



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **The Bones in the Soup: The Anglo-Saxon Flavour of Tolkien's The Hobbit**

Porck, M.H.

### **Citation**

Porck, M. H. (2012). The Bones in the Soup: The Anglo-Saxon Flavour of Tolkien's The Hobbit. *Lembas Extra*, 77-84. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/21045>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/21045>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

---

---

# LEMBAS EXTRA

---

---

REDACTIE: CÉCILE VAN ZON

BIJLAGE BIJ LEMBAS 155

---

---

## The Bones in the Soup: the Anglo-Saxon Flavor of Tolkien's *The Hobbit*

*Thijs Porck*

*M. H. (Thijs) Porck (1984) studied medieval history and English language and culture at Leiden University. Currently, he works as a PhD-student/teacher for Leiden University, studying the perception of old age in Anglo-Saxon England and teaching Old English, Middle English and the history of the English language. This article, in a slightly different form, was presented as a lecture for prospective students at the 2012 Open Dag at Leiden University.*

*M.H. Porck, MPhil, Leiden University, Leiden University Institute for Cultural Disciplines, Department of English Language and Culture, P.N. van Eyckhof 4, 2311 BV Leiden, The Netherlands, m.h.porck@hum.leidenuniv.nl*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

"In Dasent's words I would say: We must be satisfied with the soup that is set before us, and not desire to see the bones of the ox out of which it has been boiled."<sup>1</sup> By citing these words in his article *On Fairy-Stories*, Tolkien discouraged scholars to study the sources and material (the bones) out of which a particular story (the soup) originated. A too rigid focus on the origin of stories, Tolkien argued, could lead to the devaluation of literary masterpieces, such as the Old English epic *Beowulf*, as mere combinations of older folklore motives. Remarkably, despite Tolkien's discouragement, the bulk of scholarship on his Middle-earth has focused on the ox's bones rather than the soup.

In mapping out the various sources of Tolkien's

Middle-earth, however, scholars have shown that this endeavour need not diminish a work's value. Rather, these studies have provided a better understanding of Tolkien's methods of composition and have often uncovered nuances or details that would otherwise have been left unnoticed. A case in point is Shippey's excellent book *The Road to Middle-earth*, which provides sources and analogues for Tolkien's stories in order "to provide material for a more thorough and appreciative reading of Tolkien".<sup>2</sup> Other publications do not focus on Tolkien's methodology in adapting his sources per se, but, instead, seek to highlight the relevance and inspiring nature of the source material itself. By studying how, for example, Old English and Old Norse material influenced Tolkien's fantasy books and their subsequent movie adaptations, these publications show that the academic study of these medieval languages is still relevant in a modern age.<sup>3</sup>

The present paper aims to contribute to these source studies by focusing on the Old English sources of *The Hobbit*, which have not received as much attention as those in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*. After describing the relationship between Tolkien and Old English, the Anglo-Saxon material will be discussed that either directly influenced *The Hobbit* or attests to the fact that *The Hobbit* was written by an author who was familiar with the culture and writings of the early medieval inhabitants of Anglo-Saxon England. By reading *The Hobbit* from an Anglo-Saxonist point of view, we not only learn more about what in-

1) J.R.R. Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, in: C. Tolkien (Ed.), J.R.R. Tolkien: *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* (London 1983), 120.

2) T.A. Shippey, *The Road to Middle-Earth* (London 1982), 215.

3) For example: C. Tolley, "Is It Relevant? Old English Influence on *The Lord of the Rings*", in: R. North & J. Allard (Eds.), *Beowulf & Other Stories: A New Introduction to Old English, Old Icelandic and Anglo-Norman Literatures* (Harlow 2007), 38-62.

spired Tolkien to compose his narrative, we can also highlight the enduring value of studying his original sources.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. TOLKIEN AND OLD ENGLISH

Old English language and literature played a major role in Tolkien's life: he studied Old English as a university professor, Old English was one of the many languages he would compose poetry in, and, finally, Old English has clearly left its traces in his literary work.

