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“Languages are the chief distinguishing marks of peoples. No people in fact comes into being until it speaks a language of its own; let the languages perish and the peoples perish too, or become different peoples”  (English & Welsh, 3)

-Sjéra Tomas Saemundsson

Words are magic, and the ability to manipulate them makes wizards of us all.  We can arrange them in near infinite combinations to convey any message we wish.  They allow us to share our experiences with others, to pass down lessons through hundreds of generations, truly to define ourselves.  Anyone who can read may open a book and hear the voice of someone who lived hundreds, even thousands of years ago.  The words we use however, much like the societies in which we live, have changed drastically over time.  Though we often view language as a set of rigid guidelines by which we communicate it is in fact fluid and ever changing.  With every word we speak we invoke hundreds of years of conflict and change.  The stories we tell are living breathing expressions of our linguistic heritage, our history.  As such it is imperative that if we wish to master our own language we must understand its origins and development. I have chosen to examine this field through the extensive works of Oxford Professor J.R.R. Tolkien.  By comparing his original (fictional) work with the legends and histories of the cultures that inspired him, I hope to showcase how classrooms may benefit from their study.  Language, history, and legend should be taught side by side, for what is history but the legend of the truth.

The goal of Tolkien’s written work was not simply to produce an entertaining narrative, though that was a fortunate side effect.  Tolkien was first and foremost a lover of languages, a fascination that began in his childhood and developed into his academic career.  In a letter to Harvey Breit, a writer for the *New York Times* he comments on the origins of this interest, saying:

“...it is to my mother who taught me (until I obtained a scholarship at the ancient Grammar School in Birmingham) that I owe my taste for philology, especially of Germanic languages, and for romance.  I am indeed a West Midlander at home only in the counties upon the Welsh Marches; and it is, I believe, as much due to desent as to opportunity that Anglo-Saxon and Western Middle English and alliterative verse have been both a childhood attraction and my main professional sphere” (Carpenter, 218)

It is this love of Germanic languages and verse that would lead Tolkien to embark on what many consider his great lifes work.  Tolkien was enthralled by the great “northern spirit” and pure aesthetic value he found present in these languages.  The obstacle Tolkien faced however, was that his most beloved of northern realms, his own Britain, had only the stories and legends of her invaders.   This is to say that there was no purely British mythos, the ancient traditions of her natives had been overshadowed by continual waves of invasion and settlement.

As is the case with much of western history, scholarly attention follows shortly after the region becomes of interest to the Roman Empire.  Churchill begins his *The Birth of Britain* by describing the native Britons as he imagined Julius Caesar must have seen them around the year 55 B.C.  “The Islanders had helped the local tribes in the late campaigns along the northern coast of Gaul.  They were of the same Celtic stock, somewhat intensified by insular life”.  Our understanding of this society has not shifted greatly since - a testament to the complete eclipse of native culture and language that Tolkien mourned.  This is due mostly to a lack of literary records left by these societies.  We do know that the oral tradition of druidic culture flourished, they made use of iron for their tools and they built stone monument circles the most famous of which, Stonehenge, still stands today.   Caesar was the first to break this isolation, seeking gold, slaves, pearls, and conquest.  With Rome came the traditional markers of western civilization such as a central government and infrastructure backed by military power, as well as their most important contribution: Latin.  The spread of christian practices and monasteries created a whole new literate class of clergymen, who would assume the role of historians and librarians.  Nearly all written records in pre-Norman England were recorded by men of the cloth.  Works of poetry and verse (usually religious or historic in nature) were also preserved, among them a cornerstone of our understanding of these northern cultures, Beowulf.

