

Is it relevant?

CHAPTER 2

Old English influence on *The Lord of the Rings*

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Pearl of delight that a prince doth please
To grace in gold enclosed so clear,
I vow that from over orient seas
Never proved I any in price her peer.
So round, so radiant ranged by these,
So fine, so smooth did her sides appear
That ever in judging gems that please
Her only alone I deemed as dear.
Alas! I lost her in garden near:
Through grass to the ground from me it shot;
I pine now oppressed by love-wound drear
For that pearl, mine own, without a spot.

These lines were written by J.R.R. Tolkien (1892–1973) who also wrote *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–5). As everyone knows, the three books which make up *The Lord of the Rings* were adapted in the early years of the twenty-first century into a world-famous film trilogy by the New Zealand director Peter Jackson. Tolkien was a professor of Old and Middle English in the University of Oxford. The lines above are his translation of the opening stanza of *Pearl*, which is one of the greatest Middle English poems of Chaucer's time, the late fourteenth century. In the stanza above, the narrator of *Pearl* describes the loss of a precious pearl and his search for it. But the pearl, it emerges, is a symbol of his young daughter. Perhaps her name was Margaret, which means 'pearl'. At any rate, the exuberant poetic descriptions in *Pearl* are expressions both of the father's loss and his quest to find her, concluding with his vision of her, resplendent in paradise, but separated by the great gulf of death, no longer to please a prince of this world, but the Prince of Heaven himself.

Old English literature might be looked upon as just such a pearl. The study of Old English is the study of a past culture: death separates us from its creators. Yet the people of those days were men and women like us, with the same depths of experience and the same ability to express those depths. Some of their creations indeed emerge as pearls of great price, for those who seek to find them. The father in *Pearl* sets out from the familiar surroundings of his garden and it is only by following this route that the otherworldly splendours of paradise are finally revealed. In this chapter, I would like to come to Old English along a similar path, starting from what (probably) is the more familiar world of Tolkien's fiction or, rather, taking a further step back, from Peter Jackson's film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*. The film presents the viewer with a rich array of visual and emotional ravishment. And the uncut versions, drawing also from *The Silmarillion* (1977), are rich in characterisation. Striding through Middle Earth, from *The Fellowship of the Ring* through *The Twin Towers* to his crowning in *The Return of the King*, is 'Strider' Aragorn, son of Arathorn, last of the kings of Gondor. He is in some way reminiscent of Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, monster-slayer general and the future king of Geatland. Like Beowulf, whose father Ecgtheow is at best a violent renegade passing through one kingdom after another, Aragorn is a man with a dubious family past. He is wary of his own lineage and in *The Return of the King*, just like the hero of *Beowulf*, he takes up the crown not with ambition, but with much persuasion after harbouring doubts about his own suitability for the role. Aragorn, to the extent of this likeness, was probably based on the Geatish hero of whom we shall read so much in this book and especially in the following chapter. And Rohan, the kingdom of horsemen into which Aragorn leads two of his fellowship in the second part of *The Lord of the Rings*, was based in large part on the country and great hall of Hrothgar, king of Denmark, in the first two-thirds of *Beowulf*. It is obvious, but needs restating, that the books could not have been written, the films made, without the great Old English poem named *Beowulf*.

From among the many striking scenes in Tolkien's novels and Jackson's films, I will pick one that relates to the court of Rohan and particularly to Théoden, its king. Here I have to assume you are to some extent familiar with the film, if not the novel, *The Lord of the Rings*. Let us look now at the arrival of Gandalf and his companions at the 'Golden Hall' in Edoras, court of Théoden, king of Rohan. Here we see two worlds confronting one another and finally uniting. One of these worlds is the Quest of the Ring, with Gandalf as its guide and mentor; the other is that of the proud Rohirrim, led by the decrepit Théoden, who is under the thumb of the treacherous counsellor Gríma ('Masked'), nicknamed Wormtongue. There

are some splendid touches in the film. For example, the tossing of the banner of Rohan as rubbish in the wind in *The Two Towers* is not something Tolkien wrote, but surely he would have been gratified to see this symbolic representation of the inner collapse of Rohan presented in a form which works well in this visual format. The character of Wormtongue is also presented outstandingly well, even though in details it differs from what Tolkien wrote. Above all, the lady Éowyn ('Equine joy'), niece to the king, is finely presented in all her complexity, exceeding the sometimes stereotypical depiction Tolkien affords her. How subtle, for example, is the moment when she almost yields to Wormtongue, then turns on him in fury.