Tolkien studied comparative philology and early Germanic languages and literature at Oxford. Later, he would become a leading specialist in Old English, Old Norse and Middle English. His academic career started after World War I, when he began working for the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) and contributed to the definitions and etymologies of words in the range *waggle* to *warlock*. He became a university professor of English Language at the University of Leeds in 1920. During his period there, he published *A Middle English Vocabulary* (1922) and, with E.V. Gordon, an edition of the Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1925). Tolkien subsequently held the Rawlinson and Bosworth Professorship of Anglo-Saxon at the University of Oxford from 1925 to 1945 and then became Merton Professor of English Language and Literature until his retirement in 1959. His most well-known contribution to the academic study of Old English is his 1936 lecture *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*, which guided *Beowulf* scholarship into new directions.<sup>5</sup>

Studying the remnants of Old English literature appears not to have been enough for Tolkien: he also set out to compose some Old English poetry of his own. His works in Old English include translated nursery rhymes, riddles and a celebratory poem for W.H. Auden.<sup>6</sup> He also wrote songs in Old English and some of these, such as *Eadig beo þu* [Blessed be you] which could be sung to the melody of *Twinkle, Twinkle, little star*, were included in the collection *Songs for the Philologists*, of which only a few copies survive.<sup>7</sup>

Tolkien's expertise in Old English language and literature, finally, is also clearly present in his literary work. Various names of places and characters in Mid-

dle-earth, for example, can be traced back to Old English words. First of all, the name Middle-earth itself is based on the Old English *middangeard* "world, earth".<sup>8</sup> Other place names derived from Old English words include:

Isengard	< <i>isen geard</i> "iron court" or "iron enclosure"
Orthanc	< <i>orþanc</i> "intelligence"
Eodoras	< plural form of <i>eodor</i> "enclosure, house"
Meduseld	< <i>meduseld</i> "mead hall"
Dwimorberg	< <i>dwimor beorg</i> "ghost mountain"

Old English personal names are found mainly among the inhabitants of Rohan. The Rohirrim's love of horses is reflected in personal names containing the element "éo-", which is derived from Old English *eoh* "war-horse", as in Éowyn (*wynn* "joy"), Éomer (*mære* "famous, great") and Éomund (*mund* "protector, guardian"). King Théoden's name is derived from the Old English word *ðeoden* "ruler, king", giving us the somewhat whimsical name King King. This philological jest is continued if we look at the names of Théoden's father and grandfather (Thengel and Fengel) which derive, similarly, from Old English words denoting "prince" or "king" (*ðengel* and *fengel*).

The Old English poem *Beowulf*, in particular, was one of Tolkien's most inspirational sources. *Beowulf* is an epic which relates the adventures of the hero Beowulf, who, as a young man, comes to the aid of the old king of the Danes, Hrothgar, whose hall is terrorized by the monster Grendel. After describing how Beowulf defeated both Grendel and Grendel's mother, the poem fast-forwards fifty years: Beowulf is now an old king and his lands are threatened by a dragon. With the help of a young warrior, the elderly Beowulf manages to defeat the dragon and, after laying eyes on the dragon's treasure, Beowulf dies of his wounds. The poem ends with the description of Beowulf's burial.

Tolkien used *Beowulf's* description of the dragon's treasure, "iumonna gold galdre bewunden" [gold of ancient men, wound round with a spell],<sup>9</sup> as the initial title and inspiration for his poem that is now known as *The Hoard*. This poem by Tolkien describes an ancient, cursed treasure, guarded by a dragon that is ultimately defeated by a fearless warrior who, like Beowulf,

4) This article is based on a lecture for prospective students of Old English language and literature and presupposes only a basic acquaintance with the characters and plots of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

5) T.A. Shippey, "Tolkien's Academic Reputation Now", in: T.A. Shippey, *Roots and Branches: Selected Papers on Tolkien* (Zollikofen 2007), 203–212.

6) For these works, see J.D. Rateliff, *The History of the Hobbit* (London 2008) pp. 65, 170–171, 190–191.

7) Three of Tolkien's Old English poems for this collection are reprinted in Shippey, *Road to Middle-Earth*, 227–233.

8) All definitions of Old English words were taken from J.R. Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Toronto 1960). Throughout this article, I have decided not to indicate the length of the Old English vowels.

9) *Beowulf*, l. 3052. All translations from Old English, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

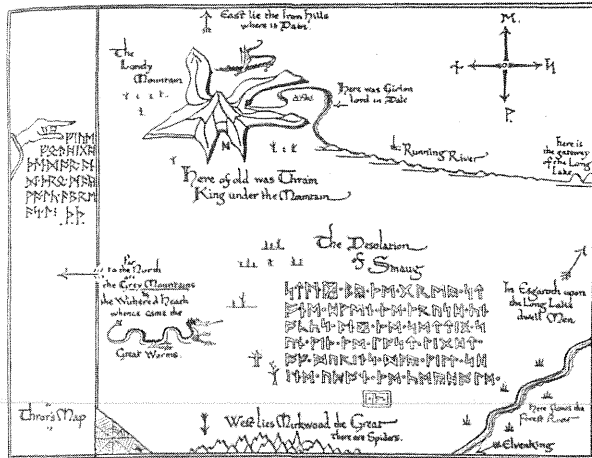


Figure 1. Thorin's map

cannot enjoy his newly acquired wealth.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, various scenes in *The Lord of the Rings* reveal the influence of *Beowulf*. Gandalf's approach and reception at the hall of King Théoden, for example, resembles Beowulf's arrival at the hall of King Hrothgar and Théoden's funeral is comparable to that of Beowulf himself.<sup>11</sup> As we shall see below, the influence of *Beowulf* is also traceable in *The Hobbit* and has definitely inspired Tolkien's depictions of Gollum and Smaug.

