall under the category of dark elves, have been sketched with such beautiful features already mentioned in the case of Glorfindel and Elrond (Wilkin76). Also, these dark elves appropriately live in Mirkwood, which taken from Myrkvith in *Poetic Edda*, means the dark forest.

Dwarves

Dwarves primarily belong to Germanic mythology, to which Norse mythology is a subdivision. Throughout his works, Tolkien has established his dwarves with characteristics strikingly similar to those of the Norse eddas and sagas, especially *Sigfried Saga*, which are depicted as long bearded, bad-tempered creatures, who live in caves and mines in the mountains, where they can dig for gold and gems to satisfy their quenchless love of treasure. Their portrayal as skilful smiths who have created the sword Narsil, which later becomes Aragon's sword, also parallels the craftsmanship of the dwarves in Norse mythology, and their reputation as the creators of such valued objects as Thor's hammer and Mjölfnir's collar.

Yet, the most obvious similarity between his and Norse dwarves is the dwarves' names. Apart from two, all the dwarves in *The Hobbit* have their names driven from the poem "Völuspá", the first poem of the *poetic Edda*. The names, Balin, Durin, Dwalin, Bifur, Bofur, Bombur, Nori, Thorin, Thrór, Fili, Kili, Gloin, and Ori all appear from the 9th till the 16th stanza of the poem, where Thorin's title, Oakenshield, is also mentioned, but as a separate name. It is likely that in some cases these names have attributed to the characterization of their possessor, as in the case of Thorin, whose name is translated as "the bold one", and Durin, who similar to the Norse Durin, the ruler of the people living in stones, is the king of the underground mines of Moria.

Hobbits

No mention of hobbits precedes Tolkien's writings. They are purely his contribution to the genre. Yet, some of their most salient features are influenced by Old Norse. Nordic literature, especially family sagas, has consistently demonstrated a hyperbolic sense of hospitality, which has been almost always accompanied with a longing for food. Large portions of food has been considered as a sign of nobility and generosity. An interesting example can be found in *Njáls Saga*, where Hallgerd makes her servant to steal food for her guests, so that she can keep her honour. Much the same, Hobbits are obsessed with food. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, it is said about them that "Growing food and eating it occupie[s] most of their time" (12). Bilbo's frequent attempts to find food throughout his quest, and his worries

about the adequacy of the food for his guests, shows the importance of food for hobbits. At the same time it emphasizes the hobbits' sense of hospitality, for, though dwarves are considered unwanted and rude by Bilbo, he finds himself obligated to serve them.

Akin to Icelanders, hobbits like to acknowledge their ancestry. Tolkien remarks, "hobbits have a passion for family history" (*Fellowship* 29). Bilbo regards both his Took and Baggins ancestors with pride, and repeatedly addresses himself with expressions of family affiliation, such as "a Baggins". Moreover, Merry and Pippin endanger their lives to join the fellowship, solely because of their kinship with Frodo.

Norse tradition of oral storytelling is also present at hobbits' customs. Bilbo recognizes Gandalf from his great stories, "the fellow who used to tell such wonderful tales" (*Hobbit* 16). Sam also reflects on the tradition and the "tale of Beren One-hand and the Great Jewel", popular in Rivendell, while daydreaming of his and Frodo's probable appearance in the future storytelling of the Shire (*Return* 1244 - 1245).

To Icelanders, good clothing was a sign of prosperous life. Their practice of wearing bright fancy clothes, and their care for wearing up to their dignity mentioned by Clair, has influenced hobbits' clothing (64). Hobbits are said to have "whole rooms devoted to clothes", which are chiefly of bright colours (*Hobbit* 14). The value of clothing for hobbits is further illustrated in Bilbo's frequent expressions of concern for leaving his hat and handkerchief behind (*Hobbit* 36).