Tolkien, being an avid scholar of Old English literature was very familiar with our languages oldest epic, Beowulf.  It’s estimated that Beowulf was first penned in Old English sometime between the seventh and early ninth centuries AD by a monastic author (Heany, iii).  The text has been used as a rich source of information about Germanic warrior culture, and is often treated more as an archeological sight then as a piece of poetry - a practice Tolkien was rather critical of.  Tolkien began his 1936 British Academy lecture *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics* by criticizing scholars for their tendency to treat the epic as a “quarry of fact and fancy, far more assiduously than it has been studied as a work of art”.  And it was indeed with this archaeological approach that I was first introduced to the epic.  My sixth grade Social Studies class studied the first and second portions of the epic via a prose translation.  While we did read it out loud in class we did not discuss metre or verse past the observation of its existence, and dissected the story primarily to study “the heroes journey”.  Unfortunately because of this my classmates and I missed out on a chance to learn much more interesting and valuable lessons.

Elements of Beowulf can be found throughout Tolkien’s mythology.  Perhaps the greatest thematic similarity between them is the nature of their villains and monsters.  Tolkien describes the monsters that Beowulf faces as “...essential, fundamentally allied to the underlying ideas of the poem, which give it its lofty tone and high seriousness” (Monsters and Critics, 2).  At the time of this lecture this was not a widely held opinion of the poem.  Most critics found Beowulf’s adversaries - the ogre-like Grendel, Grendel’s monstrous mother, and finally a greedy dragon - to be simplistic and of little interest.  They are however, in Tolkien’s eyes fantastic and awful creatures.  For Beowulf to truly be *wreccena wide maerost* [the most famous warrior-adventurer] simple human enemies simply won’t do.  He must face the horrible creatures of man’s imagination, purely physical embodiments of humanities faults.  To an Anglo-Saxon these creatures would be as terrifying and real as the plights which they represented.  This is where Tolkien shows us the value of these monsters, their “reality”.  Beowulf is merely human, a hero of incredible strength and ability, but still only human.  And yet he does battle with the very essences of evil itself.  So to do Tolkien’s heroes fight what is presented as the very nature of evil given physical form.  Just as Beowulf can tear off Grendel’s arm, Isildur, a mere man, is capable of cutting the one ring from Sauron’s hand.

The text is rich with opportunities for comparative study with Tolkien’s work.  For example Beowulf’s encounter with a dragon is remarkably similar to the events in *The Hobbit*.  In each case we have a terrible dragon, a monster of greed and violence, guarding a hoard of stolen treasures.  Both narratives also have a member of royalty who feels it is their duty to reclaim this wealth for their people (Thorin Oakenshield in the case of *The Hobbit)*, and both of the dragons’ layers are accessed by secret doors, “a hidden passage, unknown to men” (Heaney, 151).  Just as Smaug guards the treasures of Dwarves, smiths and craftsmen whose skills far outreached the abilities of man, so too does Beowulf’s dragon guard the works of “...a high-born race” (Heaney, 152).  For students who are potentially new to this area of study or are otherwise in need of an introduction, this would be an excellent place to start.  The language is not remarkably difficult thanks to an abundance of translations, and the themes are relatively clear.  At a more advanced course level, students would also benefit from comparative study of another iteration of this legend as well as another one of Tolkien’s source texts, the Elder Edda.

The Elder Edda, an Old Icelandic poetic epic, is without a doubt a chief among Tolkien’s sources.  As a professor at Oxford Tolkien taught not only Old English (West Saxon) but Old Norse as well.  The Elder Edda has been a rich area of study for Norse philologists, Tolkien included.  From this text he directly draws the names of many of his dwarves as well as one of the most significant characters of Tolkien’s imagination, Gandalf.  Indeed the wise and wily character of Odin is considered a direct inspiration for the sage-like Gandalf the Grey (Carter, 154).