### 3. MAPS AND RUNES: THORIN'S MAP

The first thing any reader of *The Hobbit* sees upon opening the book is the illustration of Thorin's map (see Figure 1). The map directs Thorin, the dwarves and Bilbo Baggins to the Lonely Mountain of Erebor and indicates the secret passage which would allow them to defeat Smaug the dragon and retake the treasures. According to Shippey, the depiction of Thorin's map "added nothing to the story but decoration and a 'Here be tygers' feel of quaintness".<sup>12</sup> I would argue, however, that Thorin's map firmly places *The Hobbit* in its medieval and, ultimately, Anglo-Saxon setting and, as such, adds to the work's distinctive flavour.

In form and orientation, Thorin's map is a medieval map and has an Anglo-Saxon analogue in the eleventh-century, Anglo-Saxon Cotton World Map (see Figure 2).<sup>13</sup> Tolkien's map outlines the area around the Lonely Mountain through illustrations, such as the

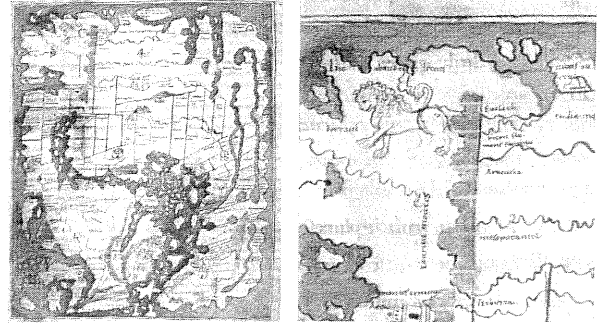


Figure 2. The Anglo-Saxon Cotton World Map (left) with Britain in the lower left corner. On the right: a detail of the map, showing a depiction of a lion and a mountain. London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B. v., fol. 56v.

mountain and the dragon, as well as writing, such as "West lies Mirkwood the Great, there are Spiders". In a similar vein, the Cotton World Map has simple illustrations of mountains, such as the "mons aureus" [golden mountain], and a lion with an accompanying Latin description "hic abundant leones" [here are many lions]. A more fundamental similarity between Thorin's map and medieval maps, including the Cotton World Map, is the fact that East rather than North appears at the top; an orientation which was the norm in medieval maps until the sixteenth century.<sup>14</sup> As such, while to the modern reader Tolkien's dwarven map may come across as "quaint", it would seem like an ordinary map to an Anglo-Saxon.

In Rivendell, Elrond makes an important discovery: Thorin's map contains moon-letters which reveal when and how the secret passageway to the Lonely Mountain will be made visible. The discovery of this magical inscription emphasizes the second Anglo-Saxon aspect of Thorin's map: the runes. The runes that Tolkien used, as he noted himself, were "similar to, but not identical with the runes of Anglo-Saxon inscriptions".<sup>15</sup> Aside from the long message in moon-runes, Thorin's map contains two other instances of runes: the compass points are marked with runes, reading clockwise E, S, W and N, and a short message in regular runes, which describes the secret doorway as "five feet high the dor and three may walk abreast. Th. Th.". This second runic message is accompanied by a drawing of a hand. This drawing is reminiscent of the

10) D.A. Anderson, *The Annotated Hobbit* (London 2003), 335–338.

11) Tolley, "Is it Relevant?", 42–47. R.H. Bremmer Jr., "Zin in Tolkiens In de ban van de ring", in: B. Verstappen (Ed.), *Vreemde verhalen, goed nieuws? Over Harry Potter en andere helden* (Nijmegen 2003), 81.

12) Shippey, *Road to Middle-Earth*, 76.

13) For a complete description of the Cotton World Map and its context, see P. McGurk, "The Mappa Mundi", in: P. McGurk, D.N. Dunville, M.R. Godden & A. Knock (Eds.), *An Eleventh-Century Anglo-Saxon Illustrated Miscellany: British Library Cotton Tiberius B.V Part I, Together with Leaves from British Library Cotton Nero D. II* (Copenhagen 1983), 79–87. See also: M.K. Foys, "The Virtual Reality of the Anglo-Saxon Mappamundi", *Literature Compass* 1 (2003), 1–17.

