

J.R.R. Tolkien's use of an Old English charm

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J.R.R. Tolkien wanted to create – or, as he saw it, rediscover – a mythology for England, its native heathen tales having been almost entirely lost due to the country's relatively early conversion to Christianity and the cultural and linguistic transformation initiated by the Norman Conquest.^{1,2} Apart from the English treatment of the Scandinavian pagan past in the Old English poem *Beowulf*; scraps of lore in other Anglo-Saxon heroic poems, chronicles and Latin histories; 'impoverished chap-book stuff' from centuries later;³ and inferences Tolkien could make using his philological expertise and knowledge of Old Norse literature, he had little other than his imagination to go on – barely more than the names of a few gods, mythical creatures and heroic ancestors.⁴

However, a few Anglo-Saxon charms do provide tantalising glimpses of something more. This article explores the use that Tolkien may have made of one of these: an Old English charm in alliterative verse against a sudden stabbing pain.

The Charm

The charm is found only in the late-tenth or early-eleventh Anglo-Saxon medical collection known as the *Lacnunga* ('Remedies'). It is usually thought to comprise a prose recipe ('Against a sudden stabbing pain ...'), words for recitation ('They were loud ...'), and finally a line of prose ('Then take the knife ...'). The text of the charm has been published many times, most recently by myself.⁵ However, at the time Tolkien was writing and teaching, the edition most commonly used was that in Henry Sweet's *Anglo-Saxon Reader*, first published in 1876 but still the standard text-book in Oxford in the 1950s.⁶ The following translation uses the text in the 1908 edition of Sweet, but is slightly repunctuated.⁷

'Against a sudden pain: take feverfew and the red nettle that grows in through a house and dock; boil them in butter.

They were loud, lo, loud, when they rode over the hill (*hlæw*),
They were resolute⁸ (*anmode*) when they rode over the land.
Shield yourself now, so that you can survive this violence!

Out, little spear (*spere*), if you are in here!

I stood under a lime-wood shield, under a light shield,
Where the mighty women deliberated upon their power,
And they sent yelling spears (*garas*).

I will send another back to them,
A flying dart from the front in return.

Out, little spear, if it is in here!

A smith sat, forged a little knife (*seax*),
Badly wounded by iron.

Out, little spear, if you are in here!

Six smiths sat, made war-spears.

Out, spear! Not in spear!

If a piece of iron (*isenes dæl*) is in here,
The work of a witch (*hægtessan*), heat shall melt (*gemyltan*) it!
If you were shot in the skin, or were shot in the flesh,

Or were shot in the blood,

Or were shot in the limb, never may your life be injured.

If it were shot of gods (*esa*), or if it were shot of elves (*ylfa*),

Or if it were shot of witch (*hægtessan*), now I will help you.

This is your cure for shot of gods, this is your cure for shot of elves,

This is your cure for shot of a witch; I will help you.

Flee onto the mountain-top!

Be well! May the Lord help you.

Then take the knife. Put it in liquid.'

Interpreting the Charm

Our ignorance of Anglo-Saxon myth and folklore makes interpretation of many of the charm's details fraught with uncertainty; but, although this is frustrating for the probing scholar, it affords plenty of scope for imaginative interpretation by a myth-maker.

What seems clear is that the charm is spoken by a healer to help someone suffering from an acute stabbing pain of sudden and mysterious origin. He attributes the pain to a small piece of metal, imagined as a spear and, arguably, a knife; it has been shot into the victim by malicious riders, mighty women, gods, elves or a witch. The healer, who has apparently been attacked himself in the past and wants to retaliate, tries to extract the metal by commanding it to come out; he also tries to melt it, and perhaps to send it far away onto a mountain-top. These apparently different methods of cure — the melting seems to interrupt an otherwise logical sequence of extraction and banishment — might result from interpolation. Alternatively, they might exemplify, like the naming of various aggressors and body parts, the common tendency in charms towards universality of reference and defence — whatever the cause it will have been named, and whatever the cure the healer will work it.

The concept of attack by the projectiles of supernatural beings,

1. All quotations from *The Lord of the Rings* are from the seven-volume Millennium Edition published in 1999. References are to book number and page. I thank Professors Janet Bately and Jane Roberts for their comments on an earlier version of this paper; however, the ideas and any errors are mine alone.