Bilbo

Among hobbits, Bilbo's character seems to have been particularly influenced by Norse literature. As mentioned earlier, the dwarves' names in *The Hobbit* are driven from the poem "Völuspá". There, in the same poem, Alpiófr is mentioned as another dwarf name. Tom Birkett believes the name, which means the great thief, has been Tolkien's inspiration for his creation of Bilbo (Lee 250), as a thief who is accompanying dwarves in their journey.

Besides, the fear that Bilbo feels, and his success in overcoming it to turn to a hero, is well-known in Nordic literature. Both characters Bolli in *Laxdale Saga* and Hott in *Hrólf Kraki* are going through this transition. Hott's fear causes him to shake in every limb, and deprives him from eating or drinking. But at the end of his quest, he has turned to a fearless hero, who "will not fear [anything] anymore" (qtd in Clair 6). In a like manner, Bilbo, whose "appetite was quite taken away" (*Hobbit* 21), and was "shaking like a jelly that was melting" (*Hobbit*, 25), gains the courage to participate in different adventures alongside brave heroes.

Gandalf

Gandalf, is actually one of the dwarves' names that appear in the poem "Völuspá". The justification for using a dwarf name for a wizard might be that throughout *The Hobbit*, he is mainly a part of the dwarves group. Yet, a more appropriate reason might be that Gandalf means "elvish creature with a wand", a suitable name for a person who wears one of the elvish rings (Narya), and is always carrying a staff.

But, more important than his name, are his characteristics, which are highly influenced by Odin, one of the most prominent gods in Norse mythology. Tolkien himself calls Gandalf, an "Odinic wanderer" (*Letters* 107). As a god, Odin possesses various shapes, the most frequent one being a gigantic old man, with a grey beard, in a blue cloak, and a wide-brimmed hat, wearing a ring (Draupnir, symbol of peace), and carrying a wand. Gandalf is also depicted as a very tall, grey-bearded, old man, in a blue mantle, and a wide hat, who is wearing the ring Narya (symbol of hope and peace), and is carrying a staff. The two are also great travellers. Odin is called Vegtarnr, meaning "road-practiced", and Gandalf is well-known as Mithrandir, meaning "the grey pilgrim". Best known for their wisdom, they advise many of the kings and leaders of their worlds. They are known by different names in different lands, and are able to communicate through birds' language. Like Odin, who could predict events and knew the people's fate,

Gandalf frequently suspects affairs before their occurrence, and can see the importance of some characters before getting acquainted with them. For instance, he does not want to enter Moria without any apparent reason rather than feeling bad about the place (*Fellowship* 343). He also says about Gollum, "he may play a part yet that neither he nor Sauron have foreseen" (*Fellowship* 333). His choice of Bilbo as the group's burglar without ever meeting him as an adult further illustrates the point. Moreover, Odin knew lots of spells. He is particularly known for being able to open the earth, mountains, and rocks, using those spells. Needless to say, being a wizard, Gandalf knows plenty of spells too. It is with their help that he succeeds to open the gates of Moria (*Fellowship* 401). The fact that creatures dealing with the war of The Ring picked Gandalf as their leader, puts him in a place similar to that of Odin as the god of war and Sigfathir (father of victory). Besides, Gandalf's horse, Shadowfax, matches Sleipnir, Odin's horse, for like him, Shadowfax is the Prince of his race and the fastest horse in the universe. Additionally, the two can converse with birds.

Gandalf's death, and his return from it as a stronger wizard, further bonds him with Odin (Ljosland and Whitworth). Odin is said to have hanged himself from Yggdrasil (the world tree), and suffered to death. Through death, he gained the knowledge of runes and spells, upon which his power and his mastery over the nine worlds was based. Gandalf the Grey falls off a bridge in Moria (*Fellowship* 431), fighting Balrog, but comes back as Gandalf the White, a stronger and wiser wizard (*Towers* 655), who could now defeat Saruman. This increase of power, though not stated explicitly, is shown in comparison to Saruman; for though Gandalf the Grey is beaten up and imprisoned by him, Gandalf the White, as depicted in the following extract, is undoubtedly much stronger than Saruman.