14) E. Edson, *Mapping Time and Space: How Medieval Mapmakers Viewed Their World* (London 1997), 16.

15) For further discussion on Tolkien's runes, see Anderson, *Annotated Hobbit*, 378–379.

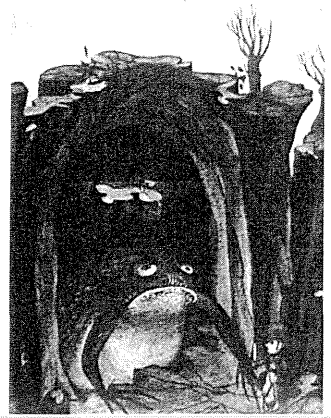


Figure 4. Depictions of Gollum in, from left to right, the 1962 Swedish edition, the 1962 Portuguese edition and the 1967 German edition

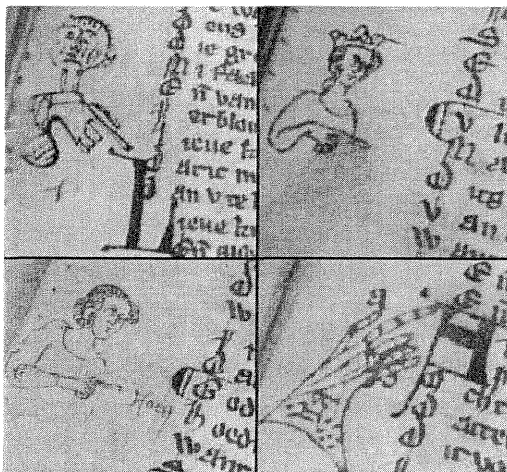


Figure 3. Examples of medieval manicipulae, drawings of hands to indicate passages of interest. The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, KA 24

medieval practice of drawing little hands, *manicipulae*, in the margins of a manuscript to indicate passages of interest (see Figure 3).

The Anglo-Saxons rarely used runes for writing on parchment. Instead, they used their runes to inscribe short messages on wood, stone, bone and metal. These messages usually denoted little more than the owner and the material out of which the object was made. Runic inscriptions could also simply identify the object, as is the case for the late eighth-century Wheatley Hill ring: “ring ic hatt” [I am called ring].<sup>16</sup> Inscriptions of a more magical nature, such as those on Thrór’s map, also occur. The Kingmoor Ring and the Bramham Moor Ring, for example, both contain a magical formula, inscribed in runes.<sup>17</sup> Tolkien will certainly have been familiar with these rings and, quite possibly, they partly inspired the one that Gollum called

“My precious”.

#### 4. MONSTERS AND RIDDLES: RIDDLES IN THE DARK

What kind of creature is Gollum? Readers of the *Lord of the Rings* know that Gollum was once Sméagol, one of the river folk, not unlike a hobbit. In the first edition of *The Hobbit*, however, Tolkien was rather more obscure in his description of Gollum, noting only:

Deep down here by the dark water lived old Gollum. I don’t know where he came from, nor who or what he was. He was Gollum – as dark as darkness, except for two big round pale eyes. He had a boat...<sup>18</sup>

The only detail of Gollum’s physical appearance that is constantly stressed in *The Hobbit* is his eyes, from which a light “burned with a pale flame”.<sup>19</sup>

The lack of a detailed description had an unfortunate side effect. Some illustrators of foreign editions of *The Hobbit* took quite some liberty in drawing Gollum and, as a result, Gollum was depicted a giant six times the size of Bilbo in the 1962 Swedish edition, a bearded brute in the 1962 Portuguese edition and as an immense toad-like creature in the 1967 German edition (see Figure 4).<sup>20</sup> Tolkien criticized these monstrous depictions in a letter to his publishers in 1963: “Gollum should not be made a monster, as he is by practically all other illustrators in disregard of the text.”<sup>21</sup> To avoid any further monstrous representations of Gollum, Tolkien changed his initial description of Gollum

16) R.I. Page, *An Introduction to English Runes* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Woodbridge 2006), 169.

17) *Ibidem*, 112–113.

18) *The Hobbit* (1<sup>st</sup> edition), 118–119 (chapter 5). All page numbers refer to the second, revised edition of Anderson, *Annotated Hobbit*.

19) *The Hobbit*, 129.

20) Illustrations of various foreign editions are available online on the website H.O.B.B.I.T.I.S.H. (Hobbitish Or “Bilbo Baggins” Illustrated”, The International Sketched Hobbit), <http://pblancho.free.fr/>. Accessed May 18, 2012.