2. See Tolkien (1981: letter 131), on which see Tolkien (1983: 22). Also relevant are Shippey (1992), Anna (1993), Agøy (1995), Hostetter and Smith (1995), Stenström (1995), Crashaw (2000) and Chance (2001). For what remains of Anglo-Saxon paganism see Wilson (1992), Page (1995), and North (1997).

3. The quotation is from Tolkien (1981: letter 131).

4. Principally, the gods Woden, punor, Tiw, the goddess Frig, and the semi-mythical Ing; the elves, giants/trolls (including ents), 'night-walkers', and a creature called the mare (as in modern English 'nightmare'); and the heroes Hengest and Horsa. Of these, elves, ents and trolls feature prominently in Tolkien's works; the gods figure only briefly in the development of *The Book of Lost Tales* (see Tolkien [1983: 23] and [1984: 290]); Hengest and Horsa also feature in *The Book of Lost Tales* (see Tolkien [1983: 23] and [1984: 290-4, 304, 323]); 'night-walkers' are mentioned in *The Lord of the Rings* (V, 189). On Tolkien's use of Ing and related matters see Hostetter and Smith (1995).

5. The most important editions are by Cockayne (1864-6: III, 1-80), Wülcker (1883), Grendon (1909), Dobbie (1942), Storms (1948), Grattan and Singer (1952), and Pettit (2001).

6. According to Martsch (1995: 294-5), *The Lord of the Rings* was 'finished' in 1948, but Tolkien kept revising the first volume until April 1953.

7. Sweet (1908: XIX, II., 104-5); similarly Sweet (1922: 105); these texts differ slightly from that found in the current edition of Sweet's *Reader*, Whitelock (1967: 100-1). In my translation, Old English words of particular importance are italicised in parenthesis. My edition of the *Lacnunga* contains a better text and translation, and a full commentary; see Pettit (2001: Entry CXXVII).

8. Literally 'of one mind.'

9. Or 'malice', 'malicious (attack).'

10. A difficult passage, often thought to be textually corrupt, and which has been interpreted in various ways down the years. Cockayne (1864-6) has 'Sat the smith; he sledged a sword. / Little iron, wound sharp.' I present a new reading in my edition.

11. Or 'it shall melt!'

particularly elves, is common in European folklore; many other instances of charms to combat it exist – in Tolkien's beloved Finnish, for example – but none I think has quite the dramatic intensity or imaginative appeal of this Old English example. It certainly impressed the American poet Ezra Pound, who with regard to the first two verse lines said: 'For twenty years thereabouts I have had in my head a few fragments of Anglo-Saxon.' He also translated it, 'made it anew.'¹²

Tolkien did not, as far as I know, formally translate the charm, but I think some aspects of it settled among 'the leaf-mould of [his] mind',¹³ to surface years later in a new context and form. As one student of Tolkien's use of other northern sources has said: 'His pattern of borrowing was unpredictable and elements borrowed were changed to meet his own purposes ... Tolkien's own imagination and creativity moulded, shaped, and sculpted elements from earlier stories to fit the needs of his own tales.'¹⁴

I hope to show how the charm may have informed Tolkien's conception of the Black Riders, their attack on Weathertop, and Elrond's cure of Frodo in chapters eleven ('A Knife in the Dark') and twelve ('Flight to the Ford') of the first book of *The Lord of the Rings* and the first chapter ('Many Meetings') of the second book. I do so not as a sterile, reductive exercise in literary dissection, but to enrich our sense of the work's 'rootedness' in the old Germanic world, to feel the reassuringly ancient bedrock from which much of its power derives.¹⁵

Tolkien's Use of the Charm in *The Lost Road* and *Quenta Silmarillion*

Before considering *The Lord of the Rings*, however, an instance of Tolkien's use of the charm in *The Lost Road* and the *Quenta Silmarillion* should be noted:

*Thus cwæth Ælfwine Widlast:
Fela bith on Westwegum werum uncuthra
wundra and wihta, wlitescene land,
eardgeard elfa, and esa bliss.
Lyt ænig wat hwylc his longath sie
tham the eftsithes eldo getwæfeth*¹⁶

"Thus said Ælfwine the far-travelled: 'There is many a thing in the West-regions unknown to men, marvels and strange beings, a land fair and lovely, the homeland of the Elves, and the bliss of the

Gods. Little doth any man know what longing is his whom old age cutteth off from return.'"