But – and I feel that amidst all the adulation that has surrounded the film it is owed to Tolkien to point such matters out – the exorcism of 'Théoden King', one of the most dramatic events in the 'Golden Hall' in the court of Edoras, capital of Rohan, misses Tolkien's point. In the film we are presented, essentially, with a contest of wizardry between Gandalf and his fellow wizard Saruman ('Crafty'), who, having turned to evil, has somehow possessed Théoden and who is finally exorcised from the king by Gandalf. In this show of strength Gandalf reveals that he is no longer Gandalf the Grey, but Gandalf the White, appropriating Saruman's erstwhile colour, the symbol of the purity he has now lost. The reason the scene is unfortunate – apart from its simply departing from the book – is that moral uprightness and freedom, and their opposites, are presented as imposed from outside. All that is needed to solve the problem is a powerful enough magician to impose his will on the situation. In other words, *might is right* – a principle which Tolkien explicitly says Gandalf refuses to adopt. In the book, Gandalf *persuades* the king to relinquish the counsel of Wormtongue. This isn't as visually dramatic, but it is far more adult and, what is more, it is an important part of Tolkien's message. The free peoples of Middle Earth are free not so much because of political structures, but because they choose to be so, even in the face of ill advice and pressure from outside. Freedom is defined from within, not imposed from outside. It relates to our stance on good and evil, rather than to political systems. In our own world, we see regimes around us appropriating to themselves the moral high ground and seeking to impose what they usually term 'democracy' by force, acting in much the same way as Gandalf does in Jackson's film. Tolkien has often been criticised for writing an indulgent fantasy work with no relevance to the real world. I would like to suggest, without engaging in a detailed political debate, that the point he is making here is strikingly pertinent to many of the events being perpetrated on the world stage around us.

What has this got to do with Old English?

Attitudes towards Tolkien and Old English are often the same. Both are seen as irrelevant. Prejudices like this should always be countered. Picking a scene from the film and – without being swayed by the hype – comparing it with what Tolkien actually wrote is a straightforward and graphic way of developing a vital skill: a critical approach, by means of which we may hope to uncover the meaning of the scene and the details of how this meaning is realised. This goes for whether the scene is by Tolkien or by Jackson. In the process we should be able to come to an appreciation of the true extent – even if in the end we may decide that extent is limited – to which a work such as *The Lord of the Rings* is a serious book, about serious, adult issues which will always remain current. The same approach is called for with any work of Old English literature.

Having realised that Tolkien deserves a serious critical approach, we must, of course, apply this not only to the derivative film, but also to Tolkien's own text. Doing this reveals a second reason for unease with Jackson's approach in the Golden Hall 'exorcism' scene. One of the best-known influences on Tolkien is the Old English epic – or, more correctly, extended elegiac – poem *Beowulf*. As you see, our book is named after *Beowulf* and the chapter after this one is especially focused on the poem. *Beowulf* was immensely important to Tolkien when he wrote *The Lord of the Rings*. While there are many points throughout Tolkien's work which can be traced back to the poem, the Golden Hall scene forms a sort of cluster, a concentrate. And yet in large part Jackson has chosen not to follow Tolkien here, but to go his own way in this scene. This may well be due to the general exigencies of film making rather than a specific decision, but it is nonetheless unfortunate. Before showing how Tolkien handled this scene, let us take a broader view of his influences.

The Rohirrim are a proud race of horse lords. They clearly belong to a pre-urban, and pre-urbane, society, where the code of honour is defined by truth, loyalty and courage. They are, in fact, the Anglo-Saxons, as imagined and idealised by Tolkien. Indeed, the language they speak in the book is Old English. The foundation legend of the English, as you have seen in the previous chapter, is that they came from northern Germany and Denmark in 449 at the invitation of the British king, King Vortigern of Kent, to act as mercenaries, and were given the isle of Thanet as reward. In their greed they seized Kent for themselves and, subsequently, the whole of England, driving the British out. Likewise, in the prehistory of the novels, the Rohirrim ride from the north and fight as confederates at the Battle of Celebrant and are

