

Humour in and around
the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien

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Plain Ignorance in the Vulgar Form: Tolkien's
Onomastic Humour in *Farmer Giles of Ham*

pre-publication offprint

Abstract

As a die-hard philologist, J.R.R. Tolkien was always exceptionally careful in the choice of names for his numerous characters and locations. Whether they be of (originally) Norse, Celtic, Finnish or other provenance, both the anthroponyms and the toponyms he used for the Middle-earth characters give the appearance of having been methodically selected to comply with the rigid contours of his complex linguistic map. Seen in this light, his short and light-hearted medieval fable *Farmer Giles of Ham* makes a notable, if somewhat disregarded, exception where the typically serious author frequently gives vent to his outstanding sense of philological humour. Here Tolkien's comic talent really shines through, as the reluctant hero Giles suddenly finds himself face to face with his not-quite-mortal foe, the greedy but craven dragon by the name of Chrysophylax Dives, and so the story gradually develops into what in all likelihood is a tongue-in-cheek rendering of the dragon episodes in *Beowulf* and the *Volsunga saga*. A noteworthy addition to the witty plotline is the aforementioned philological humour which may not necessarily seem to be of prime importance to its younger readers, but could easily provoke many a smile amongst the more scholarly-minded people (as it doubtlessly did amongst his fellow Inklings). In *Farmer Giles of Ham* Tolkien evidently amused himself (and others) by giving the characters elaborate Latinate names and making up false etymologies. The paper seeks to examine the nature and supposed purpose of these little onomastic bits and pieces (i.e. mostly personal and place-names) with a particular emphasis on the sometimes surprisingly complex (and thus amusing) implications of their cultural roots.

Introduction

There seems to be no unanimity amongst Tolkien's scholars as to the actual genesis and, in particular, the purpose of writing of *Farmer Giles of Ham*. Originally published in 1949, though in all likelihood written at least a decade earlier,¹ around the time of *The Hobbit's* publication in 1937, this somewhat neglected mock-medieval fable is a charming tale of its own which literally bursts with the writer's immense sense of humour, both situational and linguistic. Hence, in the introduction to its 1999 edition Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond argue that Tolkien's tale may have been invented mainly "to entertain his children" (FGH iii). His biographer Humphrey Carpenter appears to be a little bit more cautious, suggesting that it was probably written "in part to amuse [the writer's own] children, but chiefly to please himself" (220). Yet another view was once put forth by the author himself. Upon hearing that Allen & Unwin had decided to publish the story as a separate book, Tolkien declared that it "was not written for children; though as in the case of other books that will not necessarily prevent them from being amused by it" (L 108).

Perhaps, as is usually the case, the truth lies somewhere in the middle. No doubt, the origins of Farmer Giles and at least one more, unfortunately unfinished, story set in the Little Kingdom are to be found in an unspecified "local family game" (L 36) the Tolkiens are reported to have played in Oxfordshire in the 1930s, but its further development is visibly marked by the academic interests of the future author of *The Lord of the Rings*. At the very core of its plot is perhaps Tolkien's lifelong fascination with dragons and dragon-like creatures which stemmed from his vast knowledge of early medieval texts such as *Beowulf* and the *Völsunga saga*. Another vital, perhaps even more intriguing, component of *Farmer Giles of Ham* is the writer's keen interest in the origins and meaning of words, in this case mainly the few but noteworthy names of both places (toponyms) and characters (anthroponyms and zoonyms). For Tolkien, who is known to have possessed "a most unusual sensitivity to the sound and appearance of words" (Carpenter 177), the very contact with *nomina propria*, both English

¹ Although different dates have been suggested, the majority of scholars concur that *Farmer Giles* was written in or about 1937. It was certainly in existence by 1938 when Tolkien is believed to have read the story to a group of undergraduate students at Worcester College (Duriez 164). In *The Road to Middle-earth*, Tom Shippey cautiously maintains that *Farmer Giles* was written "in the period 1935-8" (11).

and not, appears to have regularly generated curious semantic associations that spurred his uncommonly vivid imagination.² Such is in all likelihood the principal *raison d'être* for such characters as Eärendil³ and Gandalf⁴ or places like Mirkwood⁵ and Mordor⁶ as well as various other names that may be found in the indices to *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Silmarillion*.