21) Anderson, *Annotated Hobbit*, 133.

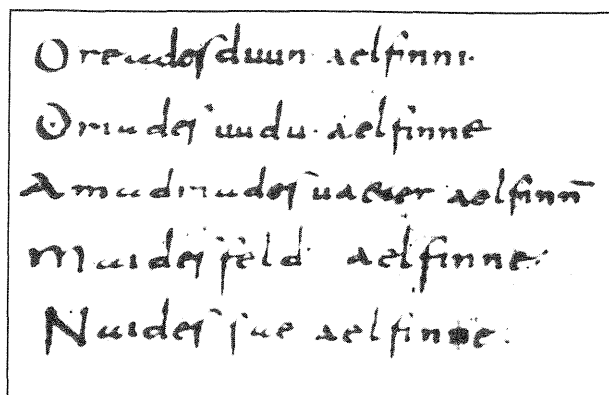


Figure 5. Catalogue of elves in a Latin-Old English glossary, the elf-terms translate the Latin words *oreades*, *driades*, *amadriades*, *maides* and *naiades*. Leiden, Vossius QL 106, fol. 10r.

in the third, revised edition of *The Hobbit* (published from 1966 onwards):

Deep down here by the dark water lived old Gollum, *a small slimy creature*. I don't know where he came from, nor who or what he was. He was Gollum – as dark as darkness, except for two big round pale eyes in his *thin* face. He had a *little* boat... (alterations are in italics)

Why didn't Tolkien choose to describe Gollum in a more detailed manner in the first place? The answer lies in *Beowulf*, as Tolkien's description of Gollum has much in common with that of the monster Grendel in the Old English poem. During the whole poem, the *Beowulf*-poet never reveals what sort of monster Grendel is, calling it by generic names, such as "grimma gæst" [grim spirit], "feond mancynnes" [enemy of mankind] and "manscaða" [vile ravager], and noting, in an authorial comment that closely resembles Tolkien's, that Grendel was a "sceaðona ic nat hwylc" [an enemy, I do not know what kind].<sup>22</sup> As with Gollum, only the eyes of Grendel are described in some detail: "him of eagum stod ligge gelicost leoht unfæger" [from his eyes issued a distorted light, most like a flame].<sup>23</sup> With his description of Gollum, then, Tolkien appears to have drawn on the description of Grendel in *Beowulf*. Like the *Beowulf*-poet before him, Tolkien must have realised that the omission of descriptive details is an effective narrative method which stimulates the reader to participate actively with the story and imagine his own nightmare being.

Aside from the similarities between Gollum and Grendel, the chapter *Riddles in the Dark* exposes an-

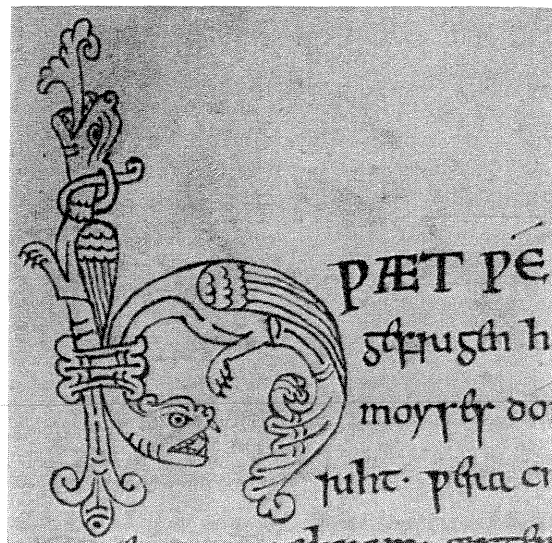


Figure 6. Two dragons form the letter 'h' of "Hwæt", the first word of the Old English poem *Exodus*. Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius MS 2, p. 143

other trace of Anglo-Saxon culture: the riddles. As many scholars have noted, the riddles told by Gollum and Bilbo bring to mind the various Old English riddles that are found in the tenth-century Exeter Book.<sup>24</sup> By means of illustration, Riddles 45 and 69 are reproduced below:

Ic on wincle gefrægn weaxan nathwæt,  
þindan ond þunian, þecene hebban;  
on þæt banlease bryd grapode,  
hygewlonc hondum, hrægle þeahte  
þrindende þing þeodnes dohtor.<sup>25</sup>

[I learned of something unknown growing in a corner, swelling up and standing out, lifting its cover; a proud bride grabbed upon that boneless thing with hands, the daughter of a lord covered the swelling thing with a garment.]