given Rohan by the realm of Gondor. ‘Gondor’ is parallel to the Roman Empire, which still nominally existed when the English came to England, although it had no authority in Britain any longer. The land the Rohirrim have been given is said to be largely empty, however, and there is no tale of rebellion and seizing of more land: the Rohirrim stay loyal to Gondor. In one essential, the Rohirrim differ markedly from the English, in their mastery of horses. The Riders of Rohan have many names in *Éo-* such as Éomer and Éowyn. That is because the word *eoh* is the Old English for ‘horse’ (an ancient word related to (but not borrowed from) the Latin word *equus*). There are complex reasons for Tolkien’s choice here, but I would like to mention just one. The first kings of the English when they settled in Kent were called Hengest and Horsa. These names mean ‘stallion’ and ‘horse’. Yet there are no legends associating the English with horses. But inspired by the implications of the names, and enticed into recreating a lost legend, Tolkien forged a whole race of Anglo-Saxon horsemen.

Arrival at the court of Rohan

Having created a (slightly modified) race of Anglo-Saxons, Tolkien naturally crafted a scene among them where he could closely echo his favourite Old English literary work, *Beowulf*. The arrival of Gandalf, Aragorn, Gimli and Legolas at *Meduseld* (‘mead hall’ in Old English), the hall of King *Théoden* (Old English for ‘lord’), in the settlement of *Edoras* (Old English for ‘courts’) in Rohan (Book III, Chapter 6) is based precisely on an extended scene in *Beowulf*. This is the arrival of the Geatish hero, Beowulf, and his men at the Danish hall of Heorot. In the poem, Beowulf, a man with the strength of 30, has come to Denmark to rid King Hrothgar, king of the Danes, of Grendel, a cannibalistic monster who has preyed on Heorot for 12 years. To see the influences from *Beowulf* to *The Lord of the Rings*, have a look at some passages set side by side in the box on page 43. Precise points of similarity in the two are linked by means of numbers.

My comparison will use a translation of *Beowulf*, although Tolkien would have had the original poem in mind. Finding the right translation is a matter of some importance, since Tolkien had an acute sensitivity to linguistic registers. Not surprisingly, given the difference in backgrounds, the scriptwriters of Jackson’s film version don’t have Tolkien’s knowledge of the English language, or his sensitivity to its use, but thankfully a great deal of the dialogue in the films derives directly from the book. In what follows I shall use the recent translation of Seamus Heaney. It is a version with its own faults and foibles, but whose isn’t?, one might well ask. And it is

appropriate to render the words of the greatest poet writing in English over a millennium ago with those of one of the most respected poets of our day, one who has himself been moved by the poetic splendour of the original work.

Arrivals at Heorot and Meduseld

A *Beowulf*, lines 224–490

Beowulf and his followers disembark from their ship and are met by the Danish coastguard, who greets them in the following words:

[1] ‘What kind of men are you who arrive
[2] rigged out for combat in coats of mail,
[3] sailing here [4] over the sea-lanes
[5] in your steep-hulled boat? [6] I have
been stationed

as lookout on this coast for a long time.

My job is to watch the waves for raiders,
any danger to the Danish shore.

[7] Never before has a force under arms
disembarked [8] so openly – not bothering
to ask

if the sentries allowed them safe passage or
the clan had consented. [9] Nor have I seen
a mightier man-at-arms on this earth than
the one standing here: [10] unless I am
mistaken,

[11] he is truly noble. This is no mere
hanger-on in a hero’s armour.

So now, before you fare inland

[12] as interlopers, [13] I have to be
informed

about who you are and where you hail
from.

Outsiders from across the water,

I say it again: [14] the sooner you tell where
you come from and why, the better.’

Beowulf replies that they have come from
Hygelac of the Geats to help Hrothgar
against the ravages of the monster. The
coastguard replies:

[15] ‘Anyone with gumption
and a sharp mind will take the measure

B *The Lord of the Rings*, Book III, Chapter 6

As the company approaches Edoras, Legolas
is able to discern the scene and the details
of the royal hall Meduseld: ‘And it seems to
my eyes that it is [18] thatched with gold.
[19] The light of it shines far over the land.’

As they approach, Aragorn sings a song in
the language of Rohan, ‘Where now the
horse and the rider?’ [in the film, this song
is sung by Théoden at the Battle of Helm’s
Deep, where, it could be argued, it acquires
greater pertinence and poignancy]: this is
inspired by a passage in the Old English
poem *The Wanderer*, but its theme of the
passing of things is common to *Beowulf*.

