

Words that Might Have Been

Fictitious Word-Formation
from Mediaeval Sources in the
Works of J.R.R. Tolkien

A Quote to Set the Scene

“The invention of languages is the foundation. The 'stories' were made rather to provide a world for the languages than the reverse. To me a name comes first and then the story follows. ”

J.R.R. Tolkien in a letter from 1955
(*Letters*, p. 219)

And Yet Another Quote

“The real horror for Tolkien would probably have come when he realised that there were people writing about him who could not tell Old English from Old Norse, and genuinely thought the difference didn’t matter.”

Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth*,
2nd edition (1992), p. 292

The Periods of English

Old English: ca. 700 – 1100

Middle English: ca. 1100 – 1500

**Early Modern English: ca. 1500 –
1700**

**Late Modern English: ca. 1700 –
1900**

Present-day English: 1900 – now

The Case of Dwarves

A Plural's Tale

What Is A Dwarf?

From the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

“A human, being much below the ordinary stature or size; a pygmy (a700)...

“One of a supposed race of diminutive beings, who figure in Teutonic and esp. Scandinavian mythology and folk-lore; often identified with the elves, and supposed to be endowed with special skill in working metals, etc. (1770)”

Plural Forms

hoof

hoofs

hooves

scarf

(scarfs)

scarves

wharf

wharfs

wharves

dwarf

dwarfs

∅

elf

∅

elves

Tolkien in the *Appendices*

“It may be observed that in this book as in *The Hobbit* the form *dwarves* is used, although the dictionaries tell us that the plural of *dwarf* is *dwarfs*. It should be *dwarrows* (or *dwerrows*), if singular and plural had each gone its own way down the years, as have *man* and *men* or *goose* and *geese*.”

Historical Development

Old English:

dweorg → *dweorgas*

Early Middle English:

dweg → *dwerwhes* ~ *dwerwes*

Late Middle English:

dwerf → *dwerrows* ~ *dwarrows*

Singular:

Middle English:

dweorg /dweorχ/ → *dwerf* /dwerf/

Early Modern English:

dwerf /dwerf/ → *dwarf* /dwarf/ ... /ar/ → /ɔ:r/ → /ɔ:(r)/

Fantasy Literature

“Dwarves weren't interested in green things.”

“Yet, like all Dwarves, he stood somewhere between four and five feet tall...”

“Perhaps dwarves just have some sort of ability in that area.”

But...

“Lockhart clapped his hands and through the doors of the Entrance Hall marched a dozen surly-looking dwarfs.”

(J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*)

The Case of Hobbit

**In a Hole in the
Ground...**

Some Fictitious Sound Developments

Old English *hol-bytla* “hole-dweller”

Unrounding of /y/ → /ɪ/

holbitla

Fixation of word stress: /a/ → Ø

holbitl

Loss of now syllabic/l/: /l/ →

holbit /holbɪt/

Lowering of /o/ → /ɒ/

holbit /hɒlbɪt/

Regressive total assimilation /l/ → /b/ *hobbit* /hɒbɪt/

American English: /ɒ/ → /ɑ:/

hobbit /hɑ:bɪt/

Theoden's Use of *Holbytlan*

“Are not these the Halflings, that some among us call Holbytlan?”

“Hobbits, if you please, lord,” said Pippin.
(*The Lord of the Rings*, ch. “The Road to Isengard”)

holbytla (singular) → *holbytlan* (plural)

The Case of (She)lob

And Other Spiders

The *Oxford English Dictionary*

† **lob**, *n.*¹ *Obs*

[OE *lobbe* wk. Fem.; cf. *Loppe*, *Lop* n.]

A spider.

c1000 *Lamb. Ps.* Lxxxix. 10 (Bosw.) Ure gær swa swa lobbe [Vulg. *sicut aranea*] oððe rynges beop asmeade.

a1325 *Prose Psalter* xxxviii. 15 þou madest his soule to stumblen as a lob [Vulg. *sicut araneam*].