Wundor wearð on wege; wæter wearð to bane.<sup>26</sup>

[A miracle happened along the way; water became bone.]

The Exeter Book does not provide the answers to the ninety or so riddles it contains and, therefore, remains an interesting source to study. The answers to the two riddles above are commonly accepted to be "dough" and "ice". Despite the fact that most of the riddles told

22) *Beowulf*, ll. 102, 164, 712, 274.

23) *Ibidem*, ll. 726–727.

24) Anderson, *Annotated Hobbit*, 131. Rateliff, *History of the Hobbit*, 171.

25) G.P. Krapp & E. Van Kirk Dobbie (Eds.), *The Exeter Book* (London & New York 1936), 205.

26) *Ibidem*, 231.

by Gollum and Bilbo have analogues elsewhere, none of the Exeter Book riddles were used by Tolkien for this chapter.<sup>27</sup> Yet these Anglo-Saxon riddles may definitely have been on his mind when he described the riddle game as “sacred and of immense antiquity”.<sup>28</sup> One of Bilbo’s riddles does seem to have a clear Old English basis:

An eye in a blue face  
saw an eye in a green face.  
“That eye is like to this eye”  
Said the first eye,  
“But in low place  
Not in high place.”<sup>29</sup>

The answer to this riddle, “Sun on the daisies”, reveals, as Anderson explains, that the riddle is a clever play on the etymology of *daisy*. The word was derived from the Old English *dæges eage* ‘the day’s eye’; the term ‘eye’ alluding to the fact that the flower opens its petals at sunrise and closes them in the evening.<sup>30</sup>

##### 5. WHAT’S IN A WORD? WARGS, BEORN, SPIDERS AND ELVES

For several characters and creatures in *The Hobbit*, Tolkien appears to have drawn inspiration from Old English words. The evil wolf-like wargs that harass Bilbo and the dwarves after escaping the Misty Mountains, for example, are based on the Old English word *wearg*, which means both “wolf” and “outlaw, criminal”. Similarly, the hospitable character Beorn, who is a warrior by day and a bear by night, exhibits the dual meaning of the Old English word *beorn*: “bear” and “warrior”.<sup>31</sup> Old English words for “spider”, such as *attecoppa* and *loppe*, are found in the lines “Attercop! Attercop!” and “Lazy Lob and crazy Cob”, sung by Bilbo to annoy the spiders of Mirkwood.<sup>32</sup>

Tolkien’s characterization of the elves in *The Hobbit* also draws, in part, on Old English vocabulary. The Wood-elves of Mirkwood, who capture the dwarves, are described in an ambivalent manner. On the one hand, they are characterised as distrusting strangers, and “more dangerous and less wise” than the High

elves of the West. On the other hand, Tolkien remarks “[s]till elves they were and remain, and that is Good People”.<sup>33</sup> In Anglo-Saxon England, we find a similar dual attitude towards elves. Their dark and dangerous side is attested by Old English words for nightmare and physical ailments, such as *ælf-aðl* “elf disease, nightmare”, *ælf-siden* “elf’s influence, nightmare”, *ælf-sogoða* “hiccough” and *wæterælf-aðl* “water elf disease”.<sup>34</sup> These last two words suggest that elves might cause diseases and this idea also turns up in Old English medical texts. The “Charm against a sudden stitch”, for example, attributes a shooting pain or cramp to “ylfa scot” [elves’ shot] and another text provides instruction on what to do if your horse was shot by an elf.<sup>35</sup> That elves could be considered malignant creatures is also found in *Beowulf*, which describes the elves as monstrous descendants of Cain: “þanon untydras ealle onwocon: eotenas ond ylfe ond orneas swylce gigantas” [thence (from Cain) all monsters awoke: giants and elves and orcs/monsters, as well as giants].<sup>36</sup>

There is also evidence that the Anglo-Saxons considered the elves to be a positive presence. An example of this is the word *ælf-sciene* “bright as an elf, beautiful, radiant” which is used twice in the extant corpus of Old English texts to describe two Biblical women: Judith and Sarah. The element *ælf-* was also used in personal names, which equally suggests that parents considered elves as something positive: *Ælf-red* “elf-counsel”; *Ælf-wine* “elf-friend”, *Ælf-noth* “elf-brave”, *Ælf-thryth* “elf-powerful”, *Ælf-here* “elf army”, *Ælf-ric* “elf-powerful”.<sup>37</sup> Like Tolkien’s Wood-elves, the Anglo-Saxon elves were both feared and respected.