"Behold, I am not Gandalf the Grey, whom you betrayed. I am Gandalf the White, who has returned from death. You have no colour now, and I cast you from the order and from the Council. " He [Gandalf] raised his hand, and spoke slowly in a clear cold voice. "Saruman, your staff is broken." There was a crack, and the staff split asunder in Saruman's hand, and the head of it fell down at Gandalf's feet. (*Towers* 761)

Smaug

Dragons are by no means limited to Norse mythology. They feature in myths of various cultures, Chinese, Iranian, Greek, and Welsh, to name but few. They are traditionally sketched as destructive monsters with magical powers. In this sense Tolkien's dragon, Smaug, is not much different. Yet, it owes much to Norse mythology, for it showcases two of its significant dragons, Fafnir, and the unnamed dragon of the epic *Beowulf*.

Beowulf

In *Beowulf*, the dragon's lair is on a cliff, and at the entrance, Beowulf faces a stone arch, out of which leads a stream of fire (lines 2545 - 2547). Similarly, in *The Hobbit*, Smaug is placed in the Lonely Mountain, and a tall arch stone with three strands of stream from the dragon's breath are witnessed as Bilbo enters the mountain (203). There in their deserted den, which is called "Emptiness" in *Beowulf*, and "The Desolation of Smaug" in *The Hobbit*, the dragons sleep on their treasure. In *Beowulf*, the treasure used to belong to some noble people, who were all swept away by death. Before his death, the last survivor piles the treasure somewhere in a hill. Later, it is found by the dragon, who sleeps on it for 300 years. Likewise, Smaug, who is attracted to the dwarves' gold stocks, comes to settle in the mountain. He kills the guards and sleeps on the gold for 171 years. The dragons' sleeping periods end with a theft, the theft of a "gold-plated cup" by an outlaw in *Beowulf* (line 2283), and a "great two handed cup" by Bilbo in *The Hobbit* (180). Though the gold is of no significant use to any of them, for, according to the poet of *Beowulf*, the dragon "is none the better for it [the heathen gold]" (qtd in Clair 43), and Thorin states, that the dragon "never enjoy[s] a brass ring of it[the treasure]" (*Hobbit* 30), the robbery brings about the dragon's wrath. The same night *Beowulf's* dragon begins searching for the thief, burning whatsoever in his sight (lines 2299-2311). Likewise, Smaug rose the next night to burn the town

Esgaroth. Many people suffer, till finally Beowulf succeeds in "stuck[ing] it[his blade] deep into the dragon's flank" (line 2704); equally people's suffering is relieved when Bard shoots Smaug in his left breast (*Hobbit* 210).

Fafnir

In his letter to Naomi Mitchison, Tolkien praises the dragon of *Völsunga Saga*, Fafnir, and admits that Smaug and his conversation is influenced by him (*Letters* 122). Both Fafnir and Smaug are renowned dragons in their worlds, whom people fear to approach. Both do also have a weak spot in their invulnerable bodies, under the left shoulder in Fafnir, and a hollow patch on the left breast of Smaug. When faced with their enemies, both dragons ask them for their backgrounds. Smaug asks for Bilbo's name, and wants to know about his home, while Fafnir asks Sigurd of his, his father's, and his kin's names. Sigurd and Bilbo are equally reluctant to give these information. Sigurd is reluctant, for he knows well that dragons are powerful spell casters; therefore, by concealing his true identity, he is trying to avoid a curse. While in Bilbo's case, though Tolkien mentions that not giving the required information is a wise choice (*Hobbit* 188), the reason is not explained. Both heroes therefore, resolve to answer in riddles. As for his name Bilbo says, "I am the clue-finder, the web-cutter, the stinging fly. I am chosen for the lucky number" (*Hobbit* 188). He also says of his home that "I come from under the hill, and under hills and over the hills my paths led. And through the air, I am he that walks unseen." Sigurd answers Fafnir in the same manner, "Unknown to men is my kin. I am called a noble beast: neither father have I nor mother, and all alone have I fared hither" (qtd in Clair 45). These riddle-talkings cause the dragons to accuse their enemies of lying. Not being answered properly on their questions, the dragons opt to turn their opposers against their companies. As Fafnir advises Sigurd against Regin, and calls the treasure Sigurd's downfall, Smaug warns Bilbo not to trust dwarves. He assures Bilbo that dwarves will betray him by not paying his promised share of treasure, to which Bilbo answers that they are not there only for treasure, but to take revenge (*Hobbit* 190). Sigurd as well is there for more than the treasure; he is exclusively after the knowledge of the Norns. Finally, both protagonists leave the lair with pieces of information that would later on save their lives. Sigurd learns about the bird's language, this would later save his life whilst confronted by Regin, and Bilbo finds about the dragon's weak spot. Bard is later informed about this discovery and by killing the dragon, saves Bilbo's as well as everyone else's life.