The case of *Farmer Giles of Ham* is no exception. While its plot centres on the rather disinclined, and for the most part largely reluctant, hero bearing the proud name of Ægidius Ahenobarbus Julius Agricola de Hammo, or “in the vulgar form [...] Farmer Giles of Ham” (FGH 9), it is not improbable that perhaps as important as the narrative is the subtle, but nonetheless distinct layer of philological humour which may easily go unnoticed in the eyes of a less-informed reader. Tolkien's witty puns and ingenious wordplays, however, certainly did amuse his fellow Inklings when the earliest drafts and thoughts for the story were presented to them during the regular evening meetings in C.S. Lewis's rooms at Magdalen College or the somewhat less formal lunchtime gatherings at the Eagle and Child. It is not difficult to imagine their understanding nods and smiles or even outbreaks of contagious laughter upon hearing that, for instance, the crucial question of what a blunderbuss is should be settled by the “Four Wise Clerks of Oxenford” (FGH 15)⁷ or that the scheming dragon Chrysophylax Dives should promise to pay his enormous ransom on the feast of St. Hilarius and St. Felix (FGH 48).

It seems rather doubtful that the very character and classification of all the personal and place names that appear in *Farmer Giles of Ham* could have been consciously predetermined prior to its actual composition. While some of them, such as Worminghall, might have indeed ignited Tolkien with a creative spark

2 Well known is, for instance, the story of young Tolkien's “excitement” by certain Welsh words (not necessarily proper names) he once saw painted on coal trucks (1971 radio interview for BBC4, quoted in Hooker 243). There is no denying that his professional interest in languages could be traced back to some such incidents in the writer's childhood.

3 Cf. Old English *éarendel* “ray of light, morning star” in Cynewulf's *Crist* (104).

4 Cf. Old Norse *Gandálf* “Staff-Elf”, one of the many dwarves listed in the *Dvergatal* section (9-16) of the eddic poem *Völuspá*.

5 Cf. Old Norse *Myrkviðr* “Murky Wood” which originally appears in the eddic poems *Lokasenna* (42) and *Völundarkviða* (1), but was later borrowed (and anglicised into “Mirkwood”) by William Morris. Tolkien probably first came across this name in Morris's novel *A Tale of the House of Wolfings* (1888).

6 Cf. Old English *morðor* “mortal sin” (later also “murder, manslaughter”).

7 Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond believe that the said clerks, whose impoverished prototype is to be found in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, were in fact the editors of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, James A.H. Murray, Henry Bradley, W.A. Craigie and C.T. Onions (111).

for the narrative, it is almost certain that others (e.g. Thame, which is not found in the earliest manuscript version of the story), only came to him at some later stage, in the course of writing, or during the unusually long – though in his case rather habitually prolonged – ten-year process of revising this relatively short text. Regardless of their debatable origins, though, those names which bear some discernible traces of Tolkien’s sense of philological humour could be loosely divided into four (sometimes overlapping) major categories which include: pseudo-classical reframing, replication of reality, semantic reversal and false etymology.

Pseudo-classical reframing

As a rule, the practice of lexical reframing could be defined as a purpose-led redescription or refiguration of the existing concept in a creative way which may – if such be the author’s intention – produce the effects of a satirical commentary, ironic imitation or just a plain joke. There are obviously countless ways in which this comic effect may be achieved. Depending on its various linguistic properties, a particular name may invoke a certain degree of conceptual associations: temporal (e.g. medieval), cultural (e.g. Celtic), physical (e.g. tall), or other. The associations may of course be based upon specific stereotypical or arbitrary assumptions whose precision does not need to be so exceptionally high. What is more, the actual character of such associations may sometimes differ quite radically depending on the reader’s cultural and/or educational background.

