

## THE HEROIC PROFILE OF BILBO BAGGINS

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As a fairy tale, *The Hobbit* lacks nothing. Bilbo, while not exactly a stepchild, is a "Took-Baggins" and not a "Sackville-Baggins," ergo he is not quite respectable. The greedy behaviour of the Sackville-Bagginses at the conclusion of *The Hobbit* also supports their identity as wicked step-siblings. Bilbo's mother, "the fabulous Belladonna Took," is only a name in the background, like the lost, beloved mother of a fairy tale orphan. One day, this ordinary fellow, whose only skills are accuracy in stone-throwing and silence in running and walking, is chosen by a sort of fairy god-father to "go out into the world and seek his fortune."

Like the fairy tale youth, Bilbo receives help from magical figures, even when he hasn't "earned" it. Gandalf rescues him from the trolls, the eagles rescue him from the goblins, and Beorn gives comfort and refuge. Even the thrush which calls his attention to Smaug's "back door" is typical of bird-messengers in fairy tales.

Typical, too, are the "magical implements" he receives: a ring and a sword with supernatural properties. It does not matter, of course, that these items are acquired in a less than legitimate fashion. Fairy tale heroes are allowed to take unfair advantage of evil people, because it is so easy for the listener or reader to recognize them as evil, and to agree that the "good" hero or heroine incurs no guilt by doing a bad turn to bad people.

Regarded in another way, the trolls and Gollum are not merely "people," but are the supernatural monsters the hero must meet along his way, as are also the spiders and Smaug. Bilbo's "luck" and his magical helpers and implements help him overcome each of these opponents in one way or another.

In a fairy tale, the hero reaches the goal of his journey, confronts the ultimate danger, wins the day by dint of his pure heart, and lives happily and wealthy ever after. Just so, Bilbo confronts and confounds Smaug, achieves the beginnings of reconciliation between men, elves, and dwarves by giving up the Arkenstone, and goes home with enough treasure to last him his life-time.

Superficially, this could hardly be a more typical combination of fairy tale motifs and figures. Fairy tale motifs and types, however, while they often resemble those of mythology, are without the specific cultural frame of reference. They are, so to speak, adrift in a sea of universal morality. Not so *The Hobbit*. It has more than a fairy tale message about Good and Evil. It speaks far more specifically of varieties of courage, fear, glory, and degradation. Furthermore, as students of Tolkien have pointed out, there is abundant evidence that Tolkien has adapted figures and motifs from Germanic, Celtic, and Finnish myth and heroic epic to his own uses.<sup>1</sup> I propose, by noting some of the names not yet analyzed and some of the characteristics thus far ignored or misinterpreted to show that Bilbo Baggins satisfactorily fills the classic heroic profile, and therefore that his larger-than-life experiences can be taken as a vindication of the values and ideals of his society, just as those of Sigurd, Beowulf, Cúchulainn, and Arthur.

I begin with Bilbo's family tree: his mother was Belladonna Took and his maternal grandfather was the old Took of the Water and the Hill, whose great-grand-uncle, Bullroarer, killed the goblin king, Golfimbul.<sup>2</sup>

"Belladonna," of course, aside from meaning "beautiful lady" or "fine lady," is also the Latin name of the plant "Deadly Nightshade," *atropa belladonna*. In controlled doses, the atropine derivative of this plant may be a narcotic and a medication against pain and spasm. In larger amounts, it is a deadly poison. All this is reminiscent of the "adventurous" side of the Tooks, which leads to enjoyable excursions but, in the case of Frodo and Bilbo, also to a fatal contact with the ring. We are also told that one of the Tooks may have "taken a fairy wife," and this fits with the fact that *atropa belladonna* was commonly associated with Hecate and with witches in general.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the "fabulous Belladonna," Bilbo's connection to the Otherworld, is the only woman even mentioned in *The Hobbit*. No fairy tale princess to win, no queen to please, not even a lusty wench to teach our hero the facts of life! Belladonna Took hovers alone in the background of *The Hobbit*, the sole representative of those fearsome, otherworldly women who are so important to Northern mythologies: the Germanic Valkyries, Kriemhild, and Hel; the Celtic Morrigan, Medb (Maeve), Scathach, Rhiannon, and Gwynhyafar (Guinevere). As the old woman or fairy godmother may serve to designate a fairy tale hero or heroine as unusual or blessed by luck, so these mythological figures -- especially in Celtic tradition -- symbolize the good or ill fortune of the mythological hero. Some, like Rhiannon, Medb, and Gwynhyafar are even taken to symbolize the chthonic goddesses. Their union with heroes or gods like Lugh, Arthur, and others is taken to be a metaphor for the union of sky god and earth goddess and, as such, also a sign of political sovereignty.<sup>4</sup>

