J. R. R. Tolkien: The British and the Norse in Tension

Marjorie Burns
Portland State University

The most persistent argument against J. R. R. Tolkien's fiction is its moral simplicity, its tendency to follow firmly delineated lines of respectability and worth, its tendency to slip into what Diana Jones would call a "Goodies vs. Baddies story" (95-6). And certainly fantasy—freed, as it is, from "the domination of observed 'fact'" ("On Fairy-Stories" 47)—has a particular capacity for unequivocal characterization and moral certitude. Fantasists are more at liberty to fortify or justify their own brand of partialities; they can rig the game in ways less easily defended in other literary forms and more comfortably create a world where everything and everyone is clearly and properly in one camp or the other, where extremes of delineation in class, rank, and character are just as the author sees fit.

J. R. R. Tolkien's fiction seems unquestionably to have been created along these lines. It is not difficult to pick out Tolkien's likes and dislikes, his values and preferences, and his sense of who belongs where. This remains so even though there is more complexity to Tolkien than would at first appear evident in a fictional world where social and cultural roles are firmly specified and where creatures seem all too often to be created either unredeemably evil or unwaveringly good,[1] and where all the usual clues apply to mark the moral and hierarchical extremes: light and dark, ugly and fair, black and white, high and low, up and down (plus a few that are somewhat more peculiar to Tolkien: the superiority of North over South, West over East, and the unadorned over the ornate).

Even though this emphasis on opposition and dissimilarity persists throughout *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, it is important to realize that a good number of Tolkien's contrasting viewpoints are not easily divided into absolute good or bad. Tolkien, often enough, finds himself drawn to more than one opposing quality or trait, more than one culture or attitude. At times he seems comfortable with multiplicity; at other moments, however, he fluctuates, sometimes defending, sometimes rejecting one or another view. So it is that Tolkien, for example, both rejects and makes use of allegory, both scorns and reveres the Celts, both laments and idealizes the pagan. This doubleness or, to borrow Clyde S. Kilby's clever coinage, "contrasistency" (Preface) is characteristic of Tolkien throughout his literature and particularly noticeable in his complex approach to tradition and change, or in the tension between forest and garden, home and wayside, comradeship and solitude, risk and security, freedom and obligation—all of which appear as tensions in the character and story of the skin-changer, Beorn.

It is the last one, however, the tension between freedom and obligation, that runs most strongly through Tolkien's literature and which is subtly but indicatively reflected in Beorn. Though Tolkien is greatly attracted to the loner, to independence of thought, and to singularity (qualities closely associated with the Viking North), he is equally committed to the English world, to kingship and inheritance, to ritual and the idea that blood will tell. Tolkien, in spite of the German ancestry of his name, saw himself as fully English; with this and a strong Catholic upbringing behind him, it is not surprising that inherited rule and divine decree form a basis of his ideal and that sovereignty, stewardship, and allegiance—particularly evident throughout *The Lord of the Rings*—culminate in that final, triumphant volume, entitled *The Return of the King*.

And yet the greatest evil in Tolkien's view is "possessiveness," a sin which includes simple materialism as well as domination, enslavement, and arbitrary control; and these, of course, are qualities which may be as manifest in those who inherit power as in those who acquire it by force, stealth, or deception.

In part, however, it is this very complexity, this tension between differing beliefs, cultures, or ideals, that saves Tolkien from the triteness of his imitators. Tolkien may create extremes based on an exaggerated view of types or characteristics, but the conflict he creates between extremes is played out in so many directions and in so many forms and in such varying combinations and on so many levels that Tolkien's world remains intriguing and intricate at the same time it is simplified and accentuated to highlight principal themes.