There are numerous instances of pseudo-classical reframing in Tolkien’s tale, the first and foremost being of course the very name of its protagonist, Ægidius Ahenobarbus Julius Agricola de Hammo (*FGH* 9). Although unspecified with respect to time, the narrative appears to be set in post-Roman Britain,⁸ when people are reported to have been “richly endowed with names” (*FGH* 9). The time frame is of course of lesser significance here. What matters is the somewhat exaggerated accumulation of Latinate names which, instead of raising the esteem for the character (as was indubitably the case with many a respected Roman citizen who would customarily have had three or more

⁸ Its “postness” is naturally a matter of unsolvable debate. The anachronistic inclusion of the blunderbuss (a post-medieval firearm with an interesting etymology) may, for instance, call to mind the cannons which greatly disturb King Arthur in T.H. White’s novel *The Once and Future King*.

names), sometimes consciously, sometimes perhaps intuitively, brings a smile to the reader's face (much as it did in the times of Swift, Pope, Carey and other leading parodists of the Augustan age when the influence of classical literature was at its strongest).⁹ Unlike the aforesaid Augustans, Tolkien was not much of a satirist, though. His most probable intent was to create a tongue-in-cheek analogy with medieval chronicles where the sense of pluperfectness could be enhanced by the not-always-factual references to the contacts a certain nation is said to have had with the Greek and/or Roman world.¹⁰

This amusing sense of pseudo-historical formality appears to be even further exercised in the case of the ruler of the Middle Kingdom. In the official letter he sends to Giles in recognition of the farmer's unanticipated heroics, the impressive stock of royal *nomina* is literally stretched out of any reasonable proportion, appearing as "Augustus Bonifacius Ambrosius Aurelianus Antoninus Pius et Magnificus" (*FGH* 20). Perhaps to amplify the effect, the king's names are additionally embellished by the four honorary (and for the most part synonymous) titles of "dux, rex, tyrannus et basileus" (*FGH* 20). Interestingly, this naturally overstressed aura of almost imperial decorum was perfectly captured by the book's illustrator Pauline Baynes who envisioned a serious-looking scribe with an enormous scroll whose third part appears to be covered only by the aforesaid names and titles (*FGH* 21).

Replication of reality

Those readers who possess at least a passing knowledge of Latin should notice that there is much more to these names than just their pseudo-classical look. In fact, Tolkien's philological jest becomes all the more funny when the onomastic layer is properly understood. It is only then that the reader becomes fully aware

9 Cf., for instance, the pseudo-classical names in Henry Carey's satirical play *Chrononhotonthologos* (1734) or the name of an imaginary Bavarian antiquarian Martinus Scriblerus which was originally Alexander Pope's pseudonym, but was subsequently adopted as a mock-patron of the literary group founded in 1714 by a number of London satirists. While these early-eighteenth-century names are not as expanded and elaborate as those of Tolkien's, it seems more than plausible that the very idea behind their use was likewise of comical nature.

10 A good example of this is the fabulous *Chronica Polonorum* which was written at the turn of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries by Master Vincentius of Cracow. Amongst the most intriguing pseudo-classical episodes to be found in its first book are those that relate the Poles' victorious confrontations against Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar.

of the writer's efforts to replicate the reality, which is of course hardly surprising in the case of the characters' nicknames,¹¹ but is not so apparent when it comes to their *pronomina*. To illustrate, those parents who chose to call their son Sigurd (Old Norse *Sigurðr* "protector of victory") may have had in mind a long and, above all, glorious military career for their offspring, but there was at the time absolutely no guarantee that their parental dreams could ever come true. The employment of highly meaningful names in literature, however, appears to be dictated by an entirely different purpose. They may, for instance, serve as useful *aide-mémoires* for the younger readers or provide the author's valuable comment on the actual disposition or character of a given person.¹²