Here the alliterative pairing *elfa ... esa*, an exact cognate of which is well attested in Old Norse poetry, corresponds to the charm's *esa ... ylfa* 'of gods ... of elves', with the elements reversed (as at least once in Old Norse).¹⁷ That Tolkien is not simply translating the commoner Old Norse collocation is shown by the form *esa*; this form is phonologically unusual — one would expect *osa* in Old English — and is attested only in this charm.¹⁸

Tolkien's Use of the Charm in *The Lord of the Rings*

The Black Riders: Sound and Fury

Tolkien's concept of nine Black Riders (Ringwraiths/Nazgûl) was inspired, I believe, partly by Germanic myth and legend, not just by the Biblical Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.¹⁹ The riders in the first two lines of the Old English charm seem particularly suggestive of the Black Riders. Here, I propose, we find their loudness – be it their thundering hooves or piercing cry – and their single-minded determination in scouring the land.

The charm's riders are also 'shadowy' survivors of the Dark Ages; for we know no more about them than is told in the first two lines of the charm, and never shall – all else is supposition.²⁰ However, the reader naturally associates them with the mighty women, the witch, gods or elves mentioned later in the charm as the agents of harm.

Several of these associations raise others suggestive of the Black Riders, and can account for many of their characteristics:

1) Association with the gods (*esas*) and the hill (or burial mound) leads the Anglo-Saxon scholar to thoughts of the deified spirits of the ancestral dead, this being the first attested meaning of the earlier, cognate word *anses*.²¹ The Black Riders, we may recall, were originally men of the Second Age and so also ought, by rights, to be dead.

2) Association with the spear-throwing women suggests the Old Norse valkyries, themselves servants of a sinister lord, for whom they flew to battlefields in search of new warriors.²² Furthermore, valkyries are often thought to have flown through the air on steeds (compare 'rode over' in the charm?), like the Nazgûl later in *The Lord of the Rings*.

3) Association with the witch suggests the leader of the Black Riders, the Witch-King of Angmar.

4) Scholars also often connect the charm's riders with the Wild

12 See Robinson (1982 [1993]: 243-5). For another literary recreation see Brooke (1892: 159-61).

13. Tolkien's expression, quoted in Carpenter (1977: 182).

14. St. Clair (1995b: 70, 72).

15. I agree with Orchard (1993: 84) that 'we might well inquire after the ingredients, without wishing to see them whole, if only the better to savour the soup.' Bibire (1993: 125), with whom Tolkien would probably have agreed, takes the opposite view: 'This informing power of the Old English text ranges from trivially comic quotation, to the elegiac resignation of the end of *The Lord of the Rings*. We should not look for, and in general we do not find, specific narrative or motive relationships. Nor are they usually interesting when they can be found. The endless search for sources illuminates neither the original texts nor Tolkien's work, but (even if successful) reduces these great structures only to the constituent elements of which they may be made.'

16. Tolkien (1987: 44, 103, 203). These lines are also found in *The Notion Club Papers*; see Tolkien (1992: 244).

17. Stanza 17 of one manuscript of the Eddic poem *Skirnismál* ('Lay of Skirnir'); see Dronke (1997: 380, 407). For this poem's influence on Tolkien see also Shippey (2000a: 32-3). The Old English form of the word for 'god' is also found heading a list of the Valar in Tolkien (1986: 208): 'The chief gods are Fréan. ós (ése); and the charm's genitive plural form is seen in *Ésa-card* in Tolkien (1986: 283).

Another alliterative pairing — that of 'light' and 'linden' in Tolkien's poem 'Light as Leaf on Lindentree' — might also suggest use of the charm. This pairing is found in Old English only in this charm and in *Maxims B* ('light linden shield', ed. Shippey [1976: 68]). For Tolkien's poem, which was first published in 1925, and its textual history, see Tolkien (1985: 108-10, 120-3) and Tolkien (1988: 179-82, 187); the version in the *Lord of the Rings* (I, 252-4), told just before the attack on Weathertop, contains the line 'Of feet as light as linden-leaves.'