I began by saying that Tolkien is often criticized for dividing his characters into a too easily recognizable evil and good. And, true enough, we tend to prefer those Tolkien characters who appear to be exceptions to this rule, those individuals who initially, at least, suggest a moral complexity, characters such as Strider, Fangorn, or Beorn, who fall on the side of the good but who exhibit an aura of risk. Most often, however, Tolkien adds complexity to his characters not so much by hints of a darker side but by his habit of intermingling qualities or beliefs drawn from more than one literary tradition or from more than one cultural base. Since Tolkien, for example, values both independence and dependence (both the freedom of the Viking North and the social constraints of England), a number of his characters exhibit both extremes. Usually these are individuals who display exceptional self-sufficiency and freedom of choice but who are equally capable of devoting themselves to a cause, when the need or time is right. Obvious examples are Tolkien's singular stewards and guardians (men or wizards), his Robin Hood "outlaw" figures (English and rebellious at once), and those who prefer seclusion in isolated homes or halls—all those who live apart or travel apart and yet belong to the good. To a lesser extent the "bachelor" figures of Bilbo and Frodo belong to this type as well, as does Sam, in a modified servant-class way. These are individuals who more or less differ from others of their kind,

who suffer from a certain poetic sensitivity and who live (like the characters in *The Wind in the Willows*) free from familial restraints. Through temperament and availability, these are the singled-out hobbits, men, wizards, elves, and dwarfs who qualify for the quest, an undertaking which, interestingly enough, requires both freedom and restraint combined.

The most striking of Tolkien's individuals, however, are his innate, one-of-a-kind loners, the honorable isolationists, who dwell in secluded domains and who are presented as being distinctive, free, self-reliant but respectful of other lives and hostile only to those deserving hostility. They are, in order of appearance, Beorn, both man and bear, "appalling" when angry, though "kind enough if humoured" (*Hobbit* 102); Tom Bombadil, childlike, blithe, and, innocent of a large or consistent, world-view; and Treebeard, ponderous and pondering, righteous and tenderhearted. Each is unique, and yet each, while initially appearing either basically Nordic or basically English, is the result of a complex mixture of traditions, literatures, and characteristics familiar to Tolkien with his background in Old English, Icelandic, German, Finnish, and Welsh. A sense of the "good pagan," an ideal which runs throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, is strongest with these characters as well, though Christianity (or at least its values) is never fully absent in anything Tolkien creates to exemplify the good. Where the setting seems more Nordic (that is, either generally Teutonic or specifically Scandinavian), this pagan element is particularly pronounced; where a softer, more English climate prevails, Christian values are more likely to occur.

Of these three lone and singular characters, Beorn is the one who most neatly exemplifies Tolkien's particular pattern of complexity; he is the one who best illustrates the tensions and cultural intricacies at work in Tolkien's "sub-creation" ("On Fairy-Stories" 22-3), though, at first reading, Beorn's character—and the traditions that lie behind it —appear to be simple enough. He is, after all, a character in *The Hobbit*, where the tone is far more elementary than it is in *The Lord of the Rings* and where explanations and details are less likely to occur. But there are complexities and even contradictions connected with Beorn; and these, for the most part, hinge on those previously mentioned dichotomies: North/South, East/West, freedom and obligation, forest and garden, home and wayside, risk and security. Directional tension, for example, exists in the journey itself. The party (consisting of Bilbo, Gandalf, and the dwarfs) reaches Beorn's isolated lodgings by traveling from Middle-earth's civilized and idealized West into the dangers of North and East, directions that, in Tolkien's mind and in Norse tradition, are always suggestive of risk. There is as well, within the character of Beorn, a Nordic/English tension of considerable complexity. Though Beorn is primarily drawn from a Viking model and is given a Viking hall, Shire-like qualities also play their part, as do hierarchical and elitist elements that contrast with the primary image of independence and Northern solitude. And, of course, the bear/man, Beorn himself, is a double character, with some overlapping of traits—he is rough and alarming, even when shaped like a man,

outright dangerous when wearing the shape of a bear, and committed to justice (admittedly harsh) in either outward form.

Our first impression is that Beorn, the skin-changer, belongs unquestionably to a Norse and pagan world. His homestead (in the northern regions of Middle-earth), his name, his appearance, his attachment to nature and revenge link him to the sagas, but there are softer, more civilized aspects to him as well, aspects which are not specifically English or Christian but which suggest some elements of both. He neither hunts nor eats other animals but "lives most on cream and honey" (103). He uses no metal (in other words, no weaponry) except in the occasional household knife where exceptions must be made. His garden is full of flowers, in an English countryside way. Home seems all important and carefully maintained. And yet, of course, it is Beorn who ranges great distances by night and who returns from his private, ursine raid "in a splendidly good humour" (115), having stuck a goblin's head on the outside of the gate and nailed a warg's skin on a tree (a nasty but Nordic stunt). He is, then, in the best Tolkienian tradition, a being of two extremes: both ruthless and kind, a bear and man, a homebody and wanderer, a berserker and pacifist in one.