It would not be particularly revealing to say that Tolkien's names are always in some way related to the characters that bear them. Those that appear in *Farmer Giles* are obviously no exception. Here the protagonist's first name (which is only superficially Latin, as its etymology is beyond any doubt Greek) ingeniously reflects the role that, willy-nilly, Giles ultimately plays in the history of the Little Kingdom. The Latin name *Ægidius* (also spelt "Aegidius") derives from Ancient Greek *Αἰγίδιος* (*Aigidios*), meaning "the bearer of the aegis" (i.e. the fearsome shield used, amongst others, by Athena and Zeus), which was one of the many titles borne by the supreme Hellenic god. As such it may thus figuratively allude to Giles' protective, if not perhaps entirely intentional, endeavours against, first, the giant, and then, the dragon, and so his ultimate role as the actual defender of the realm.¹³ Worth noting is also Tolkien's use of two other names, *Julius* and *Agricola*. The former is of an indeterminate origin and meaning, but the latter is evidently to be associated with Giles' farming profession. Side by side, however, they appear to recall the character of the famed Roman general, Gnaeus Julius Agricola (AD 40-93) who in the second half of the first century AD brought under his control most of what would subsequently become the imperial province of *Britannia*. Needless to say, this

11 As a rule, nicknames are given as a tribute to someone's traits (e.g. Hákon the Broad-shouldered) and abilities (e.g. Richard the Lionheart), or in recognition of their deeds (e.g. William the Conqueror). As such, they cannot obviously precede the emergence of the agent that generates them.

12 Perhaps nowhere is it better realised than in the works of Charles Dickens, where the characters' whimsical made-up names often speak volumes of their bearers' personality or social position.

13 It cannot be ruled out that the protagonist's name was also indirectly inspired by the name of the street where the Inklings' favourite Oxford pubs are to be found, the Eagle and Child and the Lamb and Flag (respectively 48/49 and 12 St Giles' Street).

evidently anticipates the role that Giles later plays in the creation of his small but well-managed realm.¹⁴

None of this could ever be achieved without the legendary blade *Caudimordax*. Briefly mentioned in the context of the magnificent sword that Giles receives from the King is its once owner by the name of Bellomarius, “the greatest of all dragon-slayers of the realm” (*FGH* 33). Here again, the name appears to speak volumes of the hero's unaccounted, but presumably glorious martial past. Its etymology is not in the least complicated, and so may be easily understood by those who only know a little Latin by way of its various English cognates. The word *bellum* “war”, which constitutes the name's first component, may be found in, amongst others, *belligerent* and *bellicose*. It can also be found in the name of *Bellona*, the Roman goddess of war, vividly evoked, for instance, in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (I.ii.54). There is some doubt as to the actual origins of *Marius*, the second element in the hero's name, but the most common opinion is that it is derived from, or at least related to, that of the Roman god of war. If such indeed be the case, the divine pair of Bellona and Mars¹⁵ should therefore constitute not only fitting patrons for the famed dragon-slayer, but also an instantly recognisable onomastic pun whose meaning should perfectly recapitulate the very character and military accomplishments of the legendary hero.

Although he is but a minor character in the book, the slothful blacksmith who undertakes to produce Giles' ring-mail also bears a Latinate name whose meaning happens to account for his general disposition towards work and, once again, testifies to Tolkien's keen sense of philological humour. Fabricius Cunctator, better known to the local people as “Sunny Sam”, does not seem to be particularly pleased with the prospect of any kind of labour. His visible lack of enthusiasm and inclination to put things off for later is perfectly illustrated by means of the blacksmith's second name which might be translated as “delayer”. *Fabricius* has an unclear etymology, but it is even more amusing than the blacksmith's second name, its joke resting upon the fact that the word

¹⁴ Giles' royal aspirations appear to be further emphasised by means of his highly descriptive nickname *Ahenobarbus* “red beard” which clearly evokes the character of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I (1155-90), commonly known under his Italian name *Barbarossa*.

¹⁵ The two are sometimes described as siblings, sometimes as spouses.

fabricator, whence the name may derive, could in reality mean two closely related, though not entirely synonymous, things. One is that of a “craftsman, artisan” or even “smith” (the last of which is of course perfectly in line with the character’s profession). The other, however, carries a far more pejorative meaning, signifying a person who counterfeits or even falsifies things. This way or another, the very nature of Sunny Sam as well as his vocation are once again deliberately revealed by means of highly suggestive *nomina*.