Finally, Tolkien’s distinction between different types of elves, such as the Wood-elves, High elves, Light-elves, Deep-elves and Sea-elves, also has a clear analogue in the Anglo-Saxon lexicon, which features similar subcategories of elves. A small Latin-Old English glossary kept in the University Library of Leiden, for example, includes a short catalogue of words denoting elves that include “dun ælfinne” [dune or hill elves], “wudu ælfinne” [wood elves], “wæter ælfinne”

27) For an exhaustive overview of sources and analogues for Tolkien’s riddles, see Rateliff, *History of the Hobbit*, 168–182.

28) *The Hobbit*, 126–127.

29) *The Hobbit*, 122.

30) Anderson, *Annotated Hobbit*, 122.

31) For a discussion on the idea of “bear-warriors” in Anglo-Saxon England, see: B. Bates, *The Real Middle-Earth. Magic and Mystery in the Dark Ages* (London 2002), 155–159.

32) *The Hobbit*, 211–212.

33) *The Hobbit*, 218–219.

34) My definitions of the Old English words are based on Clark Hall, *Concise Dictionary*. Cf. T.A. Shippey, “Light-elves, Dark-elves, and others: Tolkien’s Elvish Problem”, in: Shippey, *Roots and Branches*, 218–219, who has different definitions for the same words.

35) These and other charms against diseases caused by elves, are published electronically by Karen Jolly on <http://www2.hawaii.edu/~kjolly/unc.htm>. Accessed May 18, 2012.

36) *Beowulf*, ll. 111–113.

37) Bremmer, “Zin in Tolkien?”, 90.

[water elves], “feld ælfinne” [field elves] and “sæ ælfinne” [sea elves] (see Figure 5).

#### 6. DRAGONS AND TREASURE: SMAUG AND THE ARKENSTONE

Like elves, dragons held an important position in the Anglo-Saxon imagination. Place names, such as Drakelow (Derbyshire), Dragley beck (Lancashire) and Drakeholes (Nottinghamshire), attest to the Anglo-Saxon fascination with dragons, as do the depictions of dragons on various pieces of armour and jewelry.<sup>38</sup> Dragons are also found as manuscript illuminations and Tolkien will have been familiar with the illustration of the two dragons in the tenth-century Junius Manuscript (see Figure 6). Together, these dragons form the first letter of the Old English poem *Exodus*, of which an edition, translation and commentary by Tolkien was published posthumously in 1981.<sup>39</sup>

For the Anglo-Saxons, seeing a dragon could be both a bad and a good omen. One of the manuscripts of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, for example, reports:

793. Her wæron reðe forebecna cumene ofer Norðhymbra land, ond þæt folc earmlic bregdon, þæt wæron ormete þodenas ond ligrescas, ond fyrene dracan wæron gesewene on þam lifte fleogende.<sup>40</sup>

[793. In this year dire signs had come over the land of the Northumbrians, and they terrified the people miserably, these were huge whirlwinds and lightnings, and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air.]

These dragons were indeed a bad omen as the year 793 was a year of great hunger and marked the first year of the Viking raids. Conversely, seeing a dragon in a dream was a sign of good fortune. One entry in an Old English collection of dream interpretations reads “Gif him þince þæt he dracan geseo: god þæt biþ” [If it seems to him (in a dream) that he sees a dragon: that will be good].<sup>41</sup> That dreaming of a dragon might entail good fortune is probably due to the association of dragons with treasure. This association was

even proverbial: *Maxims II*, a collection of Old English proverbs, includes “Draca sceal on hlæwe, frod, fræt-wum wlanc” [A dragon must live in a barrow, old and proud of his treasures].<sup>42</sup>

Smaug in Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* is a typical, Anglo-Saxon dragon and, as many researchers have noted, has much in common with the dragon in *Beowulf*. The analogues between Smaug and Beowulf’s dragon are numerous and have been discussed elsewhere in greater detail than is possible here.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, I will only discuss the three most striking similarities. First of all, both dragons are old, live in a hill and guard a treasure, which once belonged to another. Secondly, like Smaug, the dragon in *Beowulf* is roused from his slumber because someone has stolen a cup from his hoard:

Hordweard sohte  
georne æfter grunde wolde guman findan  
  
þone þe him on sweofote sare geteode.  
...  
sincfæt sohte. He þæt sona onfand  
ðæt hæfde gumena sum goldes gefandod,  
  
heahgestreona.<sup>44</sup>

[The guardian of the hoard (the dragon) sought eagerly along the ground, he wanted to find the man, who had sorely hurt him in his sleep... he sought the treasure cup. He soon found that some man had disturbed the gold, the exquisite treasures]

After discovering the missing cup, finally, both Smaug and the dragon in *Beowulf* wait until nightfall to go on a destructive campaign which, ultimately, leads to their deaths. Interestingly, when Smaug travels to Lake-town, his approaching glow is interpreted, in keeping with Anglo-Saxon notions, as both a good and a bad omen: the inhabitants of Lake-town interpret the glow as a sign that gold and silver will come their way, whilst Bard thinks otherwise and is criticized for “always foreboding gloomy things”.<sup>45</sup>

As Smaug leaves the lonely Mountain to attack

38) Bates, *Real Middle-Earth*, 88–97.