18. Tolkien's knowledge of Old English charms and remedies is also shown by his use of *Lacnunga*'s term *smeah wyrms* 'penetrating worm.' This contributed to his conception of Smaug in *The Hobbit*; see Shippey (1992: 82). It also partly inspired *Smeagol/Gollum*; see Pettit (2001: II, 34-5). Tom Bombadil's exorcism of the Barrow-wight in 'Fog on the Barrow-Downs' (I, 188) has, for me, a flavour of the Old English metrical charm 'against a wen'; see the edition by Dobbie (1942: 128).

Tolkien's interest in charms is also indicated by his repeated use of *galdor*, the Old English word for them. It is the name of a man in *The Silmarillion*, of an elf in *The Lord of the Rings*, and renders *Gondolin* (Stangaldor(burg), *Galdorfæsten*) and *Nargothrond* (Stangaldor(burg)) in a list of names in Tolkien (1986: 210). Tolkien also wrote a poem entitled 'Iumonna Gold Galdre Bewunden', based on a line about a *galdor* in *Beowulf*; see Carpenter (1977: 270) and Shippey (2000a: 278).

19. For one reader's association of the Black Riders with the Four Horsemen see Amon Hen 173 (January 2002), 31. This accords with the apocalyptic nature of the war against Sauron. Note also that the Black Riders' chief identifies himself as Death in V, 113.

For analysis of the Black Riders as wraiths see Shippey (2000a: 119-28) and Shippey (2000b). Their 'sniffing' in search of Frodo recalls that of the dragon in *Beowulf*, which 'sniffed along the stone' (I, 2288) and discovered a thief's footprints.

20. Consequently it is, at least for me, hard to imagine them other than as dark.

21. See Bosworth (1898: sv. ós) and North (1997: 136-7).

22. Cf. the Eddic poem *Völuspá*, in which the valkyries are said to be *görfar at riða grund* ('ready to ride the ground'); Dronke (1997: 15). See further Simck (1993: art. 'valkyries').

Tolkien's use of an Old English charm

Hunt. This was a band of ghostly huntsmen, sometimes led by the god Odin, that, like the Black Riders — 'hunters' (II, 60) who 'rode like a gale' (I, 233) and 'seemed ... to run like the wind' (I, 281)²³ — was associated with howling winds and storms.²⁴

For the number of Black Riders, Tolkien chose the commonest 'mystic' number in Germanic lore. The number nine's importance in England, and its applicability to evil creatures, is evident elsewhere in the *Lacnunga*; for example, from its prominence in the Old English Nine Herbs Charm, which the first and best-known early translation says avails 'against venom and vile things / And all the loathly ones, / That through the land rove,'²⁵ and 'against nine fugitives from glory, / Against nine poisons and against nine flying diseases.'²⁶

For the Riders' blackness and that of their horses, Tolkien may have drawn — although a single 'source' hardly seems necessary here — on a similar account from early England: an eerie entry for the year 1127 in a manuscript of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. It is often thought to describe the Wild Hunt. In translation it reads as follows:

'Nor shall it be thought strange what we say as truth, for it was fully known over all the land ... it was heard and seen by many men: many hunters hunting. The hunters were black, and great and loathly, and their hounds all black, and wide-eyed and loathly, and they rode on black horses and black he-goats. This was seen in the very deer-park in the town of Peterborough, and in all the woods from the same town to Stamford; and the monks heard the horns blowing that they blew at night. Truthful men who kept watch at night said that it seemed to them that there might well be about twenty or thirty horn-blowers.'²⁷

The Attack on Weathertop: A Cold Knife/Spear

Just as the charm's riders ride over, and arguably attack on, a hill, so Tolkien's Black Riders attack the Fellowship in a dell on the hill Weathertop.²⁸ This might be coincidental, but other details of the attack seem to echo the charm too.²⁹

Frodo is attacked by the Witch-King of Angmar ('Iron-Home'). He stabs Frodo with a knife that we later learn is a Morgul-knife ('black-magic knife'), so that Frodo feels 'a pain like a dart of poisoned ice pierce his left shoulder' (I, 258). Its point breaks off within him. All this finds parallel in the charm: there too we find both spear/dart and knife, and the embedded 'piece of iron' is

specifically attributed to the 'work of a witch.'