Again in Gandalf we see the ascribing of moral attributes to physical forms.  Just as evil, hate, and wrath are embodied in characters such as Sauron and monsters like the giant spider Ungoliant, wisdom and righteousness are embodied by characters such as the Elves and the far more mysterious Istari, more commonly known as wizards.  In Tolkien’s *Unfinished Tales* he describes the Istari (a Quenya name, often translated as “wise”) and their purpose in Middle-Earth.  They are emissaries, sent by the god-like Valar to aid the free people of Middle-Earth in their battle against Sauron.  They are great spirits bound to a true physical body, capable of wounds, hunger, and aging although they do not die of it.  This is so that they may be accepted by Elves and Men not as masters but peers and allies.  In other words, they are made to be relatable to us.  This also provides plenty of room for comparison between the physical/saviour nature of the wizards and that of Christ.  Divine beings, sent to guide (not rule) mankind from evil and corruption by assuming the form of man.  This technique of systematically borrowing and adapting elements of reality is absolutely central to Tolkien’s work.

Tolkien knew that in order for his work to fit into the larger scheme of Germanic mythologies Middle-Earth could not be some alien world.  As such Middle-Earth is presented as our own Earth in some far-gone age.  As proof of this Tolkien provides Middle-Earth with an astronomy undeniably similar to our own.  Eärendil’s Star, a light sailing against the current, is our own Venus, Orion is presented with the name Menelvagor the Swordsman, the Big Dipper becomes the sickle of the Valar, and Mars appears as Red Borgil.  Between this and their shared year length (365 days, 5 hours, 48 minutes, 46 seconds) there really is no doubt that Middle-Earth was constructed as a realm of our own Earth.  One may even go so far as to say, given Tolkien’s objectives and biases as well as the flora and fauna he has written into the landscape, that Middle-Earth is an archaic Europe (Kocher, 7,8).  So why does Tolkien go through all this trouble, what is the justification for including several pages in Appendix D about how the inhabitants of Middle-Earth dealt with leap years?  Tolkien provides his readers with such a realistic foundation that we never question the magic he has woven throughout it.  Tolkien walks the line between fantasy and reality as only a master could, and his literary style in itself merits study.

Tying fiction to reality however, is by no means a literary innovation.  It is rather a critical component of any narrative.  One reason these northern legends were of so much interest to Tolkien is their use of historical figures and places.  The overlap and adaptation of characters is prominent throughout northern mythology.  Characters such as Odin appear in many legends spanning multiple peoples, yet in each tale he is slightly different, subject to the his author’s influences.  Northern history and myth are also tied by overlapping references to ancient geography and peoples.  Tolkien is essentially trying to fill what he sees as a hole in this elaborate web.  He very intentionally ties his mythos to our own world.

The name Middle-Earth, although clearly related to the norse realm of Midgard, can be traced to a few lines of Cynewulf’s *Crist,* a ninth century Old English poem.  The following excerpt is what inspired Tolkien’s “subcreation”:

**Old English:**

*Eala Earendel engla beorhtast*

*ofer middengeard monnum sended*

**Modern English:**

*Hail Earendil, brightest of angels,*

*Over Middle-Earth sent to men*(Snyder, 59)

Tolkien was apparently struck by these lines.  He borrowed this bright angel to create his own character, Eärendil the Mariner, whose story grew into what is today the *Silmarillion*.  Tolkien began his adaptation of this character by examining the name’s origin in Germanic mythology.  Earendil appears in the *Prose Edda* as Aurvandil, a messenger who crosses an icy river with the help of Thor.  Aurvandil’s toe freezes and Thor snaps it off and sets it in the sky as a star.  Another iteration of this character is found in a 13th century German poem as the mariner prince Orendel, who is shipwrecked while on a journey to the Holy Land.  Tolkien borrows elements of both of these characters to create Eärendil the Mariner: an Elven prince who tries to sail west to the Undying Lands as an emissary to the Valar.  He only succeeds in passing barriers of void and shadow with the help of a silmaril, an jewel crafted with the light of creation and carrying immense power.  Because of his efforts the Valar sent aide against Morgoth to the free people of Middle-Earth and Eärendil and his ship were set in the heavens as Eärendil’s Star.  This is a narrative that would be quite at home in an archaic Germanic mythology.  Tolkien’s use of Norse and German influence is also a very specific choice as these were the groups who settled the most on the British Isles.