The company is greeted by a warden at the
gates:

It is the will of Théoden King that none
should enter his gates, save those who
know our tongue and are our friends.
None are welcome here in days of war but
our own folk, and those that come from
Mundburg in the land of Gondor. [1] Who
are you that [3] come [8] heedless [4] over
the plain thus [2] strangely clad, [5] riding
horses like to our own horses? [6] Long
have we kept guard here, and we have
watched you from afar. [7] Never have we
seen other riders so strange, [9] nor any
horse more proud than is one of these
that bear you. [11] He is one of the *Mearas*,
[10] unless our eyes are cheated by some
spell. [13] Say, are you not a wizard, some
[12] spy from Saruman, or phantoms of his
craft? [14] Speak now and be swift!

Aragorn and Gandalf explain they had
met Éomer, but the guard replies that
Wormtongue has forbidden any to see the
king; Gandalf says his [26] errand is with
the king and no one else, and bids the
guard go and tell Théoden. The guard asks

of two things: what's said and what's done. I believe what you have told me: that you are a troop loyal to our king. So come ahead with your arms and your gear, [16] and I will guide you.'

He promises Beowulf's ship will be [17] carefully guarded. The Geats march on, the poet commenting on the boar images on their helms, towards the hall, Heorot, adorned in gold:

They marched in step,
hurrying on till the timbered hall
rose before them, [18] radiant with gold.
Nobody on earth knew of another
building like it. Majesty lodged there,
[19] its light shone over many lands.

The guard returns to his post on the shore:
[20] 'It is time for me to go.

May the Almighty
Father keep you and in His kindness watch
over your exploits. I'm away to the sea,
back on alert against enemy raiders.'

The Geats make their way up the [21] stone paved street. They put their [22] weapons against the wall of the hall, and sit on a [23] bench. Wulfgar, King Hrothgar's [24] officer ['I am Hrothgar's herald and officer'], comes to question them, and comments on their [25] boldness. Beowulf declares who he is, and says he wants to report his [26] errand to Hrothgar himself. Wulfgar says he will ask, [27] 'then hurry back with whatever reply it pleases him to give'. He advises Hrothgar not to refuse the request. The king gives a speech: he knows Beowulf by name and reputation, and bids the Geats enter. [28] Wulfgar returns with the message, telling them they may go in in their helms, but [29] must leave their weapons outside. Beowulf greets Hrothgar and offers to fight without weapons against the monster Grendel. Hrothgar gladly accepts Beowulf's offer, and after telling him a little about Grendel asks him to join the feast in the hall. [30] The old king Hrothgar has Unferth below him in the hall, and his wife Wealhtheow serves.

what names he should give, and remarks that they seem [25] fell and grim beneath their tiredness; they give their names. The guard says he will go in, and tells them to [27] 'wait here a little while, and I will bring you such answer as seems good to him.' He goes in and then [28] returns, saying they may come in, but [29] must leave their weapons, which the doorwardens will [17] keep. The company goes through the gates; 'they found a broad path, [21] paved with hewn stones'. The hall and its surrounds are described; at the top of the stair were stone [23] seats. The guard, who has [16] guided them up, now says farewell: [20] 'There are the doors before you. I must return now to my duty at the gate. Farewell! And may the Lord of the Mark be gracious to you!' They ascend the stair, and are greeted by Háma [24] the doorwarden ['I am the doorward of Théoden'], who asks for their weapons. There is a heated debate over this, but the weapons are laid aside – Aragorn lays Andúril [22] against the wall – and in the end Háma allows only the staff of Gandalf to pass: [15] 'in doubt a man of worth will trust to his own wisdom. I believe you are friends and folk worthy of honour, who have no evil purpose. You may go in.'

[30] In the hall, the aged Théoden sits with Éowyn behind and Gríma at his feet.

