

Tolkien's Wargs

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 25 Jan 2001

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Dan Rabin — 25 Jan 2001, 21:53

I happened to be flipping through my copy of *The Annotated Hobbit*, just now, and ran across the following citation from a letter by J.R.R. Tolkien that addresses the etymology of "warg", the name that Tolkien gives to the ferocious wild wolves who menace the protagonists:

It is an old word for wolf, which also
had a sense of an outlaw or hunted
criminal. This is its usual sense in
surviving texts. I adopted the word, which
had a good sound for the meaning, as a name
for this particular brand of demonic wolf
in the story.

Editor Douglas A. Anderson continues by noting that "Tolkien derived the word from Old English *_wearg-*, Old High German *_warg-*, Old Norse *_varg-r* (also = "wolf", especially of a legendary kind)."

The letter in question was written in 1966 to one Gene Wolfe.

Editor Daniel E. Rabin comments that this shows Wolfe's early concern with words, especially those bearing on his surname (contributors to this mailing list have noted several cases of his literary plays on "Wolfe"). The letter also pleases said editor in that it shows a meaningful connection between his two favorite authors.

Perhaps this is not as remarkable in the grand sweep of things as the fact that Gandhi corresponded with Tolstoy, but it's Definitely Up There.

The note is on page 111, for those of you following along at home.

-- Dan Rabin