The presence of Belladonna is supplemented by Tolkien's description of the area around Bag-End. It is not "Mount Hobbit" and "Bag-End Brook," or the like, but simply The Water and The Hill. These terms are so general that Tolkien even inserts a phrase (on p. 16) to explain that The Water is a small river. "Bag-End" itself, of course, is a literal translation of cul-de-sac -- "dead end" -- an appropriate description of Bilbo's middle-class rut before Gandalf arrives. "Under Hill," on the other hand, is an indicator in the opposite direction. In both fairy tales and mythology, hills, mounds, mountains, and so forth, are significant entrances to the Otherworld. The apparently prosaic Bilbo, therefore, not only has a fairy in his family tree, but also has his residence at the accepted threshold to the chthonic Underworld -- the underworld he will be asked to penetrate to find its treasures, much as did King Arthur and Gwydion before him.

While Belladonna's given name emphasizes supernatural connections, her family name suggests heroic action. "Took" may be related through a hypothetical old Germanic form, *tukk*, to "tuck."<sup>5</sup> "Tuck" (which occurs in Scots dialect as "Took"!)<sup>6</sup> is a word once current in English, French, German, and Italian -- probably originally Italian -- meaning "rapier." The significance of this meaning will be clear to those who already know that "Bilbo," a word of Spanish origin and found in Shakespeare as well as elsewhere, also means "sword." And, of course, one hallmark of Bilbo's confrontation with Gollum and with the spiders is his possession of "Sting," his own magically endowed sword.

A second meaning of "tuck" in older English documents is "blow," or "strike," e.g., "he delivered a mighty touk . . . ." This meaning, too, reminds us of Bilbo's activities with "Sting."

As to great-uncle Bullroarer, his name does not evoke direct associations with mediaeval mythological documents. Rather, he confirms the magic of the family by bearing a name that describes a semi-musical instrument used by primitive peoples on sacred occasions such as circumcision rites.

The name of Bullroarer's opponent, "Golfimbul," is cleverly disguised by Tolkien's pun on "golf," but its actual components are *Gol* and *fimbul*. *Fimbul* occurs in two well-known combinations in mythological documents from Iceland: *fimbulvetr* or *fimbulvintr* -- the "terrible winter" which will precede the destruction of the world, according to the Voluspa of the *Poetic Edda* -- and *fimbulthul*, a river which flows into a well in Niflheim, the Nordic hell, a wasteland of ice and snow. In the first combination, *fimbul* probably means "terrible" or "awful" and in the second, "loud" or "noisy."

*Gol*, if it derives from the Germanic tradition, would probably mean "gold" or "fool" (as in the older English term "gull").<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, both Cúchulainn and Finn in Irish tradition meet powerful opponents named *Goll* or *Gol*. This name, we find, means one-eyed.<sup>8</sup> Considering the penchant of Gaelic mythological literature for chthonic figures who display various physical disabilities and grotesqueries, the Gaelic *Gol* probably signifies a monstrous, chthonic opponent to the gods.

Combining the two Germanic (Iceland and English) forms, therefore, we get something like "terrible fool," the kind of pun that might well have appealed to Tolkien. Combining the Gaelic *gol* with the Germanic *fimbul*, on the other hand, we may get "terrible one-eye," or even "one-eyed loudmouth," either one of which would be appropriate for a king of the highly unattractive and objectionable goblins.