Finally, equally relevant with regard to the character’s disposition is the name of Chrysophylax Dives, the not-quite-terrifying dragon that ravages “the midland realm of Augustus Bonifacius” (FGH 25). The beast is said to be “of ancient and imperial lineage” (FGH 25) which clearly explains why he should be endowed with both a Greek and a Roman name. The former, Chrysophylax, is evidently a compound consisting of χρυσός (*krysos*) “gold” and φύλαξ (*phylax*) “guardian, protector”. The dragon is therefore a “protector of gold” whose first name is further semantically intensified by the second one meaning “rich”.¹⁶ All this seems to imply that what at first sight appears to be his proper names is in fact no more than a descriptive moniker relating to its owner’s most significant attribute. Tolkien’s intricate jest does not become apparent, however, until some twenty pages later, when the dragon is forced to dispose of much of his treasure. In doing this, he turns out to be a very poor “protector of gold” who, in addition to the woes he suffers at the hands of Giles, becomes less and less *dives* with every box and bag bound on his back by the victorious farmer. In the end, though, his wheel of fortune seems to be turning back, for we are told that, contrary to what we may have thought, even after he pays the enormous contribution, Chrysophylax is still a *chrysophylax* with “a mort of treasure [hidden] at home in his cave” (FGH 78).

¹⁶ In fact, he even introduces himself as “Chrysophylax the Rich” (FGH 43). It looks like for Tolkien this may have seemed to be the proper way of addressing a dragon. This practice can be seen at its fullest in *The Hobbit* where Bilbo clearly does not want to enrage Smaug, and so calls him “Smaug the Tremendous”, “Smaug the Chiefest and Greatest of Calamities”, “Smaug the Mighty”, “Smaug the unassessably wealthy”, “Lord Smaug the Impenetrable”, and, finally, “Your Magnificence” (278-83).

Semantic reversal

This intriguing swapping of meanings brings us to the third category of Tolkien's philological humour in *Farmer Giles of Ham*, namely that of semantic reversal. There are obviously numerous instances of such alterations to be found in world literature, some being more laudatory, others evidently depreciatory in their nature. One of the best examples is of course that of Little John, Robin Hood's second-in-command, whose descriptive nickname is in stark contrast with the outlaw's enormous stature. The actual reasons for semantic reversal may vary significantly, often depending on the author's intentions and the character of the work in which the name is to be found. On the whole, however, it appears that by giving a character a name that does not quite correspond to his or her physique and/or personality the writer may wish to accentuate certain features (or their lack) which somehow typify the person in question. This by and large humorous effect could be achieved, for instance, by means of tagging the character with a nickname which is not quite consistent with his or her physical dimensions (as is the case with the abovementioned character of Little John). It may also be accomplished by way of "christening" the said individual with an authentic name whose etymology and/or cultural connotations would suggest an entirely different person.

The most evident example of semantic reversal to be found in *Farmer Giles of Ham* is of course that of the overanxious dog called Garm. Upon introducing Giles' faithful companion, Tolkien immediately informs the reader that in those days dogs "had to be content with short names in the vernacular [as] the Book-latin was reserved for their betters [and] Garm could not even talk dog-latin" (*FGH* 9). All this is naturally far from being a serious scholarly explanation, the real point of this jest lying elsewhere, in the cultural heritage of Northern Europe. What is interesting, perhaps, is that the actual meaning of the Old Norse word *garmr*,¹⁷ whence the dog's name could be derived, is of lesser significance here, although it ought to be noted that its literal rendering into English is "rags" or "tatter" (which may be highly indicative of the dog's

¹⁷ The above form is not a spelling mistake. Several Old Norse nouns end in *-r* in the nominative singular, although the suffix is lost or substituted by another (e.g. the genitive *-s* or *-ar*) in the oblique cases. In Modern Icelandic the word is spelt *garmur*.

appearance). On the more figurative level, it could also be used in the sense of an unfortunate person (which is quite symptomatic of Garm's numerous woes).¹⁸