Furthermore, when Tolkien writes of a 'pain like a dart of poisoned ice', of a 'thin, piercing chill' (I, 257), and of 'a breath of deadly cold [that] pierced him like a spear' (I, 281),³⁰ he may be drawing on a figurative use of *gar*, a common Old English word for 'spear' used in the charm. This use is found only once in Old English, in a description of the torments of Hell in the poem *Genesis B*:

'Then an eastern wind comes in the very early morning,
intensely cold frost, always fire or *gar*.'³¹

Rightly or wrongly, *gar* was here interpreted early on as meaning 'piercing cold' rather than literally 'spear.'³²

The Morgul-Knife: A Herb for the Wound

After the attack on Frodo, Strider finds the Morgul-knife minus its point:

He stooped again and lifted up a long thin knife. There was a cold gleam in it. As Strider raised it they saw that near the end its edge was notched and the point was broken off. But even as he held it up in the growing light, they gazed in astonishment, for the blade seemed to melt, and vanished like a smoke in the air, leaving only the hilt in Strider's hand. (I, 260-61)

Although the charm also speaks of metal melting, Tolkien here drew on another Old English poem. Readers of *Beowulf* will recall the melting of the giant sword with which the hero kills the monster Grendel's mother:

'Then, because of the battle-gore, that sword, the fighting blade, began to dwindle into icicles of war. It was a marvel of marvels how it all melted away, just like the ice when the Father, he who has power over times and seasons, loosens the fetters of frost, unbinds the water's bonds.'³³

That *Beowulf* is Tolkien's inspiration here becomes even clearer when, later in the chapter, Strider shows the hilt to Glorfindel, who studies it and declares (I, 277): 'There are evil things written on this hilt.' Just so, *Beowulf* shows the hilt to the Danish king Hroðgar, who examines it and sees engraved, either in pictures or runes, the story of the Flood's destruction of giants.³⁴

23. Similarly I, 276, and I, 280 ('a rushing noise as if a wind were rising'). Note also Frodo's dream (I, 167): "There was a noise like a strong wind blowing, and on it was borne the sound of hoofs, galloping, galloping, galloping from the East. 'Black Riders!' thought Frodo as he wakened, with the sound of the hoofs still echoing in his mind."

24. On the Wild Hunt see de Vries (1956-7: Index under 'Wilde Jagd'), Briggs (1976: art. 'Wild Hunt, the'), Simek (1993: art. 'Wild Hunt'), Orchard (1997: art. 'wild hunt'), Jones and Pennick (1995: 160), and Folklore, Myths and Legends of Britain (p. 105). That the Wild Hunt is behind the depiction of the Black Riders is suggested by the similarity of their demise. Just as the Black Riders' horses were drowned in the Ford of Bruinen so, according to a late-twelfth-century account by Walter Map, the ghostly hunt of the British King Herla was drowned in the river Wye; see Briggs (1976: art. 'King Herla'). Tolkien doubtless knew Map's account at first hand. It is analogous to the Fairy Hunt of the Middle English poem *Sir Orfeo*, the standard edition of which is indebted to Tolkien's scholarship. For the original text and Tolkien's translation of the Fairy Hunt in this poem see, respectively, Bliss (1966: 26) and Tolkien (1975: 122). Tolkien's early, in-depth study of *Sir Orfeo* is evident from his glossary thereto in Sisam (1921).

Aragorn's leading of the Dead into battle is probably also indebted to the Wild Hunt. Note especially (V, 61): "... folk that were afield cried in terror and ran like hunted deer. Ever there rose the same cry in the gathering night: 'The King of the Dead! The King of the Dead is come upon us!' ... the Grey Company in their haste rode like hunters..."

25. Cockayne (1864-6: III, 33).

26. Pettit (2001: I, 65). The numeric balance determined by Elrond before the Fellowship leaves Rivendell ('The Company of the Ring shall be Nine; and the Nine Walkers shall be set against the Nine Riders that are evil', II, 80) may recall the Nine Herbs Charm's 'These nine (?) fight against nine poisons.' The same charm includes at least one fighting plant ('This is the herb which fought against the snake'), a concept that might have made a small contribution to Tolkien's Ents.