Thus the introductory paragraphs of *The Hobbit* offer a tantalizing hint of Bilbo's special status. The subsequent appearance of Gandalf is not a hint but an unmistakable statement. Water, of course, has much the same significance as a pathway to the Otherworld as do mounds, hills, and the like,<sup>9</sup> so being "over the Hill and across the Water" as Gandalf has is a double-barreled allusion to the Otherworld. The wizard, whose name as used in Snorri's *Edda* means "magic elf," has been compared with both Arthur's Merlin and the chief Norse god, Odin.<sup>10</sup> According to George Dumézil's ordering of gods and heroes in Germanic and Celtic mythology,<sup>11</sup> Gandalf clearly belongs to function I: priest-shaman. Like the typical function I

figure, Gandalf has access to secret knowledge, makes use of magic, is or becomes allied with certain natural forces or figures (e.g., Beorn and the Eagles), and may also fight like a warrior. He arrives during the season of the Germanic Wild Hunt -- a phenomenon associated with the storm-god Wuot, whose name may be one of the many names of Odin. It is also just before the Germanic Walpurgis Night or Witches' Sabbath and the Celtic high sacrifice of Beltaine or May Day, all of which marks him as a potent magical figure. His choosing of Bilbo extends this association to the hobbit.

Gandalf is very specific in his comments on Bilbo, as well as in the message of the rune he marks on Bilbo's door. Bilbo is a burglar. According to Rees and Rees's adaptation of Dumézil, therefore, Bilbo is "function IV" -- slave, outcast, criminal. With the magic powers he later acquires through the ring and the sword, he may be compared to Cúroí mac Dáiri, the wizard-king of the "outcast" province of Ireland -- Munster.

Burglary may seem a rather inappropriate occupation for a member of this significant expedition against the dragon, Smaug. We may, of course, accept Gandalf's word at face value: there aren't any heroes to be had at the moment. Or we may note that the ancient anthropomorphic gods -- who were capable of incest, lying, murder, and so on -- also became thieves and tricksters on occasion: young Hermes with Apollo's cattle, Odin's masquerading in order to steal the mead of poetry, Prometheus stealing fire from heaven, Coyote of American Indian legends doing the same, Loki and Thor using deceit to regain the thunder god's hammer, the Sons of Tuirreann cheating and plundering the Mediterranean with Gaelic panache.

All of this suggests a folkloric analogue for Bilbo: the so-called Trickster or Trickster-Provider figure, who is mischievous, sometimes even larcenous or cruel, but also capable of some good or beneficial acts. Paul Radin's Winnebago archetype of the figure, which Radin began in the 1920's and 1930's (i.e., when *The Hobbit* was being written), refers to himself as "Foolish One, Trickster."<sup>12</sup> The trickster is, in fact, sometimes arch-hero, sometimes arch-fool; sometimes a victim of his own ignorance or drives, sometimes the only one who can get at the Truth.<sup>13</sup> This "fool-hero" is both inferior and superior, sub-human and superhuman, and -- according to Jung -- "in picaresque tales, in carnivals and revels, in sacred and magical rites, . . . this phantom of a trickster haunts the mythology of all ages, sometimes in quite unmistakable form, sometimes in strangely modulated guise."<sup>14</sup>

I suggest that one such modulated guise in one such picaresque tale is Bilbo in *The Hobbit*. Inferior to the dwarves in stamina, obstinacy, and greed, but superior in stealth and trickery, it is Bilbo who routs and confounds the spiders in a series of vivid action scenes with obvious comic overtones. He is the "burrahobbit" caught and dropped by the trolls, as well as the architect of a plan which crams the self-consciously dignified dwarves into floating barrels and leaves himself outside, hanging on for dear life. Even his escapes from Gollum and the goblins and his conversations with Smaug are touched with burlesque. And in each of these actions, he entertains by tricking this one for the benefit of that one. Thus, the solid, bourgeois hobbit of the first chapter evolves into the accomplished burglar and trickster who brings the dwarves to their treasure.