Ibid. lxxxix. 10 Our yeres shal þenchen as þe lob.

An Addition

Bosworth/Toller: *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*

Law of the Penitent. “Místlíce þréala
gebynaþ for synnan bendas oppe
dyntas carcernþýstra lobban”

“Various punishments are proper for sins,
bonds or blows, prison darkness,
spiders.”

The Secular Spider: *attercop*

Outside of religious contexts:

āt(t)or-coppe “poison-cup”

“Quite apart from the stones no spider
has ever liked being called Attercop....”

(*The Hobbit*, ch. “Flies and Spiders”)

Last Recorded Pre-Tolkien Use

A spider's web; [from] *atter*, poison, and *coppe*, a cup. Receiving its denomination, according to Dr. Jamieson, partly from its form and partly from its character – a cup of venom. The word is occasionally used to denote the spider itself, and a female of a virulent or malignant disposition is sometimes degraded with the appellation.

(John Brockett's *Glossary of North Country Words* [1825])

The Old English Original

From the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

“OE. *attorcoppa*, f. *átor*, *attor*, poison + *coppa*, deriv. of *cop* top, summit, round head, or *copp* cup, vessel; in reference to the supposed venomous properties of spiders. Cf. also Du. *spinne-cop* ‘spider,’ and cob-web, formerly *cop-webbe*; whence it appears probable that the simple *coppa* was itself = ‘spider.’“

From A Medical Text

“*wið áttorcoppa bíte*” = “against a spider’s bite”

Cockayne, Thomas Oswald, Ed. *Leechdom, Wordcunning and Starcraft in Early England. Being A Collection of Documents, for the Most Part Never Before Printed Illustrating the History of Science in this Country Before the Norman Conquest.* Volume I. Reprinted 1961. London: Holland, 1864.

**The Case of
*Dweomer(-)***

**Middle English
Illusions**

The Missing Word

From the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

Early Middle English:

*And Peluz hit wiste anan purh his
dweomercræften. (Layamn's Brut, c.
1205)*

gedwimer, gedweomer “illusion, sorcery,
necromancer” → *dwimer, *dweomer

In Old English

Bosworth/Toller (1898):

dwimor (*dwimer, dwymer*) – no actual citations

“an illusion, delusion, apparition, phantom”

← Latin *error, fallacia, phantasma*

Der. *ge-dwimor*: 4 citations, 3 glossary entries

Ge-dwimor

He wendon ðæt hit sum gedwimor wære

they thought that it was an apparition

Hine drehten nihtlice gedwimor

Nightly phantoms tormented him

Swylcra gedwimera

of such illusions

On maegum mislicum gedwimerum

with many various delusions

Tolkien I

dwimorberg “haunted mountain”

But Éowyn stood still as a figure carven in stone, her hands clenched at her sides, and she watched them until they passed into the shadows under the black Dwimorberg, the Haunted Mountain, in which was the Gate of the Dead.

Tolkien II and III

dwimordene “haunted valley”

It is not to be wondered at: webs of deceit were ever woven in Dwimordene.

dwimmerlaik “work of necromancy, spectre, magic at, witchcraft”

Begone, foul, dwimmerlaik, lord of carrion!

Tolkien IV

dwimmer-crafty “skilled at illusion magic”

It is ill dealing with such a foe: he is a wizard both cunning and *dwimmer-crafty*, having many guises.

dwimor ~ dwimmer?

The First Non-Tolkien Use

“Only careful inspection will reveal that it vaguely resembles some form of quadruped, and of course, if magic is detected for, the piece of rock which is the *steed* figurine will be noted as radiating some dweomer (magic).”

(Advanced Dungeons and Dragons Dungeon Masters Guide, by Gary Gygax [1979])

Instead of the OED

Gilliver, Peter M. et al, 2006. *The Ring of Words: Tolkien and the Oxford English Dictionary*.
Oxford, etc.: Oxford University Press.