As has been observed, though, the most important semantic dimension of the name Tolkien chose for Giles' canine companion is its cultural rather than strictly semantic legacy. After all, in Norse mythology Garmr is the Cerberus-like hellhound that guards the gates of the underworld and forewarns the Æsir of the nearing apocalypse of Ragnarøkkr. Being *æztr viðá* [...] *hunda* (Finnur, *Grimnismál* 45) "the finest of all dogs" of course puts the beast in marked contrast with its less distinguished counterpart in Tolkien's book. In fact, it may be concluded that the two hounds somehow epitomise the opposite, though not necessarily extreme, poles of what constitutes man's best friend, from the most alert guardian to the least vigorous lapdog. Tolkien's Garm is probably neither – the author himself is silent on this matter, although Pauline Baynes depicted it as a slim Greyhound – but the disparity is just too striking to be overlooked. The craven Garm frantically yelping about the coming of the giant (FGH 13-14) was in all likelihood meant to be a humorous reinterpretation of the eddic Garmr who at the time of imminent doom *geymr* [...] *mjök fyr Gnipahelli* (Finnur, *Völuspá* 44) "bays loudly before Gnipa cave". This "echoing" sound (the words are repeated chorus-like in stanzas 49 and 58) also indirectly heralds the advance of, amongst others, the roaring giants of Jötunheimr (Finnur 48), the proper antecedents of Tolkien's famished giant.

A similar approach seems to be employed by Tolkien in the case of Giles' sovereign, the brusque and greedy ruler of the Middle Kingdom. As has been observed, the long list of his Latinate names and titles may have been intended to accentuate his near-imperial status. However, given the king's indecisiveness and overall incompetence, it is far more likely that at least some of the names were in fact meant to express open disapproval of his largely ineffective reign. Indeed, the king may be "richly endowed with names" (FGH 9), but, as maintained by the book's editors Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond, "they are [actually] an embarrassment of riches" (FGH 112). Hence, not counting the king's first name *Augustus* "majestic", which was originally adopted by Gaius

¹⁸ In their notes on *Farmer Giles of Ham* Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond also suggest a Welsh connection, whereby the noun *garm* "shout, cry" should account for the dog's "bullying or bragging or wheedling, or yelping under Giles' window" (FGH 109).

Octavius and was henceforth used by Roman emperors as a title, he is plainly criticised in every conceivable way, being ironically referred to as, amongst others, *Bonifacius* “doer of good”, *Pius* “dutiful” and *Magnificus* “great, noble”. Not surprisingly, given the enormous extent of his political ineffectiveness as well as, it seems, overall indolence, self-importance and greed, it looks as if the monarch lived up to none of his *de facto* superficial and ostentatious *nomina*. In other words, when it comes to semantics, the King is not quite who he is really supposed to be.¹⁹

Perhaps the least obvious instance of humorous semantic reversal is to be found in the name of Giles' own wife Agatha. Given its relative popularity in the Western world, Tolkien's use of that name may not immediately strike one as particularly unusual and, least of all, amusing. However, a closer look at its etymology allows us to see that it is actually a Hellenic name *Ἀγαθή* (*Agathé*) derived from the Ancient Greek adjective *ἀγαθός* (*agathos*), meaning “good, honourable”. Needless to say, with all her malevolent suggestions to have the yelping Garm drowned (*FGH* 14) or otherwise killed (*FGH* 55) as well as the furious insinuation that her husband might be a “fool” (*FGH* 14), Agatha is perhaps as far as can be from actually being *ἀγαθή*. In the end, however, she seems to live up to the semantic properties of her name, at least in the sense of being “honourable” or “noble”, for, as Tolkien informs the readers, she “made a queen of great size and majesty [who] kept a tight hand on the household accounts. There was no getting round Queen Agatha – at least it was a long walk” (*FGH* 75).²⁰

False etymology

The last category of Tolkien's philological humour in *Farmer Giles of Ham* has to do with the fictionalised etymologies of two Oxfordshire place-names, namely

¹⁹ It is hard to escape the feeling that the name Tolkien assigns to the sword that Augustus Bonifacius bestows on the local hero might also be suggestive of the monarch's incompetence and his practice of double standards. After all, Giles' *Caudimordax* is the real “Tailbiter” (if only in its terrifying potential), while the “tailbiters” invited for the King's Christmas Feast must face the shortage of genuine dragon's tails and content themselves with a substitute, “a Mock Dragon's Tail of cake and almond-paste, with cunning scales of hard icing-sugar” (*FGH* 22-23).