This doubleness, this blending of the civilized English with the far more willful Nordic, is by no means Tolkien's invention. English literature has exhibited a persistent Nordic undertone from the Anglo-Saxon period onward. Though time and new outside influence (most significantly the Norman Conquest) have softened England's Nordic disposition, it has never been fully dislodged. And those English literary works which most influenced Tolkien and which contributed specifically to the character of Beorn are works in which the appeal of the North (the appeal of the not fully civilized) can easily be discerned. There is much about Beorn, for example, that is suggestive of Bertilak in the fourteenth-century, Middle English *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Both works take their heroes away from order and civilization (Camelot and the Shire) and thrust them into a northern world of risk and transfiguration. Gawain's first encounter with Bertilak, like Bilbo's with Beorn, is marked by a Nordic vitality and a saga magnitude.

> Gawain gazed at the good man who had greeted him kindly,
> and he thought bold and big was the baron of the castle,
> very large and long, and his life at the prime:
> broad and bright was his beard, and all beaver-hued,
> stern, strong in his stance upon stalwart legs,
> his face fell as fire, and frank in his speech. (46)

Like Bertilak, the grim and outspoken Beorn lives in an isolated, oak-wood. Where Bertilak has a castle, Beorn has "a great wooden house," and we see him first standing before the hobbit, "a huge man with a thick black beard and hair, and great bare arms and legs with knotted muscles" (103-4). Bertilak too is a changer of shape (as well as a changer of hue); and though he practices Christian

formalities and Christian curtesies and speaks in the name of God, he, like Beorn, has a ruggedness and stature more appropriate to pagan nature than the halls of Camelot or the burrows of the Shire.

In both works, the journeys northward—into the wilds of Wales or Middle-earth—are fraught with the sort of troubling encounters one expects from the Nordic pagan world, though what is merely a listing of skirmishes in the earlier, Arthurian tale appears again and again throughout *The Hobbit*, as well as *The Lord of the Rings*, in more fully developed forms.

> Many a cliff [Gawain] climbed o'er in countries unknown,
> far fled from his friends without fellowship he rode.
> At every wading or water on the way that he passed
> he found a foe before him, save at few for a wonder;
> and so foul were they and fell that fight he must needs.
> So many a marvel in the mountains he met in those lands
> that t'would be tedious the tenth part to tell you therof.
> At whiles with wormes he wars, and with wolves also,
> at while with wood-trolls that wandered in the crags,
> and with bulls and with bears and boars, too, at times;
> and with ogres that hounded him from the heights of the fells. (42-8)

Northern literature influenced *Sir Gawain*; *Sir Gawain* in turn left its mark on Beorn, a perfect example of that literary cross-fertilization which Tolkien refers to as "soup" ("On Fairy-Stories" 20, 26-8). As a philologist, as an expert in several languages and literatures, he was well aware that themes and motifs are exempt from border control and that all good stories are the result of plots and ideas that have been borrowed and rearranged since story-telling began. Though Beorn, in his ferocity and stature, may appear to be most consistently based on Norse convention, he has been filtered through English literature and placed in a modified setting where the Norse and English combine, all which brings him more in line with England itself and hence in line with Tolkien's concept of a Middle-earth based on components of ancient Northwestern Europe and Britain brought together as one.[2]

Consider the use of the oak-woods which surround Bertilak and Beorn. In *Gawain* the feeling given by these woods is entirely druidic and suggestive of that particular otherworldliness that appears in Celtic tales or in the Celtic-based Arthurian tales. But the oak has a broader significance and thereby neatly serves as a common denominator for Tolkien's synthesized Middle-earth. The oak existed in ancient forests in England, Scandinavia and Northwestern Europe and was sacred there, as well as in Iceland (though trees there are rarer and less impressive in size and the concept in Iceland may therefore have been imported). In particular, the oak was sacred to Thor, in his role as god of the sky; it bears, as well, the mistletoe, which lives mysteriously between earth and air and which was considered the most holy of all plants in early European belief. It was, we should remember, a shaft of mistletoe that slew the otherwise invincible Balder.