Wormtongue and Unferth

From this point Tolkien's narrative diverges from *Beowulf*. Théoden greets Gandalf coldly, whereas Hrothgar greets Beowulf warmly. Wormtongue immediately adds to Théoden's coldness with further insult. It is on Wormtongue that the influence from *Beowulf* now focuses. Whereas the scene of arrival shows a point by point, but ultimately fairly superficial influence from *Beowulf* to *The Lord of the Rings*, with Wormtongue we encounter a more imaginative development that springs, largely, from a philological consideration. Specifically, the focus of Tolkien's inspiration lies in a name. For Wormtongue is based, in part, on *Beowulf*'s 'Unferth', a fractious Danish courtier who delivers a personal attack on Beowulf straight after the passage summarised in the box on pages 43 and 44. In Old English Unferth's name means 'strife', although it has other implications such as 'senseless'. It is typical that Tolkien should focus his interest on such a linguistically complex character as Unferth, who seems to have been specially invented by the poet of *Beowulf* to cause strife. Unferth's main role in the poem is to accuse Beowulf of not being up to the job of dealing with Grendel, on the basis of his bad performance in a swimming (or rowing) match he once had with another hero at sea. Beowulf tries to put the record straight, rounds on Unferth and defends himself by pointing out that Unferth has hardly shown himself the hero lately given that Grendel is still there. Moreover, the word is that Unferth killed his own brothers. Unferth's speech is strange being so incongruous with Hrothgar's warm welcome earlier, especially considering that Unferth is his official 'spokesman' (Old English *pyle*; compare p. 205). It is no surprise that Unferth has been the topic of a great deal of discussion by scholars of Old English literature.

Unferth shows up again later in *Beowulf* when Beowulf has the task of killing Grendel's mother in her underwater lair. She lives in the 'Mere' a few miles away from Heorot, and from there she came the night before to avenge her son whom Beowulf killed. When Beowulf is about to dive into this gloomy pool to fight Grendel's mother, Unferth lends him his sword, which is called Hrunting. Beowulf requests that if he is killed this sword should go back to its owner. The difference between this Unferth and the previous chagrin-driven criminal by that name is noted by the poet of *Beowulf*, who says he must have been drunk when he spoke before. He also points out that Unferth is too much of a coward to undertake the exploit himself.

Several times the poet mentions how the Danish court is now at peace, but will not always be so. Later the king's nephew, Hrothulf, will stage his

coup, engaging in strife with, and indeed slaying, his cousins who are the sons of King Hrothgar. One scene in *Beowulf* where this contrast is pointed out goes as far as citing Unferth as the man sitting at the king's feet. Does the poet mean that Unferth was to be involved in stirring up strife between the two sides of the family, supporting the upstart Hrothulf?

Going back to *The Lord of the Rings*, we see that Wormtongue steals the king's sword and cravenly refuses to march to war against the Orcs. While he is not accused of fratricide, later on, back in the Shire, it turns out that Wormtongue has murdered Lotho. This accusation is poured on him with scorn by Saruman, his once 'white wizard' master. Not a good move for Saruman, for Wormtongue is thus egged on to murder him. Wormtongue is a traitor, a spy of Saruman in the court of Théoden, who has gained the trust of the king against his better judgement. He also sticks loyally to his master Saruman, even in beggary, up to the last moment when he murders him. In *Beowulf*, likewise, it may be supposed that Unferth serves King Hrothgar until he betrays him in Hrothulf's rebellion.

Théoden's enmity towards his nephew Éomer, and the death of his son Théodred, which Wormtongue mentions in one breath, is based on this family struggle in the Danish royal house. In *Beowulf* there is little doubt that Hrothulf is already a villainous traitor in this way. Yet in the Old Icelandic version of this story, which calls Hrothulf 'Hrólfur Pole-Ladder' (*kraki*), this man is regarded as a great hero and the epitome of kingship (see p. 127). In Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Théoden's shift from blame to praise of his nephew seems to reflect a vacillation in the author between these Old English and Old Norse traditions, which he exploits for imaginative purposes. Tolkien chooses to exonerate Éomer. In line with this, Tolkien retains the tragic death of the king's son, but divorces this from any action of Éomer's.

Unferth is an ambiguous character; Tolkien was invariably drawn to ambiguous sources when they offered the opportunity for imaginative resolution. In *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien does indeed resolve many of the ambiguities of Unferth in Wormtongue. In contrast to the strange behaviour of Unferth as a favoured counsellor, there is no real doubt of Wormtongue's position as a disloyal coward. It is just that the old king – and he alone – has been deceived and is himself undeceived in the course of events. Hence Wormtongue's presence at court, and his attack on Gandalf, are both explained naturally. The inexplicable change of character of Unferth in generously offering Beowulf his sword is made use of by Tolkien. However, Tolkien maintains a consistency of character in Wormtongue and so turns the action in *Beowulf* on its head; far from Wormtongue offering

a sword to anyone, he steals the king's. Wormtongue's unwillingness to march to war with Théoden matches Unferth's unwillingness to fight the monster in the Mere.