Themes and Motives

Riddles

Flytings, or speaking in riddles, is a well-established motif of Norse sagas. Riddle contests can be found in "Alvissmol", *Beowulf*, and *Snnorri's Edda*. In *The Hobbit*, the technique has been employed twice. Once, when Bilbo faces the dragon, Smaug, and a second time, when he encounters Gollum. Since the first case has already been discussed under the title Dragon, only the riddle exchange between Bilbo and Gollum would be argued over in this part.

Bilbo's riddles are of a specific type of flytings, called "Neck Riddles" (Green 37), which is a riddle with a fatal result. Such riddles can be found in "Vafthruthnismol", where Odin has to win a riddle game, to convince a giant to let him out of his lair. After some questioning and answering, Odin defeats his opponent by asking a personal question, "What did Odin say in the ears of his dead son?" Bilbo too is caught in Gollum's realm, and he too uses a personal question, "What have I got in my pocket?" (75), to win the victory. A very similar incident happens in *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*. In the saga, Odin participates in a neck riddle, in disguise. When he finds out that he can not defeat the king, Odin asks the same question again, "What did Odin say in the ears of his dead son?". Asking this question, Odin unwittingly reveals his true identity, and is attacked by the king. In the same way, Bilbo's question, though, makes him the winner of the contest, affirms his theft, and causes Gollum to attack him.

Even the riddles themselves are influenced by the Nordic literature. Gollum's fish riddle, for example, is influenced by the fish riddle in *Heiðreks Saga* (Lee 124).

Gollum's:

Alive without breath, As cold as
death,
Never-thirsty, ever-drinking,
All in mail never clinking. (Hobbit 73)

Heiðreks Saga's:

What lives on high fells? What falls in
deep dales? What lives without breath?
What is never silent?

This riddle ponder, O prince Heidrek! (C. Tolkien 43)

Ethical Codes

The underlying ethical code of Nordic literature is a system of *comitatus*, kinship, and revenge, that governs much of the action. These values are present in Tolkien's works to a certain extent.

Comitatus

Comitatus refers to the bond of loyalty, formed between friends, kinsmen, as well as lords and their followers (Clair 46). The poem "Havamal", which defines much of the ethics of the Old Norse, describes *comitatus* as an everlasting bond. The code is also present in the epic *Beowulf*, where Beowulf risks his life to fight the monster, Grendel, with his bare hands, only to further "heighten Hygelac's [Beowulf's King's] fame" (line 435). He even presents all the gifts he was given for his brave action to the king (2148 - 2149).