But borrowings from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and references to the uniting prevalence of the oak or to common English, European, and Scandinavian beliefs are not the only English/Norse ingredients which Tolkien drew upon when he came to shaping Beorn. The influence of *Beowulf* (written in Old English, most likely in the first half of the eighth century) is strongly there as well. Where *Gawain* is only partially Northern in its outward Journey into a harsh, cold pagan nature, replete with trolls, worms, ogres, wolves, and wildmen, the earlier *Beowulf* is unrelentingly Northern—brutal, cold, heroic, and severe. Its influence on *The Hobbit* (which shows an obvious borrowing of monsters, dragons, dragon hoards, and a dragon's stolen cup) has been thoroughly described in Tolkien criticism before, but what is less frequently mentioned are specific character similarities that link Beowulf and Beorn.

Like Beorn, Beowulf suggests a shifting or doubleness of form and character, though not so much—in Beowulf's case—through specific actions as through suggestions of such doubleness in his name. "Beowulf," in its literal translation, means "bee-wolf"; and, through the vagaries of medieval "kenning" (a form of metaphorical naming), "bee-wolf" stands for the one who eats honey and therefore represents the "bear," or, in its Old English form, "beorn." It is for this reason that Tolkien, in his essay "On Fairy-Stories," refers to the young Beowulf as "the bear-boy" (29). And thus we have Tolkien's Beorn, who himself is a producer and eater of honey as well as a great and fearless opponent when the battle urge is on him. Like Beowulf, he returns with dismembered pieces of his enemies and displays the grisly remains. He is, in fact, a berserker, (or "bearshirter," neatly enough).[3] But "beorn" is also an Old English heroic word for "man." (Compare the present-day tribute, "He's a real tiger.") And what we get, then, is Beorn the skin-changer, an almost domesticated individual, a pacifist and bee-keeper, settled in the midst of rather English-sounding flower fields and gardens but who is at the same time a figure of brutal strength and violence, belonging to a more ancient, Northern and carnivorous world and living in a Norseman's hall.

In fact, if one were to draw concentric circles, with this hall or lodge as the central point, rings of mixed English and Nordic characteristics emerge. Outside the low-lying, Nordic, wooden hall, with its open fire hole in the roof, lies the courtyard with its Shire-like flower garden coming "right up to the steps"(106). Beyond the courtyard is the wider yard, patterned after the Scandinavian *gaard*, with its traditional cluster of surrounding outer buildings, "barns, stables, sheds," all enclosed by a "high thorn-hedge" (reminiscent of early English protective techniques). This then is itself surrounded by a "belt of tall and very ancient oaks" (104) of a size and antiquity perhaps more appropriate to England's fertile soil than the colder more barren North—but nonetheless suitable to both. Here as well lie flower fields established for the bees, "all the same kinds growing together as if they had been planted," mostly clover: purple clover, cockscomb clover, and

"short white sweet honey-smelling clover" (103). Further out, beyond this last indication of Shire-like horticulture, lie hilly slopes and dales with oak and elm trees in a distribution again more mindful of England than regions farther north, though here also are "wide grass-lands, and a river running through it all" (100) on a scale that seems truer to Iceland than anything England can claim. Beyond this are the mountains, Northern in their looming, bleak inhospitality and Norse in their goblin Mountain King.

Often, in Tolkien's writings, terrain alone is enough to establish character or intent. And, indeed, the extremes of terrain displayed in the chapter on Beorn do much to establish who he is. We are, to tell the truth, given few specific facts about Beorn in *The Hobbit*, little more than what is described or explained while the party stays in his hall. Tolkien, who often enough supplies long histories for his key characters (the better to place and explain who they are in an English and establishment way), wisely leaves us with uncertainty when it comes to defining Beorn. Clearly he has a past and one that entails a defeat, for Gandalf has heard him mutter to himself, on his lone and mountainous Carrock, "The day will come when they will perish and I shall go back!" (103). But this and other peculiarities remain unexplained. "Why is it called the Carrock?" Bilbo asks. Because, says Gandalf, that "is his word for it" (102).[4] Nor is the skin-changer's name given at first. "He" or "*somebody*," "that Somebody," "the Somebody" is all we are told at the start.