²⁰ Worth noting here is also the case of Giles' favourite cow Galathea who is trampled to death by the probably unaware giant. Being now “as flat as a doormat”, she is probably no longer as *γαλάτεια* “milk-white” as she used to be.

those of the old parish village of Worminghall and the slightly younger town of Thame (respectively 4.5 and 9 miles east of Oxford). In serious linguistics the term “false etymology” (or “paraetymology”) is typically used to embrace all sorts of fallacious explanations of the origins of words (including proper names) as well as their later historical development and meaning. While the term itself is an obvious oxymoron,²¹ it is perhaps a little bit broader than the oft-used phrase “folk etymology” which cannot really be employed in the case of Tolkien’s deliberate reinterpretations of the existing toponyms that appear in the book. However, the explanations he gives are clearly modelled after the principles of *Volksetymologie*, whereby similar sounding words are generally suggested as lexical items of formative nature. Their meaning might be at a considerable variance with the words which actually formed the said toponyms, but it is of course of little significance to the people with no etymological apparatus, or, as was surely the case with the author of *Farmer Giles*, those writers whose intention is to give a philological wink to the better-informed readers.

The case of Worminghall is a perfect example of such deliberate paraetymological efforts on the part of Tolkien. It is said to be the name of the place “where Giles and Chrysophylax first made [their] acquaintance [and which later] became known throughout the kingdom as Aula Draconaria, or in the vulgar tongue Worminghall” (FGH 76-77). The latter is therefore merely an English translation of the earlier, and thus seemingly more authoritative, Latin name which may be rendered as either “the House” (in the meaning of “dynasty”), or “the court” or “royal seat of the Wormings”, i.e. the descendants of King Ægidius Draconarius, better known in the vulgar tongue as Old Giles Worming. In reality, of course, there is little truth in the above explanation. Worminghall is in all likelihood a patronymic toponym derived from the name of an otherwise unidentified man called *Wyrma.²² Its earliest attested form may be found in the Domesday Book (1086) where it appears as *Wermelle*, the second element being almost certainly *halh* (also spelt *healh*), meaning “nook, secret place”.

21 The Ancient Greek word *ἐτυμολογία* (*etymología*), whence the Modern English word derives, is a compound term which consists of two nouns: *ἐτυμον* (*etumon*) “true sense” and *λογία* (*logía*) “study”. Hence, it is “the study of the true sense” (of words).

22 Unfortunately, the name is not attested in any written sources from the period. There is, however, no doubt that it does indeed derive from the Old English noun *wyrm* “serpent, snake, dragon” and is, of course, cognate with the Old Norse name *Ormr*.

Hence, the actual historical name of Worminghall should be translated as “Wyrma’s nook”.

Needless to say, Tolkien must have been perfectly aware of all this, and so his light-hearted etymological argument is but a clever play on words resting upon the superficial similarity between *halh* and *heall*. In the early twentieth century, when the philological apparatus was not as developed as it is today, such confusions (in this case obviously genuine rather than fabricated) would have been quite common. By bringing up the etymological issue, however, Tolkien does not appear to be so much as criticising any of his fellow scholars, although the ironic reference to the “Four Wise Clerks of Oxenford” (*FGH* 15) might perhaps suggest a more explicit target. Instead, his somewhat implied etymological puns may have been initially motivated by the mysterious “local family game” (*L* 36) he refers to in his letter to C.A. Furth. Although its nature has never been revealed, it is not improbable that in the 1930s, i.e. at the time when *Farmer Giles of Ham* was first conceived as a story, the Tolkiens actually amused themselves by inventing fictional (but not necessarily nonsense) etymologies of the places they visited during their Sunday walks in the Oxfordshire countryside. For professor Tolkien, who is well known to have had a life-long fascination with dragons,²³ the name of Worminghall must have therefore seemed like a potential invitation, a creative spark which would ignite the process of writing of what ultimately became one of his most famous stories outside the Middle-earth canon.