In *The Lord of The Rings*, what bounds the members of the fellowship together is their loyalty to their leader (the ring bearer) (Clair 46), and to each other. Even though, Elrond clearly states that apart from Frodo, no charge is laid upon anyone as for going on the quest (*Towers* 365), and lady Galadriel (to test them) offers each individual in secret, a choice between a gift of what he most desires, and going on the quest, all the members opt for the dangerous quest. Even Boromir, who goes off the path by the ring's temptation, keeps his honour by shedding his blood for the protection of Merry and Pippin. This loyalty lasts to the very end, when they put their lives once more in danger, to distract the eye of Sauran from Frodo. Though, they are not sure whether Frodo is still alive or not, and are almost certain that going to the gates of Mordor costs them their lives, none of them doubts this decision, even for a second (*Fellowship* 1150). Furthermore, despite his small and vulnerable statue, Merry endangers his life to help Eowyn in killing Angmar, to fulfil his pledge to her uncle, the king.

Kinship

Among early Icelanders whose life had a tribal structure, the bond of kinship was a strong one. This bond, which is a special type of *Comitatus*, has been manifested in such Nordic poems as *The Battle of Maldon*, and *Beowulf*. *The Battle of Maldon's* motif of nephews guarding their uncle with their lives, quite popular in early Nordic literature, is reflected in *The Hobbit*, where it is said that Fili and Kili "had fallen defending him [Thorin] with shield and body, for he was their mother's elder brother" (242). Moreover, the fact that apart from his kinsmen, no one helps Thorin in facing the dragon, and taking Erebor back, parallels with the story of Beowulf, whom no one assists, when facing the dragon, apart from Wiglat, his kin. The motif does also appear in *The Lord of the Rings*, where Théoden's kinsmen, instead of saving their own lives, try to protect his dead body, and are killed around it (*Return* 1100).

Revenge

"Wise sir, do not grieve. It is always better / to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning" (*Beowulf* 1384 – 1385). Revenge, particularly for the death of a dear one, or pride, is a recurring motif in Icelandic literature, especially in family sagas. This is true of *Njal's Saga*, in which Kari, avenges the death of his wife's family, and *Hrafinkel's Saga*, where Hrafinkel kills a servant for riding his horse, in revenge for his pride. Likewise, Tolkien's dwarves engage in a long war, which lasts for generations, to avenge the death and humiliation of Thrór.

In Norse culture, not being able to avenge a loss, was equal to a loss itself. A case in point is king Hrethel, whose younger son accidentally kills the elder. Since he cannot avenge himself on his own son, he becomes severely disturbed, and eventually loses his mind (*Beowulf* 2435- 2471). This account is particularly similar to Denethor's reaction to the death of his son, Boromir, in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Since the killer of his son is unknown, he cannot avenge him. This fact makes him lose his mind to an extent that he tries to burn his other son, Faramir, alive.

Weregild. *Weregild* is a substitute for revenge. Mostly, when the damage caused, is an unintentional one, the culpable can pay a certain amount of money (Clair 49), or enter into the service of whom he injured, to avoid his revenge. Consider King Aethelstan, who gives Egil two boxes of silver for killing his brother. In *Vatnsdale Saga*, Thorstein chooses to enter the service of Ingimund, for killing his son, Jokul. In a like manner, in *Thorstein the White*, Thorstein the Fair, serves Thorstein the White for eight years, to pay for the killing of his son. The same custom is also practiced in *Orknevinga Saga*.

In *The Return of the King*, when Pippin explains to Denethor that the death of his son, Boromir, was the consequence of defending him and his brother Merry, as *weregild*, he offers his service to the king, and takes a formal oath (*Return* 989). Besides, Eorl of Rohan, whose father, Léod, dies in an accident, trying to tame the untamable horse, Mansbane, addresses the horse that, "Come *hither*, Mansbane, and get a new name....Felaróf I name you. You loved your freedom, and I do not blame you for that. But now you owe me a great *weregild*, and you shall surrender your freedom to me until your life's end" (*Return* 1397). Felaróf accepts the service, and though, he never lets any other human being to mount him, "Eorl rode him [...] without bit or bridle" (*Return* 1397).