27. Savage (1983: 261); see also Swanton (2000: 258). For the original text see Plummer (1892, 1899: I, 258, 304) or Clark (1970: 50). Tolkien, whether consciously or not, may have transferred the horn-blowing of these twelfth-century hunters to that of the hobbits, because other elements of the account — the monks listening and the night watchmen — find parallel in Frodo and Strider (I, 233-4):

In the early light Frodo woke from deep sleep, suddenly, as if some sound or presence had disturbed him. He saw that Strider was sitting alert in his chair ... Frodo soon went to sleep again; but his dreams were again troubled with the noise of wind and galloping hoofs. The wind seemed to be curling round the house and shaking it; and far off he heard a horn blowing wildly.

28. Cf. the description in 'Flight to the Ford' later (I, 280): 'At the same moment the black horses leaped down the hill in pursuit, and from the Riders came a terrible cry, such as Frodo had heard filling the woods with horror in the Eastfarthing far away.'

29. For earlier versions of this scene see Tolkien (1988: chap. X).

30. Note also the description of a Nazgul's cry in IV, 11: "... it pierced them with cold blades of horror and despair..."

31. My translation. The original text is in Sweet's *Anglo-Saxon Reader* and in Doane (1991).

32. See Doane (1991: 265). Cf. the association of spears and cold in *Beowulf*: 'many a morning-cold spear (*gar*)'; ed. Swanton (1978), lines 3021-2.

33. Swanton (1978: 111).

34. I wonder whether it is mere coincidence, then, that the Black Riders are drowned in a flood — as in the account by Walter Map mentioned above — but, like the giants of *Beowulf*, not annihilated thereby (II, 11-12).

Mallorn XL

However, Strider's actions immediately after finding the knife recall the world of charms and herbal remedies:

He sat down on the ground, and taking the dagger-hilt laid it on his knees, and he sang over it a slow song in a strange tongue. Then setting it aside, he turned to Frodo and in a soft tone spoke words the others could not catch. From the pouch at his belt he drew out the long leaves of a plant. ... He threw the leaves into boiling water and bathed Frodo's shoulder.' (I, 261)

The Cure: 'It Shall Melt'

Frodo's life is saved by the Elven lord Elrond, but details of how the cure was effected are given only afterwards at second-hand. We do not know what, if any, healing words Elrond spoke, but the charm's influence can, I think, be detected from Gandalf's description of the cure to Frodo:

'Elrond is a master of healing, but the weapons of our Enemy are deadly. To tell you the truth, I had very little hope; for I suspected that there was some fragment of the blade still in the closed wound. But it could not be found until last night. Then Elrond removed a splinter. It was deeply buried, and it was

working inwards.'

Frodo shuddered, remembering the cruel knife with notched blade that had vanished in Strider's hands. 'Don't be alarmed!' said Gandalf. 'It is gone now. It has been melted.' (II, 8-9)

Elrond, then, apparently had to search hard for the sliver³⁵ – just like, it may be thought, the charm's healer with his repeated 'if you are in here' and 'if you were shot in the skin ... flesh ... blood ... limb.' Having found it, Elrond extracted it – compare the charm's repeated command 'Out!' He then melted it, as in the charm's 'heat shall melt it!'³⁶

Conclusion

Only in this Old English charm, I believe, do we find brought together so many of the ideas evident in the attack on Weathertop and its aftermath in *The Lord of the Rings*: mysterious riders attacking on a hill; a stabbing by a witch-figure associated with iron; an embedded shard of metal causing pain likened to that of a spear or knife; and an experienced healer who extracts and melts the shard. On this basis, I submit that this humble literary artefact caught the imagination, 'came like native air to the mind',³⁷ of the writer of one of the greatest works of imaginative fiction.

Note on Letter 236

Tolkien discusses matters touching on this Old English charm in a postscript to a letter written in December 1961.³⁸ He observes how little is known about the Anglo-Saxon elf, and says that it was associated with rheumatism, toothache and nightmares. He states that "there are no songs or stories preserved about Elves or Dwarves in ancient English, and little enough in any other Germanic language. Words, a few names, that is about all. I do not recall any Dwarf or Elf that plays an actual part in any story save Andvari in the Norse versions of the Nibelung matter. There is no story attached to Eikinskjalði, save the one that I invented for Thorin Oakenshield ... In all Old English poetry 'elves' (*ylfe*) occurs once only, in *Beowulf*."