Like the Celtic wizard-king of Munster, Bilbo is technically a criminal (burglar), but also the possessor of magical powers. He may discomfit even those he is helping, as does the Germanic Loki when he disguises Thor as the goddess Freya in order to regain his hammer. And, like the Finnish hero and mischief-maker, Lemminkäinen, he is an apparently common fellow who earns distinction through a special sword. Lemminkäinen might be speaking for Bilbo and "Sting" when he says:

"If I am not high descended  
Nor was born of noble lineage,  
Yet have I a sword of keenness,  
Gleaming brightly in the battle.  
This is surely high descended,  
And has come of noble lineage, . . .  
Thus am I so high descended,  
And I come of noblest lineage,  
With my sword so keenly sharpened  
Gleaming brightly in the battle."<sup>15</sup>

Such suggestive links to the Trickster figure offer some insight into Bilbo's apparently unflattering assignment as "burglar." But there is more to Bilbo than the burglar. Returning again to the opening of *The Hobbit*, we find Bilbo to be a comfortable, timid, wholly unprepossessing fellow ("He looks more like a grocer than a burglar," says Gloin) -- the last person in the world one would expect to perform heroic deeds. In this he is just like the hero of a fairy tale. In fact, he is also just like Osgar, mighty hero of the Gaelic Finn cycle, who was considered to be shiftless until a great

attack by an enemy upon the Fenians in which he single-handedly killed dozens of the enemy with a log. The Germanic Beowulf was also considered "lazy" in his youth. Bilbo is in very good company as a late-starter and unimpressive candidate for heroism.

Bilbo's sword also connects him to Celtic mythology. Unlike Glamdring and Orcrist, Bilbo's sword is unnamed until he gives it a name appropriate to what it has been doing: "Sting." Just so, Pryderi, the great Welsh hero, is named from a chance remark by his mother, and Cúchulainn, the great Gaelic hero, is named for a thing he has done.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Bilbo's sword lights up at the approach of goblins, just as Cúchulainn's shield moans when it is struck by an enemy of Ulster.<sup>17</sup> A further link is stone throwing. Bilbo's accuracy against the spiders is paralleled by Cúchulainn's accuracy with a sling; it also constitutes a parallel with Llew Llaw Gyffes, the Welsh analogue of and possible precursor to the Irish Cúchulainn. Llew is named for his ability to throw a stone accurately.<sup>18</sup>

The Celtic habit of naming heroes and weapons on the spur of the moment was based on a belief that such *ex tempore* inspirations had fateful significance, and were perhaps divinely caused.<sup>19</sup> It is interesting, to say the least, that the hero who carries "Sting" is himself named "Bilbo (sword) Took-(sword, blow)-Baggins" (off the beaten path, deviating from the rule).

Bilbo's sword may also echo the Germanic mythological hero. A simple and obvious comparison is the fact that it is a "named" weapon. The Germanic warrior was just as likely as the Celt to name his sword, spear, and so on. Thus, Beowulf's sword is "Nægling" and Sigurd's sword in the *Völsungasaga* is "Gram" (as in Mount Gram, scene of Bullroarer's triumph). It is also interesting that Beowulf, when confronted with Grendel's mother, finds his ordinary sword to be of no use and takes a "giant sword" (that is, one made by giants) off the wall.<sup>20</sup> Just as Beowulf uses a sword of special make that is fated for such a mighty hero, so, conversely, Bilbo does heroic things with a dagger so small that only a hobbit could call it a sword. And it, too, is of elvish make and very special.

Inverse relationship also occurs in the carrying away of treasure. After killing Fafnir, Sigurd carries away all of the treasure in two huge chests which only his horse, Grani, can carry.<sup>21</sup> After Smaug's death, Bilbo takes only two very small chests which can be carried by his own, very small pony.

Other parallels to Sigurd and Beowulf are so numerous that I can offer them as a list:

(1) Both Bilbo and Beowulf invade the Underworld and encounter a being who eats other creatures and carries the mark of Cain. In Grendel's case, the narrator tells us of this mark. In Gollum's case, we must deduce it from reading in *The Lord of the Rings* that he killed his brother.

(2) Sigurd receives a cape which makes him invisible. Bilbo gets a ring which does the same.

(3) Smaug, Fafnir, and the dragon at the end of *Beowulf* guard great treasures.

(4) All three of them have a weak underside. Sigurd plans his killing of Fafnir on knowledge of this weakness. Beowulf is helped by Wiglaf who "ignored the head and hit the attacker [dragon] somewhat below it."<sup>22</sup> Smaug is killed from below by an arrow.

(5) Bilbo's ring has great power, but has great influence for evil as well. The ring of Sigurd's and Fafnir's treasure renews the hoard magically, but is also the source of the curse.