Runes

Early Teutonic tribes, including Vikings, have primarily used runes as a writing system. In this sense, runes would be regarded as an equivalent for modern alphabets. Yet, they have exceedingly been reckoned with a magical connotation. This magical sense of runes can be found in the word's etymology. *Webster's Dictionary*, for instance, traces the origin of the word, Rune, back to "Old Norse reyna [Meaning] to whisper, [and] Gothic rūna [Meaning] secret, or mystery". It is this magical view of the word, which is considered a well-known motif of Norse literature. For example, in *Elder Edda*, Odin sacrifices himself to gain the knowledge of runes. This knowledge is the origin of his magical powers. In *Egil's Saga*, Egil uses runes to identify a poisonous drink. Later, in the same saga, using his runic knowledge, Egil heals a dying girl. In much the same way, Grettir, the hero of the *Grettir's Saga*, is saved from his death. Runes are also detectable in the original manuscripts of the poem *Beowulf*. Tolkien uses the runic alphabet to transcribe such magical words as those written on Thrór's map of Erabor, and gates of Moria. In both cases, the letters act magically and can only be seen under the light of the moon, while in a certain phase.

In everyday life of the early Icelanders, runic alphabets were particularly used on tombstones and important artefacts such as swords and rings, mainly because it was believed that the magical power of the runes would empower the object. A case in point is the famous sword, by which Beowulf kills Grendel's mother. No other sword could do the job of this runed sword. This everyday use of runes can too be seen in Tolkien's works, on Balin's grave, and on important swords like Glamdring (Gandalf's sword), Orcrist (Thorin's), and Sting (Bilbo's), as well as The One Ring.

It might be appealing to know that Tolkien used two types of runes. The first type, being the already existing runes, and the second, Tolkien's own invention. The runes on the gates of Moria, and Balin's grave are of the second type, which are called Angerthas. The Angerthas seems to be highly influenced by Elder Futhark (Hinger 44), which belongs to the old Norse. Though, there is no one to one correspondence between the letters of the two, the shapes look pretty similar.



FIGURE 1. The Elder Futhark runes

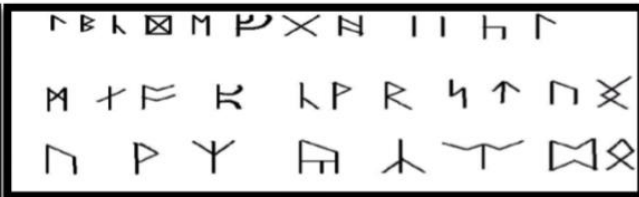


FIGURE 2. The Angerthas runes

Rings

Rings, the most significant implements of Tolkien's trilogy, are prominent motives of Norse mythology. They are traditionally imagined magical, forged by elves out of gold, and capable of bringing their masters immense power and infinite fame. For such qualities, rings were considered important enough for oaths to be sworn on. In the story of *Sigurd the Dragon-Slayer*, there exists a ring, made of the gold of the river Rhine, that could grant such power to its master, to rule the universe. All these aspects can be found in *The Lord of the Rings*. The One Ring is golden, and is forged by elves, and brings its master (Sauran) unimaginable power. Besides, Frodo and Gollum both swear on The One Ring. "Sméagol will swear on the Precious [The One Ring]" (*Towers* 807), to be loyal to Frodo, as his master. Later on, to convince Gollum to give up to Faramir, Frodo mentions their oath, taken on the Ring, "Precious will be angry" (*Towers* 899). The ring was also found in a river by Gollum.

The evilness of rings and their ability to tempt people, is a motif in *Völsunga Saga*. In a scene of this saga, Lorki (a Norse god), is sent to take a particular hoard of gold from a dwarf. Here is a passage of the fourteenth chapter of the saga, quoted by Lee,

Loki saw the gold that Andvari owned. But when he had given up the gold, he kept back one ring, and so Loki took it off him. The dwarf passed into the rock and said that the gold-ring and all the gold would cause the death of whoever owned it. (254)

This situation is very similar to what happens in *The Fellowship of The Ring*. Bilbo is ready to give up all his belonging to Frodo, but the ring. He finally loses the ring, when Gandalf almost takes it by force (*Fellowship* 44).