Although rheumatism was an affliction early scholars often identified with the charm's 'stabbing pain', Tolkien here overlooks the charm's two instances of *ylfa*.³⁹ However, little should be made of this, because he certainly *did* know the charm. Indeed, his whole statement shows a serious lapse of memory. For in it he not only overlooks the charm, but also well-known stories in the Old Norse *Poetic Edda* and *Prose Edda* that he had read and used.⁴⁰

The *Poetic Edda* includes three poems in which dwarves or

elves play a major part: *Völuspá* ('Prophecy of the Seeress'), which gives not just many of their names, but also details of their creation, migration and reaction to Ragnarok; *Völundarkviða* ('Lay of Völundr'), about the elf-smith Völundr (Old English *Weland*); and *Alvíssmál* ('Words of Alviðs'), about the dwarf Alviðs. The *Prose Edda* tells of the origin of dwarves (drawing upon *Völuspá*), of the dwarves East, West, North and South who support the sky, of two dwarves' creation and loss of the mead of poetry, and of how the 'black-elves' Brokk and Eitri forged wondrous gifts for the gods.⁴¹

Tolkien's knowledge of these works is obvious from his writings: for example, he took the names of Gandalf and the dwarves in *The Hobbit* from *Völuspá* (which is also found in *The Prose Edda*);⁴² the conversation with Smaug is indebted to the Eddic *Fáfnismál* ('Lay of Fáfnir'); the Misty Mountains and tribes or orcs probably have origins in the Eddic *Skírnismál* ('Lay of Skírnir'); the Eddic *Helgakviða Hiörvarðssonar* ('Lay of Helgi Hiörvarðsson') – or *Alvíssmál* – is the likely inspiration for the story told in *The Hobbit* of the trolls who turn into stone because they are kept talking until dawn;⁴³ and *Alvíssmál* might also be a source for the notion that gods, elves, dwarves and giants have different languages.

35. We know from earlier in the story that Frodo's 'wound was small, and ... already closed' (I, 268).

36. In an earlier version of the wound's cure, published in Tolkien (1988: 207), Gandalf says merely: 'Elrond bathed and doctored it for hours last night after you were brought in. He has great power and skill, but I was very anxious, for the craft and malice of the Enemy is very great.'

37. The quotation is from Briggs (1976: art. 'Tolkien, J.R.R.').

38. Tolkien (1981: letter 236).

39. He might have been misled by the standard dictionary of Old English (Bosworth 1898: sv. *ælf*). If he were quickly consulting this work, he might have deduced that *Beowulf*'s was the only poetic instance of the word, because it gives the charm's instances of *ylfa* under a different headword (*ilf*, *e*), to which the entry for *ælf* lacks an accurate cross-reference.

40. Tolkien was, of course, expert in Old Norse, and makes detailed reference to Eddic poems in his scholarly writings; see, for example, Tolkien (1936) and (1982). On Tolkien's knowledge of these and other sources see Shippey (1992: Appendix A), Heinemann (1993), St. Clair (1995a), and Day (1994: chap. 3). Tolkien read the Norse myths not only privately, but also with 'The Coalbiters' – the informal Old Norse reading group at Oxford which, according to Humphrey Carpenter (1977: 152) (see also [1978: 56]), fulfilled its aim of 'reading all the principal Icelandic sagas and finally the Elder Edda.' Tolkien composed an Eddic poem, *Völsungakviða En Nýja* ('New Lay of the Volsungs'), to fill a gap in the *Poetic Edda*; see Tolkien (1981: letter 295, and p. 452). According to Bibire (1993: 124), he also translated the Eddic poem *Atlamál* ('Lay of Atli') into Old English.

41. For a full edition of the *Poetic Edda* see Neckel and Kuhn (1983). Translations include Bellows (1923) and Larrington (1996). The *Prose Edda* is edited by Faulkes (1982) and (1998), and translated by Faulkes (1987). Other well-known Old Norse stories about dwarves could be mentioned.

