

Correspondence

Orcneas and 'barrow-wights'

Dear Gramarye,

I've much enjoyed *Gramarye* 7 (Summer 2015), and a couple of points occur to me which I'd like to pass on.

Jane Carroll may be glad to hear that the passage from *The Folklore of Discworld* which she quotes on p.13 of her excellent article ('No other place . . . a hymn to a time and a landscape') is not my speculation but the actual words of Pratchett himself. I had the good sense to keep a copy of my solo drafts of the chapters of this book, so that when I can't remember who wrote what, I have a way of checking which were the bits Terry added.

I was also very interested to learn from Tom Shippey that Tolkien in his commentary on *Beowulf* identified *orcneas* with 'barrow-wights'. This implies that he took *ne*, 'corpse', to be the main element in the word, and *orc-* as a qualifier meaning 'of or from the Underworld'. This fits the normal rules governing compound words, but raises a logical problem, for the line in *Beowulf* appears to present giants, elves and *orcneas* as three races or species, genetically related by descent from Cain. But can one really classify barrow-wights (Icelandic *draugar*) as a non-human *race*? Surely they are simply humans who have

died individually, but who can emerge, individually, from their graves? The alternative is to take *orc* as the main element ('deathly creature', 'hellish creature'), and assume the 'corpse' is more loosely associated, possibly as its prey. This is how Tolkien represents orcs in *The Lord of the Rings*, where they are a race of super-goblins created by a magician to be an army; they are carrion-eaters, devouring any kind of flesh, including humans, and perhaps even one another.

So, which did he really think?

Jacqueline Simpson

Dear Prof. Simpson,

Briefly, I think line 112 caused Tolkien quite a lot of uncertainty, perhaps anxiety. One thing is that it associates *ylfe* and *orc* ... as if the two were much of a muchness, and also identifies *ylfe* as of the race of Cain, among the *untydras*, the misbegotten. With his elf-fascination, Tolkien clearly didn't like that. In his translation he gives the line as 'ogres and goblins and haunting shapes of hell' – so the elves have become 'goblins', either to save their reputation or maybe to save the *Beowulf*-poet's.

Tolkien was, however, familiar with people getting things wrong. In English

we have 'The Little Elves and the Shoemaker', where the *Wichtelmänner* have become elves – J.K. Rowling seems to have stuck with this idea. I think Tolkien's really major innovation was his decision to take Snorri's 'light' and 'dark' elves and explain them as nothing to do with skin colour, but meaning 'those have seen / not seen the light' (i.e. of the Trees). So Snorri got it wrong, the translators of Grimm got it wrong, maybe the *Beowulf*-poet got it wrong too – unless the lines were an interpolation, which was Tolkien's explanation of the devil-worship passage a few lines later.

So if the poet got it wrong about the elves, maybe he felt no need to be consistent about the other 'misbegotten', tarring all these vaguely spooky creatures with the same brush. But it's also not quite certain that Tolkien thought *orcneas* were *draugar*. In his commentary he notes the connection with Gothic and Norse words for 'corpse', and comments that these are what he called 'barrow-wights', 'Those dreadful creatures that inhabit tombs and mounds.'

However, they are not necessarily (for Tolkien) the animated corpses of those who lie in the barrows, or rather, the animation may not come from the spirits which once animated the corpses, but from something or other that comes in from outside. In the *Lord of the Rings* passage, it seems that the people for whom the barrows were made were the enemies of Carn Dum, remembered and regretted by Bombadil. The wight is something else. That makes Tolkien's

wights, if I understand it correctly, not the same as *draugar*, which really are the dead come back stronger and more malevolent.

Tolkien, however, does instance Glamr as a case in point, and Glamr is a *draugr*. It might have been more consistent if he had instanced whatever the strange creature was which Glamr defeated before death.

Probably Tolkien's ultimate explanation would have been to say that with *Beowulf* we are at the end of a long chain of traditional belief, confused by the need to harmonise old beliefs with Christian cosmology: very valuable, but not necessarily logical or consistent. I think I once counted six different attempts to explain the origins of the 'hidden people', from seed of Cain to unwashed children of Eve, neutral angels, children of Ham ...

I think therefore that line 112 was for Tolkien more of a spur to imagination than an answer that could be relied on. He was certainly reluctant to accept its implications.

Tolkien was also someone who was forever changing his mind, not least about orcs, and the translation recently published dates back (Christopher thinks) to 1926, though Tolkien continued to lecture on the poem for another 30 years.

I'm sorry that that is the best answer I can come up with!

Best wishes,

Tom Shippey