Tolkien brings Beorn back, an enigma to the end, for an encore at the Battle of Five Armies, "alone, and in bear's shape," appearing "no one knew how or from where" and wrecking great havoc on goblins and wolves alike (244). Though we hear that Beorn later "became a great chief" in his region (248) and that he had many descendants, we are not shown him in a family setting or in a voluntarily social state; what is emphasized, instead, is his wish to be left alone. ("He never invited people into his house, if he could help it," 110). The closest we come to an image of neighborly hospitality, in connection with Beorn, is brief mention of Yule-tide feasting held in his house on Bilbo's journey home.[5] But more than anything this is feast of good fellowship, a Beowulf mead hall event, a Valhalla après-battle celebration, and not a domestic affair. His is the masculine world typical of Anglo-Saxon and Norse literature, a world that suffers little or no female intrusion, a far cry from Camelot. But descendants, the Beornings, appear; so somewhere a mating occurs.

There is an interesting note to these descendants of Beorn. In *The Hobbit* at least, they are divided into two opposing categories, just as Beorn himself is divided into more than one character type. "Some were grim men and bad," we are told, "but most were in heart like Beorn" (248). Such a splitting into opposing characteristics has its parallels in the Norse sagas, where children are not infrequently defined by similar polarities. A particularly striking example comes from the *Saga of Egill Skallagrímsson*, where, as T. A. Shippey points out (198),

the skin-changing ability of Kveld-Úlfr (Evening-Wolf), is remarkably close to that of Beorn. But, more than this, the fate of the two skin-changers' offspring is also much the same. In each generation, descending from Kveld-Úlfr, there is one son who is handsome and pleasant and one who is ugly, disagreeable, and greedy; so too the Beornings, who divide into evil and good.

Skin-changing is by no means limited to Norse sagas or to Loki's or Odin's Eddaic abilities to take on other forms. The Celts and Teutonics in general all have their tales of those who can shift appearance and acquire the capabilities (wisdom or strength) of animals or fish or birds. And these shared concepts about shape-changing, like those shared beliefs associated with the oak, all help draw qualities of Britain, Northwestern Europe, and Scandinavia together in the manner Tolkien desired for the creation of his Middle-earth. Nonetheless, Beorn's skin-changing, belongs more clearly to the Nordic berserker tradition than to other forms of the feat. Celtic seal woman stories or accounts of journeys in the shape of a deer or horse (during shamanistic quests for wisdom contained in other forms) carry a sense of unworldly enchantment which differs from the more purposeful, warlike, and carnal experience we see in Beorn or Kveld-Úlfr or Bjarki ("little bear") from the *Saga of Hrólfr Kraki.*

Given the saga-like quality of his shape-changing, given his Norseman's hall, his stature and boastful confidence and his pagan sense of revenge, Beorn above all seems Nordic. Rather than the fixed social order or hierarchy of the more developed English and Arthurian world (evident and idealized elsewhere in Middle-earth) or the carefully structured system behind Tolkien's *Silmarillion* (with its concern for order and degree), here in Beorn we seem to have the epitome of the independent man, the exemplary, admirable pagan. Beorn remains in our minds (in spite of some English mollification) the symbol of the Nordic ideal—grim, independent, expecting no good from the world, expecting no saving grace, loyal to those deserving, and, most telling of all, "under no enchantment but his own" (103). This last, this fierce and uncompromising self-containment, this mastery of his own magic and acknowledgment of no other power, is very Norse indeed.

In the Icelandic sagas there is a commonplace question and a commonplace response which Shippey, in *The Road to Middle-earth* (62), emphasizes to illustrate the Nordic code of independence, self-aggrandizement, and courage. The question is: "In what do you believe?" The answer: "I believe in myself," (Ek trúi á sjálfan mik). Beorn, with all his suspicion, his night forages to check on Gandalf's tale, his self-made Norse *sted* (as in the English "homestead"), and his single-handed/single-pawed, battle represents the ideal Nordic hero and demonstrates what Tolkien refers to as the Northern "theory of courage" ("*Beowulf*" 262).