Although Middle-Earth is home to many fantastic faery-like creatures, human beings are undeniably central to Tolkien’s mythos.  Tolkien’s human kingdoms are in many ways reflections of the cultures that influenced the formation of the English nation and language.  It is the story of this influence that Tolkien believed to be missing in northern legends.  In a letter to Milton Waldman he states “grieved by the poverty of my own beloved country; it had no stories of its own (bound up with its tongue and soil), not of the quality I sought.” (Snyder).  And so, if Tolkien’s intention was to create a mythology bound up in Britain’s tongue and soil, it is necessary that scholars of his work study those who spoke the tongue and tilled the soil.

Elements of British history can be seen throughout Tolkien’s work.  Out of all of Tolkien’s writing this area is probably the most fit for a comparative English-History course/unit.  In this comparison it is important to note that Tolkien’s languages (Quenya and Sindarin, as well as the runic Daeron alphabet) came before his stories.  The legends and heroes of Tolkien’s imagination are intended only as a framework for these languages and their development.  Quenya was the first of Tolkien’s Elven languages.

Quenya was spoken by the Quendi, the first Elves to awake in Arda, and is composed of dozens of root words which are combined and altered to form names and words.  This structure is inspired by the ancient Greek Tolkien studied both in grammar school and at Oxford.  “Quen” for example is a root that means say or speak, from which we get Quenya and Quendi, “The Speech” and “The Speakers” respectively.  Like every aspect of Tolkien’s world his languages were meticulously crafted.  Phonetically Quenya is based on Finnish, which, possessing both an ancient sound and Germanic heritage was of great interest to Tolkien.  In the philological history of Middle-Earth Quenya functions much as Latin did in ancient Britain.  Quenya is described in J.E.A. Tyler’s *The Tolkien Companion* as “a stately and ceremonious language, with polysyllabic word-linkage and a comprehensive formal literature that was considerably more antique than anything the Sindar possesed” (384).  Latin was also a language of ceremony, it’s role preserved and perpetuated by that most transformative of Roman institutions in Britain: the Church.  Monks made up almost the entirety of a very small literate population in Post-Roman Britain.  These men would be responsible for the recording of the Island’s history and stories in Latin for hundreds of years after the fall of Rome.  Because of this, the language of the church became so intertwined with everyday speech that vast portions of our vocabulary today are Latin in origin.

The aforementioned Sindar are those Elves who, after travelling from the woodland of the east in which they awoke, decided to stay on the western shores of Middle-Earth rather than continue westward to the Undying Lands.  “Undying” in this case can be taken to mean “Unchanging” and as such the Quenya speech of the Elves who ventured west stays roughly the same over thousands of years.  But Sindarin, in its isolation across the sea, changes over time.  The two languages share many roots and the Tengwar alphabet, but differ in phonics and status.  And when the speakers of these two languages are reintroduced to each other it is important to note that Sindarin was changed and improved by Quenya, but Quenya was not changed by Sindarin.  Likewise in ancient Britain, Latin had a clear effect on English and British languages, while itself remaining insulated in monasteries.

Tolkien modeled the sound of Sindarin on his favorite British language: Welsh.   While it is true that most Northern European languages were dear to Tolkien, Welsh held a special place in his life and studies (one in the same really).  This has to do in part with the status of Welsh as perhaps the oldest surviving example of ancient british language.  If Tolkien was to create a mythology that would be at home in ancient Britain Welsh would be a critical component of his tone and style.  He states in a letter to Milton Waldman that he wished the *Silmarillion* to have “the fair elusive quality that some call Celtic” (Snyder, 48).  In addition to this Tolkien saw Welsh as the language of his ancestors (the Suffields of his mother’s family who hailed from the West Midlands and the Welsh foothills) and as such he felt that it was in part his duty to study it.  In his 1955 Lecture *English and Welsh* he describes Welsh as “the native language to which in unexplored desire we would still go home” (English and Welsh, 20).  But neither Welsh nor Latin is the direct source language for English, and as such Tolkien assigns them primarily to fair folk ( a translation of the Welsh *Y tylwth teg* he used to refer to the Elves).  Quenya and Sindarin, although spoken by men at different points in Middle-Earth’s history are not the primary languages of men, especially in the Third Age.  The language of man, Westron or the Common Speech, is however greatly influenced by Elven languages, just as English was influenced by Celtic/Germanic tongues as well as Latin.