(6) A servant steals a cup and arouses the dragon in *Beowulf*. Bilbo steals a cup and arouses Smaug.

(7) Sigurd replies in riddles when the wounded Fafnir asks his name and origin. Bilbo also replies in riddles when Smaug asks his name and origin. (This is simple caution; knowledge of a name for the ancient Germans was the same as power over the holder of the name.)

(8) One of the names Bilbo applies to himself is "Barrel-rider," just as Beowulf is called "strayer of oceans," referring to adventures in the water.

(9) Fafnir foretells to Sigurd the treachery of Regin (identified as a dwarf), thus warning Sigurd. Smaug predicts to Bilbo that the dwarves will be ungrateful, thus presaging Thorin's angry reaction to the theft of the Arkenstone. Accurate prophecy is, of course, typical of the "fey" -- the dying or about to die.

Such confluence of motifs concerning the characteristics and habits of dragons and heroes, as established in mediaeval myth and heroic epic, can hardly be accidental. Bilbo emerges as a mythological composite: the "worthless" fellow who does great deeds later in life; the trickster who succeeds through guile and stratagem; and the hero who is distinguished by bravery, magical helpers, magical implements, a special name, unusual size or strength, a penetration of the Underworld, the winning of a treasure, and confrontation with dragons and other monsters. He is, not exactly in the way Gandalf meant: "quite a little fellow . . . after all."



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For instance: Ruth Noel, *The Mythology of Middle Earth* (Boston 1977); James L. Hodge, "Tolkien's Mythological Calendar," in *Scope of the Fantastic* (New York 1985).
- <sup>2</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (New York 1966) 16, 32.
- <sup>3</sup> Gertrude Jobes, *Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Symbols* (New York 1962).
- <sup>4</sup> Alwyn Rees and Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage* (London 1961) 73-77.
- <sup>5</sup> Walter W. Skeat, *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (4th ed., Oxford 1961); Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (Amsterdam 1971).
- <sup>6</sup> *Webster's New International Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass. 1932).
- <sup>7</sup> *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Sherman Kuhn (Ann Arbor, Mich. 1966).
- <sup>8</sup> *Ancient Irish Tales*, eds. Tom Peete Cross and Clark Harris Slover (New York 1977) 612.
- <sup>9</sup> For "Hill," etc., cf. the mountain as a place for celebrations of *Walpurgisnacht* or Witches Sabbath, the mound as entrance to the Otherworld in the Welsh *Mabinogion* and Gaelic Finn cycle, the "life of the dead" in their mounds in the Germanic *Elder Edda* and *Njals Saga*. For "Water," cf. the significance of oceans and rivers as boundaries between the worlds, e.g., the Hellenic Styx, the Finnish river of Tuoni, the circle of Oceans in Norse myth.
- <sup>10</sup> See Noel (at n. 1) *passim*; Hodge (at n. 1).
- <sup>11</sup> Georges Dumézil, *Mythe et épopée* (Paris 1968) *passim*.
- <sup>12</sup> Karl Kerényi, "The Trickster in Relation to Greek Mythology," in Paul Radin, *The Trickster* (London 1956) 174.
- <sup>13</sup> Dorothy Norman, *The Hero: Myth / Image / Symbol* (New York 1969) 151-58.
- <sup>14</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, "On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure," in Radin (at n. 12) 200, 204.
- <sup>15</sup> Kalevala: *the Land of Heroes*, tr. W.F. Kirby (London 1977), runo XI, lines 277-82, 285-88.

- <sup>16</sup> *The Tain*, tr. Thomas Kinsella (London 1969) 84; *The Mabinogion*, tr. Gwyn and Thomas Jones (London 1949) 23.
- <sup>17</sup> Charles Squire, *Celtic Myth and Legend, Poetry and Romance* (Hollywood 1975) 168.
- <sup>18</sup> *Mabinogion* (at n. 16) 66.
- <sup>19</sup> Rees (at n. 4) 242.
- <sup>20</sup> *Beowulf*, tr. Michael Alexander (Harmondsworth, Middlesex 1973) lines 1557-68.
- <sup>21</sup> *The Saga of the Volsungs*, tr. Margaret Schlauch (New York 1930) 102-3.
- <sup>22</sup> *Beowulf* (at n. 20) lines 2699-2700.