Tolkien has been able to rationalise Wormtongue out of the ambiguous Unferth by using the most elusive of all the latter's characteristics, his treachery. He follows a creative urge to tie up the loose ends left by the *Beowulf* poet. And he reads other things into the original scene in the hall in *Beowulf*, more than could ever be justified on a scholarly basis, yet which show his highly creative attention to the human complexity of the scene. Here I am thinking of a detail about Wormtongue vis à vis Éowyn, the king's niece. The princess Éowyn fulfils the same role in Meduseld as Wealhtheow, the queen of King Hrothgar, does in Heorot. The poet says nothing of the relationship between Wealhtheow and Unferth, but merely juxtaposes them by presenting the king and his nephew with Unferth at their feet and Wealhtheow coming to speak to the king. What is the faithless Unferth likely to be thinking of as he sits there looking up at the beautifully adorned queen as she speaks? He answers by telling us that Wormtongue had his eye on Éowyn. As noted, Peter Jackson goes one further in the film and lends Éowyn a momentary hesitation towards Wormtongue, a scene acted with fine delicacy by Miranda Otto.

The situation in Edoras is far plainer than that in Heorot and it is by imbuing the scene with strife that Tolkien makes it so. The major difference between the two arrival scenes, which we have just compared, is that the Geats are welcomed by the Danes, whereas Aragorn and friends are cold shouldered by the Rohirrim as a result, it emerges, of the machinations of Wormtongue's strife. It is clear that Tolkien paid homage to *Beowulf* with the detailed, but circumstantial, similarity of these arrival scenes. But it is also clear that this homage was less important to him than his imaginative development of Unferth, the ambiguous character whose name means 'strife'.

The importance of *Beowulf*

The detailed use Tolkien made of *Beowulf* in the depiction of the court of Rohan should now be clear. But why did he feel the ancient poem was so important that he should enter into such a dialogue with it – and indeed, on the wider scale, devote his whole life to its exposition?

As if he knew this question would come up some time, Tolkien attempts something of an answer to it in a lecture which was then published as the essay '*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics'. This lecture had a profound effect within the field of Old English studies when it was delivered in 1936.

It continues to be essential reading to this day, a rare commendation for any academic work. Tolkien's achievement was to salvage *Beowulf* from the hands of critics who were blind to the factor that made the poem great. It is hard to imagine, but *Beowulf* was once studied either as Scandinavian history, a repository of artefacts for archaeologists or as an archive of Old English linguistic features and grammatical forms. In his own day Tolkien helped to rescue the poem for posterity. One method he adopts is rather extraordinary for an academic, but is actually the key to the success of his piece. He uses like to defend like, that is to say he adopts a mantle of heightened poetic, almost mantic, expression in order to defend the poetic craft of the work he is discussing. Needless to say, my words here are scarcely sufficient to explain why Tolkien's article is so striking and so I will give a few further indications.

In the first place, Tolkien stresses the obvious. One problem for critics of the poem was that, on the one hand, they felt it to be great, but, on the other hand, they were embarrassed by the subject matter, the slaying of three monsters. To use a modern, if itself soon to become dated, image, this is as if a great poet decided to make use of his PlayStation as a source of inspiration for the composition of his greatest work and yet succeeded in producing a masterpiece. Or, as Tolkien puts it, as if Milton had decided to recount the fairytale of Jack and the Beanstalk in noble verse. Tolkien stresses that this is entirely the wrong way to look at things. He points out that the universally acknowledged greatness of the poem's style would be felt merely incongruous, not dignified, if the subject the poet chose to place at the centre – the fights with the three monsters – were not well suited to the expression of greatness in the hands of a gifted artist. 'I would suggest, then', he says, 'that the monsters are not an inexplicable blunder of taste; they are essential, fundamentally allied to the underlying ideas of the poem, which give it its lofty tone and high seriousness.' As a parallel, he points out that the outline story of Shakespeare's masterpiece *King Lear* is quite as trite as that of *Beowulf*.