To make comparative study of these influences one should begin with the Germanic origins of the English language and peoples.  The name *Anglii* was coined by Tacitus around the year 98 A.D. and belonged to a Germanic tribe on the Jutland Peninsula (modern day Denmark).  The Jutland Peninsula was home to several other tribes such as the Saxons and Jutes, all of whom spoke (something at least close to) Old English.  With the decline and fall of Rome in the fifth century A.D. tribes on every border sought to carve out their own chunk of empire.  Between pressure from the horsemen of the Asian Steppe and the great power vacuum left in the former Roman provinces they had little choice.  These Germanic people were first brought to Britain as mercenaries to replace the Roman legions and defend the British kingdoms from the incursions of Picts and Scots.  It was not long however before defense turned to conquest, as this new class of warriors pushed their advantage paving the way for widespread Germanic and Norse settlement.

These tribes settled in the south and east of the isles and they brought their language with them.  We see this in the high concentration of town names ending in “-ing” found in areas associated with Germanic settlement.  This suffix was hitherto unknown to the languages and place names of the Isles.  It is with this combination of roots that the comparison with Tolkien becomes clearer.  Old English place names, much like those of Quenya and Sindarin were comprised of root words.  For example Old English combines Bucca, -ingas (people of), and ham (meadow) to get Buckingham, “the meadow of Bucca’s people”.  Elvish place names are somewhat more direct, for example combining mor (dark) and dor (land) to get the dark realm of Mordor.

In Middle-Earth the language that is most comparable with the archaic roots of English is Adûnaic, the first language spoken by men.  Although Tolkien provides no record of its vocabulary, similarities can be drawn through examining its relationship with the Elven languages.  Upon their initial contact, men learned Sindarin and Quenya from the Elves, and carried both Elvish and Mannish languages with them when they settled the island kingdom of Numenor.  Numenor was the zenith of human culture thanks in large part through their interaction with the Elves who taught them the use of letters as well as other useful skills such as medicine and shipbuilding.  Quneya was spoken by royalty and used in all matters of state and ceremony, just as Latin was for the greater part of a thousand years after Roman legions departed Britain.  Men were first exposed to Sindarin however, and as such nearly all their place names are in the Grey-Elven tongue.  Adûnaic was the common vernacular speech of Numenor and gained much from the influence of these Elvish languages.  Overtime Adûnaic came to dominate Numenor in the second age do to growing pro-human (or even anti-elf) sentiments (Tyler, 282).   Prior to this however, Numenorean sailors explored and traded on Middle-Earth’s rivers and western shores where elven influenced Adûnaic mingled with the (unamed) languages of the native men to form Westron.  Man’s vanity and eventual corruption by Sauron led to Numenor’s destruction at the hands of the Valar.  The survivors, much like the inhabitants of the Jutland Peninsula embarked on a naval migration in search of new lands to settle.  Both groups of settlers established kingdoms in these foreign lands and later came into conflict with their more ancient inhabitants.

Where archaic Britain had the Picts, Scots, and Wahls (Old English word for foreigner, and the origin of the name Wales) Middle-Earth had the Pukel men, Wainriders, Easterlings and Northmen. Post Numenorean kingdoms such as Gondor played a key role in the decline of these peoples and languages through conquest, with the exception of a small nation of the Northmen that came to be known in time as the Rohirrim.  The Northmen of Éothéod rode to Gondor’s aide, routeing an Orcish invasion.  As thanks they were given dominion over the northern Gondorian province of Calenardhon which was then renamed the Riddermark, Land-of-Knights in the northern tongue, Rohan the Common Speech (Tyler, 406).