The story of The One Ring is also very similar to that of Odin's ring, Draupnir. Just as The One Ring was made by the best Smith of the middle earth, Clebrimbor the Elf, under the evil influence of Sauran, Draupnir was forged by two elves, Sindri and Brok, known as the greatest smiths of the nine worlds, under the watch of the Norse evil god, Lorki. Since rings are symbols of wealth and power in Norse mythology, the power of a king lies upon his ring hoard, from which he is expected to bestow upon his followers (Day 30). Every nine days, eight rings of equal weight would be generated from Draupnir. This would mean an infinite ring hoard, and therefore, infinite power for its master. Odin got hold of the ring Draupnir, and it gave him the power to rule over the nine worlds. In fact, it was his ring that ruled over all the other rings of his ring-hoard, so by presenting them to the noble people of these worlds, he gains mastery over the worlds. When his favourite son, Balder, dies, and all the gods gather to present the corpse with valuable gifts, in a state of deep grief, Odin places Draupnir on his son's dead body, right

before they set fire to the ship, in which Balder was laid. Soon the tragic consequence of his decision is evident, for without the ring he loses his mastery over the nine worlds, and peace and order are gone forever. This calls for a quest to the darkest place in the nine worlds, Hel, the prison of the dead. After much suffering, Odin's quest is over, the ring is back in his hands, and peace is restored to the world. Likewise, Sauran gifts nineteen rings to the lords of elves, dwarves, and men, and keeps the "One Ring to rule them all" (*Fellowship IV*). When the one ring is taken from him, he is defeated. To gain his mastery back, Sauran has to get hold of The Ring. Yet Tolkien's trilogy enjoys a more complicated plot, considering that, maintaining the peace relies not on Sauran's quest to win the ring back, but on Frodo's to destroy it. For the ring to be destroyed, Frodo, like Odin, has to enter the darkest place of his world, Mordor.

Conclusion

No work happens in a vacuum, a combination of what the writer is subject to, what he witnesses, and his personal interests, alongside his abilities defines the result of his imagination. In Tolkien's case, his personal interests go hand in hand with his academic experiences to give his writings a Nordic touch. The effect is present in his choice of creatures, which are either borrowed from the mythology, or are highly Northernised, as well as personalities that reflect one or several famous Nordic characters. Some of his most famous themes and motives do also seem to belong to the Icelandic sagas. Therefore, the evident influence of such famous Nordic works as the *Prose and the Poetic Edda*, *Völsunga Saga*, and *Beowulf* causes *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* to be in accord with Scandinavian, rather than any other culture. Though, not mentioned in the paper, many scholars believe that despite the Nordic surface of his writings, Tolkien's works are Catholic at heart. This makes his works, which already resemble lots of *Beowulf's* features, more similar to the epic, and puts him in a similar position to its anonymous poet, who is believed to be a man of God, fascinated by the pagan world of his ancestors. Since the area is almost left untouched, an investigation of different aspects of these similarities might be desirable.

Notes

1. Since several literary forms, like novel, saga, and epic have been attributed to Tolkien's writings, words like "writings", and "works" have been used to avoid labelling them as a particular one.
2. Since the epic *Beowulf* is set in Scandinavia (it tells the story of Geats and Danes, modern Swedish and Danish people), it is believed that the poem, though being known as the first English epic, is actually Scandinavian. Therefore, the present paper, has treated it as a Norse work.
3. In accord with Tolkien's own practice, the first letter of the fantasy race names, has not been capitalized.
4. The History of Several Ancient Kings of Denmark and Sweden.

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