39) J. Turville-Peters (Ed.), *The Old English “Exodus”*. Text, translation and commentary by J.R.R. Tolkien (Oxford 1981).

40) C.P. Cubbin (Ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition*. Volume 6: MS. D (Cambridge 1996), 17.

41) L.S. Chardonnens, *Anglo-Saxon Prognostics, 900-1100* (Leiden & Boston 2007), 298.

42) *Maxims II*, l. 26–27. Translation: T.A. Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English* (Cambridge 1976), 77.

43) B.M. Christensen, *Beowulf and The Hobbit: Elegy into Fantasy in J.R.R. Tolkien’s Creative Technique*. Unpublished Dissertation of the University of Southern California, 118–160.

44) *Beowulf*, ll. 2292–2302.

45) *The Hobbit*, 303.

Lake-town, Thorin and the dwarves see an opportunity to enter the mountain and reclaim the treasures. Thorin's main objective is to find the Heart of the Mountain, the great white gem called the Arkenstone. The name Arkenstone is possibly derived from the Old English word *eorcanstan* "precious jewel", which occurs as *eorclanstanas* in *Beowulf*.<sup>46</sup> According to Rateliff, the name of the Arkenstone was not taken from *Beowulf*, but derived from the word *earcanstan* in the Old English poem *Christ*, where the word is used as a metaphor for Christ.<sup>47</sup> Rateliff's suggestion is appealing as it opens up the possibility for a religious interpretation of Thorin's quest for the Arkenstone as a search for Christ. An interpretation which is worth considering as Tolkien himself suggested that all fairy stories, and by extension fantasy literature, are essentially base versions of the story of the Birth and Resurrection of Christ.<sup>48</sup>

## 7. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have studied the ox's bones; not, as Tolkien feared, in an attempt to spoil the soup. The overview presented here should not be taken as a suggestion that Tolkien simply "copy pasted" Anglo-Saxon motives into his work. Rather, what I have wanted to show is that an understanding of Old English lan-

guage and literature makes for a more enthralling experience when reading Tolkien's *The Hobbit* as well as a greater appreciation for the distinctive, Anglo-Saxon flavour of the work.

Reading *The Hobbit* from an Anglo-Saxonist perspective reveals how Tolkien was inspired by the cartographic conventions, runic inscriptions, literary techniques, words and literature created by the Anglo-Saxons. As such, *The Hobbit* is a good example of the inspirational vigour of the culture and writings that were brought to Britain by its Germanic invaders roughly 1500 years ago. By working Anglo-Saxon material into his fantasy literature, Tolkien appears to have set a trend. Over the past few years, I have spotted traces of Anglo-Saxon culture in recent works of fantasy by Stephen Donaldson (*The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*), Jeff Smith (*Bone*) and George R.R. Martin (*A Song of Ice and Fire*).<sup>49</sup> Hopefully, the enduring popularity of the fantasy genre, fundamentally inspired as it is by Tolkien, will ensure that the study of Old English language and literature remains topical and never loses its appeal among students. In this age of instructional cooking shows, such as Nigella Bites, The Naked Chef and Two Fat Ladies, it is only natural for people who like the soup to want to know more about the ingredients.

46) *Beowulf*, l. 1208.

47) Rateliff, *History of the Hobbit*, 605.

48) Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories", 155-157.

49) Stephen Donaldson's use of "Weird" and "Wüird" to refer to the concepts of doom, destiny or duty of, respectively, the Waynhim and the Elohim in *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* (1977-1979, 1980-1983, 2004-) has much in common with the Anglo-Saxon concept of *wyrd* "fate, destiny". In Rose (2009), the prequel to Jeff Smith's *Bone* saga (2000-2002), the headmaster of the Venu paraphrases Bede's parable of the sparrow; J. Smith & C. Vess, Rose (New York 2009), 27. The Seven Kingdoms of Westeros, located south of The Wall, in G.R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-), seem modeled on the seven Anglo-Saxon kingdoms (known as the Heptarchy), south of Hadrian's Wall.