And yet there are complications in the picture of Beorn that compromise this ideal, complications that conflict with the image of self-reliance and Northern solitude; and these bring Beorn more in line with Tolkien's English views.

Full independence depends upon isolation; when isolation is compromised, independence is as well. The ideal that Tolkien emphasizes in Beorn is the ideal of the lone and capable man, the hero facing life with nothing to trust but himself. For all we know Beorn is a single example of a one member species (a *lusus naturae*, to use the Latin term), and what could be more isolating than such singularity? But, in fact, something is amiss. Beorn, the isolated Norseman, is neither truly alone nor truly self-sufficient. He has around him an entourage of servants, easy to disregard in their farm animal forms—ponies, dogs, sheep that serve him silently and intelligently, setting tables, carrying in food, and no doubt washing up after meals.

> Beorn clapped his hands, and in trotted four beautiful white ponies and several large long-bodied grey dogs. Beorn said something to them in a queer language like animal noises turned into talk. They went out again and soon came back carrying torches in their mouths, which they lit at the fire and stuck in low brackets on the pillars of the hall about the central hearth. The dogs could stand on their hind-legs when they wished, and carry things with their fore-feet. Quickly they got out boards and trestles from the side walls and set them up near the fire. (110-11)

The question, of course, is how we ought to judge this form of servant labor in context of the independent man. The ancient Norse had their serf class, descended, the story goes, from Thrall, the lowest and least valued of Heimdall's three earthborn sons. Ugly, twisted but strong, Thrall and his equally unattractive children are the people destined for labor, for the cutting and hauling of wood, for digging, for herding goats and pigs, and for the spreading of dung in fields. But Beorn's clean, willing, animal servants are not the picture of thralls but rather something far more class oriented in a familiar, English way. They are, in fact, closer to personal or house servants, from what we see, and ones of a very exceptional kind. Like Sam, in his devotion to Frodo, these are willing attendants, born, one feels, to their role and protective of their position.

This is invariably the case with Tolkien. His ideal independent figures are always somehow sovereign, and the solitude they experience is strongly bound to class. Beorn is mostly alone in the sense that he has no equals within his small society. So too Tom Bombadil is called "the Master" and Treebeard has his ents. These are the beings who are most free in Tolkien's structured world, but the freedom they experience is limited in kind. Beorn's animal servants, like all of Tolkien's more plentiful subject folk, are not quite so free as those they are subject to, not quite so free of someone else's enchantment, a privilege reserved for the top.

Tolkien's answer, of course, is knowing your place, as Beorn's animals do. Who else should be their master but this skin-changer, a being who remains both in the animal world and rises above it to rule, like Adam, the creatures of his domain? We feel the fittingness of Beorn in his solitary governing role; we are impressed by his strength and extraordinary powers and by the ability he has to claim existence in both the human and the animal world, and it is only on reflection (a risky business at times) that we sense more than one message here. Tolkien, for all his emphasis on Nordic independence, on freedom and free will and the call of the open road, always returns, one way or another, to an English view of things, to all those established roles that ultimately reinforce an English belief in class, inherited status, and a sense of knowing where you and your kind belong.

NOTES

[1] Rightly so, Tolkien claims, since "romance" arose out of "allegory": and in allegory's "inner wars," the "good is on one side and various modes of badness on the other. In real (exterior) life men are on both sides: which means a motley alliance of orcs, beasts, demons, plain naturally honest men, and angels" (*Letters* 82).

[2] See *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* (144).

[3] See Davidson's *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe* for additional accounts of totemic identification with bears or wolves among Nordic warriors and for similar traditions existing among the Celts (80-1).

[4] Here lies another indirect mingling of Norse and British effects since Beorn's one-of-a-kind "Carrock," with all its bleak and Nordic features, is not really an invented term, as Gandalf's answer suggests, but comes instead from *carrecc*, a Celtic word meaning "rock."

[5] Yule was originally a Viking mid-winter feast (one which came to be associated with Christmas and the birth of Christ after Christianity arrived). This mid-winter gathering therefore offers yet another example of how Tolkien blends English and Nordic, Christian and pagan, beliefs.

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