As has been observed, the other of the two place-names whose false etymologies may have been conceived in an analogous way cannot be found in the earliest manuscript version of *Farmer Giles of Ham*. The fact that its origins might not lie in the “local family game” (*L* 36) does not, however, mean that it is not worth looking at. Indeed, the story behind the name of Thame (in reality a troublesome Celtic or even pre-Celtic name of uncertain meaning)²⁴ is perhaps as amusing as that of Worminghall. Master Ægidius, who in the end

23 In his essay “On Fairy-Stories”, Tolkien famously remarks that, as a child, he “desired dragons with a profound desire” (*OFS* 135).

24 There are a number of rivers in Britain (Thames, Thame, Tame, Team, Teme etc.) whose root appears to be either Celtic **tam-* “dark” or pre-Celtic **tā-* “melt, flow turbidly” (*Mills* 454). In reality, the Thame is a north-eastern tributary of the Thames.

becomes the autonomous Lord of Ham (itself an obvious philological pun),²⁵ is also known in his kingdom under the title of “Dominus de Domito Serpente, which is in the vulgar Lord of the Tame Worm, or shortly of Tame” (FGH 74). As the two titles of King Giles get more and more confused, the chief town of the new realm gradually becomes “known by the latter name, which it retains to this day” (FGH 76). In this way Ham turns into Thame (pronounced *tame*), a kind of word that must be truly annoying for many a philologist, as it preserves what appears to be an altogether alien graphical element in the form of the letter *h*. Tolkien’s “authoritative” explanation, though, soon dispels any conceivable doubts, for otherwise “Thame with an *h* [would obviously be] a folly without warrant” (FGH 76). In fact, in this particular word the silent *h* is a folly,²⁶ a later intrusion from French, which may also be found in, amongst other words, *Thomas*, *Thames* or *thyme*.

Concluding Remarks

There is no denying that the overall character of *Farmer Giles of Ham* was meant to be far less serious than that of his most celebrated works, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion*, or even *The Hobbit*. This is not to say, of course, that it is entirely devoid of any deeper meaning. After all, it subtly touches upon such vital issues as, for instance, the nature of kingship and administration of royal justice (Oziewicz 42-47 and Ferré 71-74). Nonetheless, what most people immediately take notice of is the tale’s light-hearted humour, situational as well as verbal. While the former cannot be in any way disregarded, it is naturally the latter that probably constitutes the finest bits of Tolkien’s mock-medieval tale, its actual *crème de la crème* and a starting point for many a scholarly analysis.

Due to its succinctness of content, the above examination was not meant to be particularly exhaustive, especially in connection with those of Tolkien’s jokes whose nature cannot be described as purely philological. Nonetheless, it is hoped that it does at least succeed in recapitulating some of the most striking aspects

25 Cf. Old English *ham* “house, property, enclosure”. There are numerous place-names throughout England which incorporate it as a suffix (e.g. Nottingham, Tottenham, Buckingham etc.).

26 Cf. Old French *folie* “madness, insanity”. It is a well known fact that Tolkien was not particularly fond of the French language whose “sounds did not please him as much as the sounds of Latin and English” (Carpenter 38).

of onomastic jest to be found in his *Farmer Giles of Ham*, along with their naturally brief and somewhat simplified categorisation. This should perhaps enable its readers to see and, in this way, better appreciate the profound depth of Tolkienian humour which, as has been observed, evinces itself in so many different ways, from the more light-hearted puns on the characters' distinctive personalities and traits, to the more thought-provoking, satirical-like remarks on the nature of kingship and consequences of tyranny. After all, humour is sometimes a serious thing which may stem from an individual's awareness that certain things in life are really important and as such could have far-ranging implications for those who can take the joke.

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Abbreviations

FGH: *Farmer Giles of Ham*, see TOLKIEN 1999

L: *Letters*, see TOLKIEN 2006

OFS: "On Fairy-Stories", see TOLKIEN 1983

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