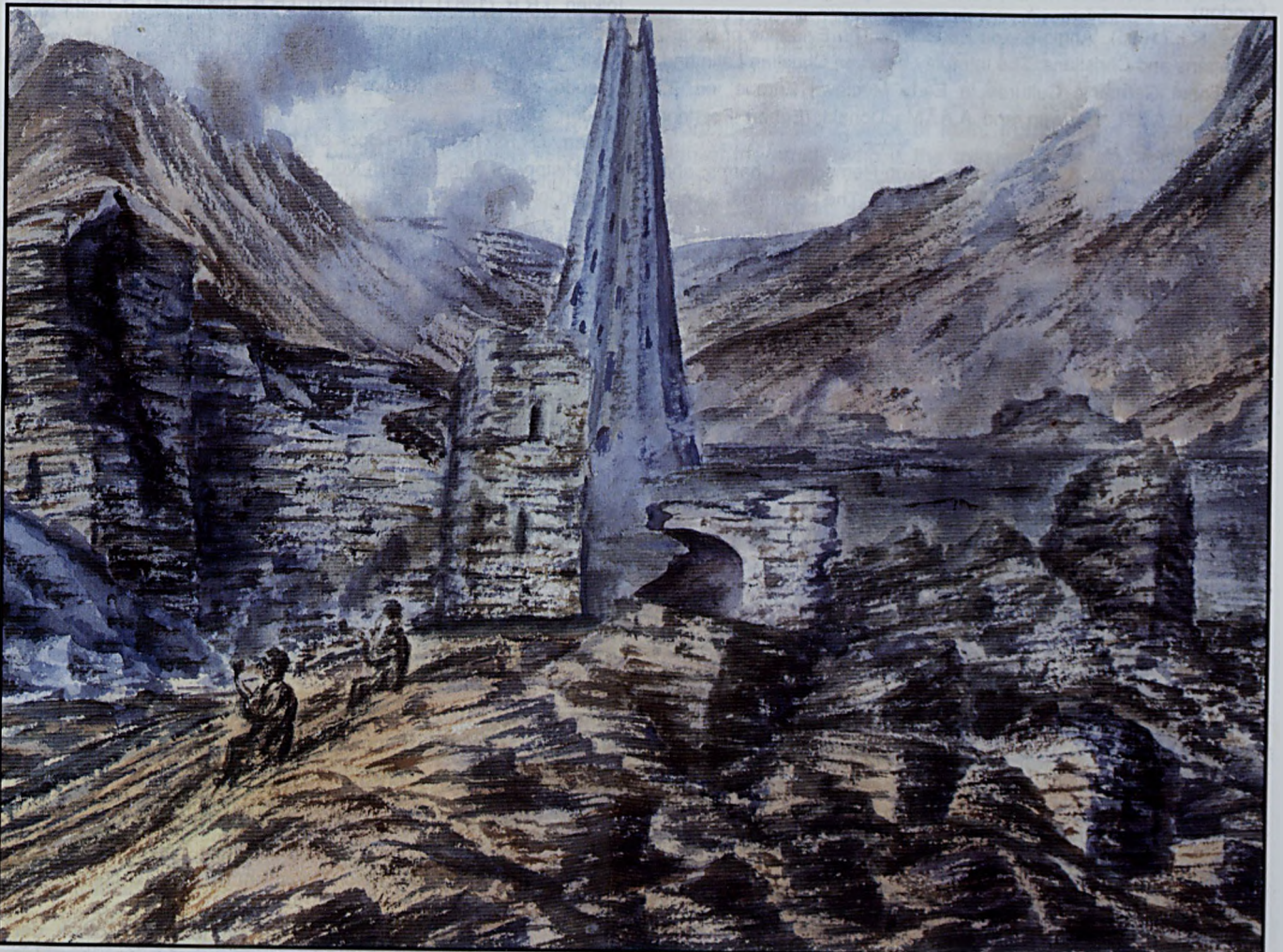
42. See Allan (1978: 220-6).

43. Tolkien (1937: chap. 2); also referred to in *The Lord of the Rings* (I, 271). The trolls and their dwarf-filled sacks doubtless derive from *Beowulf*'s Grendel and the use to which he puts his glove.

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Continued on page 44



The ruin of Isengard

John Ellison

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