It is in Rohan that we see the clearest reflection of Anglo-Saxons in Middle-Earth.  Though Rohan and Rohirrim are both Sindarin words, the language of the horse-lords is composed of Old English words, either borrowed directly or moderately adjusted.  As such, many of the Rohirrim’s names can be given English translations which provide insight into the characters that bear them: Théoden (lord of the people) king of the Rohirrim during the War of the Ring, and the less desirable Gríma (mask) Wormtongue (serpent’s tongue, sarcastic).  The Old English word for horse, eoh, also makes an appearance in several names such as Éowyn (one who delights in horses), and Éothain (horse-soldier).  The observation is often made that Rohan is simply Anglo-Saxon culture with the addition of horses.  Tolkien even goes so far as to say “The Rohirrim are more akin to the ideas the Angles had of themselves in their legends, and the virtues of the riders are the same virtues which the Angles admired and respected: courage, loyalty, generosity, self-reliance” (Snyder, 57).  The men of Tolkien’s world are kin to his ancestors, separated only by imagination.

By the time Rohan borrows the names, history, and identity of the Anglo-Saxons its no surprise that Tolkien also Germanic verse in the poetry of the Rohirrim.  Take for example the lines Théoden provides before the battle of the Pelenor fields compared with a similar verse found in the Voluspa:

Tolkien:

*Spear shall be shaken, sheild be splintered,*

*A sword day, a red day, ere the sun rises!*

Voluspa:

*Hard is the world,*

*great whoredom,*

*an axe age, a sword age,*

*shields will be cloven,*

*a wind age, a wolf age,*

*ere the world sinks*                                                  (Snyder, 68)

In both cases we hear the voice of a proud warrior, bound to battle and facing glory in oblivion.  But unfortunately English curriculums can not explore the beauty of language alone.  The Common Core States Standard Initiative has provided guidelines for what each grade level should be capable of upon completion of their curriculum.  Activities centered around the comparison of Tolkien and his sources can for the most part meet these standards esily.  The above comparison for example, if read and discussed in class could easily meet these standards:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.11-12.3

Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.11-12.3.A

Vary syntax for effect, consulting references (e.g., Tufte's *Artful Sentences*) for guidance as needed; apply an understanding of syntax to the study of complex texts when reading.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5

Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

These standards and others like them are easily achievable benchmarks.  As comparison is founded in interpretation discussions would be key to analyzing these texts in a classroom setting.  A reoccuring theme in these standards is that students should be able formulate their own opinions and interpretations of literature.  What better place to do this than in Tolkien’s mythos, literature based on interpretations of interpretations?  The shear number of authors who have translated Germanic transcripts in addition to the vast number who have studied Tolkien extensively means that students have an incredibly large base of written work from which to draw.  Along the way students would be exposed to authors, themes, and styles otherwise ignored by traditional literature curriculums.  C.S. Lewis, a great friend and colleague of Tolkien’s once said of the matter that the student who does not study Old English “remains all his life a child in the eyes of real students of English” (English and Welsh, 1).  Writing is also a key part of every English curriculum and this one would be no exception.  While analytical writing would of course be necessary (and possible) I believe that this course would particularly benefit from more creative writing than is included in most courses.  For students to understand Tolkien’s efforts they should try their hand at his craft.  For example, a final project might be for students to study the legends and languages of any given culture and adapt as Tolkien did.  Honing analytical skills through research while at the same time learning the skills to successfully construct a narrative.

These legends and their sources are ultimately simply tools, tools that we may use to understand the English language on a deep and personal level.  I think this is a genre that deserves a place in education just as much as any other, if not more so.  Language, history, and legend should be taught side by side because the more one examines them the clearer it becomes that they are really one in the same.  Tolkien set out to breathe life back into a world many considered long dead and gone.  He has given us an entire world to explore, with nations and language and people every bit as complex as us.  Our only real difference is that while we are made of cells, molecules, and atoms Middle-Earth and it’s inhabitants are made of naught but letters.  Carefully selected and placed until the line between Tolkien’s world and our own begins to fade.

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