For Tolkien, the poet's choice of subject has resulted in a poem with greater depth and applicability than if he had chosen a 'realistic' human situation from history:

It is just because the main foes in *Beowulf* are inhuman that the story is larger and more significant than this imaginary poem of a great king's fall. It glimpses the cosmic and moves with the thought of all men concerning the fate of human life and efforts; it stands amid but above the petty wars of princes, and surpasses the dates and limits of historical periods, however important. At the beginning, and during its process, and most of all at the end, we look down

as if from a visionary height upon the house of man in the valley of the world.

In particular, he focuses on the 'ancient theme: that man, each man and all men, and all their works shall die': 'for the universal significance which is given to the fortunes of the hero it is an enhancement and not a detraction, in fact it is necessary, that his final foe should be not some Swedish prince, or treacherous friend, but a dragon: a thing made by imagination for just such a purpose.'

Tolkien highlights some of the artistry involved in the presentation of this theme:

It is essentially a balance, an opposition of ends and beginnings. In its simplest terms it is a contrasted description of two moments in a great life, rising and setting; an elaboration of the ancient and intensely moving contrast between youth and age, first achievement and final death. It is divided in consequence into two opposed portions, different in matter, manner, and length.

In Tolkien's view, this structure is a reflection of the very essence of Old English alliterative metre: each line of verse is composed of two balanced, but not rhythmically equal, half-lines.

Another impressive aspect of the essay is Tolkien's gift of expression, reflecting a well-read and considered understanding of his subject. He says the greatness of fine poetry cannot be communicated by analysis. Cornered, however, into trying to do just this, Tolkien responds by composing a piece of writing which is itself infused with poetic expression. He alludes to 'Jabberwocky', a poem in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871). Who could better this metaphor for *Beowulf's* learned but short-sighted researchers at this time?

For it is of their nature that the jabberwocks of historical and antiquarian research burble in the tulgy wood of conjecture, flitting from one tum-tum tree to another. Noble animals, whose burbling is on occasion good to hear; but though their eyes of flame may sometimes prove searchlights, their range is short.

Even today, perhaps as a result of this passage, you find the name 'Jabberwocky' sometimes used by academics outside the field as shorthand mockery for Old English, Old Norse, anything medieval like that. But that is their loss, not yours. Tolkien, however, wishes to shift the study of Old English away from such uninspired and short-sighted 'jabberwocky'. In the same piece he went on to use an image resonant of biblical parable to

express the generally deficient approach of those critics who viewed *Beowulf* as a great artefact composed out of elements from yet older tales:

I would express the whole industry in yet another allegory. A man inherited a field in which was an accumulation of old stone, part of an older hall. Of the old stone some had already been used in building the house in which he actually lived, not far from the old house of his fathers. Of the rest he took some and built a tower. But his friends coming perceived at once (without troubling to climb the steps) that these stones had formerly belonged to a more ancient building. So they pushed the tower over, with no little labour, in order to look for hidden carvings and inscriptions, or to discover whence the man's distant forefathers had obtained their building material. Some suspecting a deposit of coal under the soil began to dig for it, and forgot even the stones. They all said: 'This tower is most interesting.' But they also said (after pushing it over): 'What a muddle it is in!' And even the man's own descendants, who might have been expected to consider what he had been about, were heard to murmur: 'He is such an odd fellow! Imagine his using these old stones just to build a nonsensical tower! Why did not he restore the old house? He had no sense of proportion.' But from the top of that tower the man had been able to look out upon the sea.

But Tolkien is at his best when he is expounding the implications of a short expression, from which the poem's overall significance may be gleaned:

It is in *Beowulf* that a poet has devoted a whole poem to the theme [of 'this indomitability, this paradox of defeat inevitable yet unacknowledged'], and has drawn the struggle in different proportions, so that we may see man at war with the hostile world, and his inevitable overthrow in Time. The particular is on the outer edge, the essential in the centre.

Of course, I do not assert that the poet, if questioned, would have replied in the Anglo-Saxon equivalents of these terms. Had the matter been so explicit to him, his poem would certainly have been the worse. None the less we may still, against his great scene, hung with tapestries woven of ancient tales of ruin, see the *hæleð* walk. When we have read his poem, as a poem, rather than as a collection of episodes, we perceive that he who wrote *hæleð under heofenum* may have meant in dictionary terms 'heroes under heaven', or 'mighty men upon earth', but he and his hearers were thinking of the *eormengrund*, the great earth, ringed with *garsecg*, the shoreless sea, beneath the sky's inaccessible roof; whereon, as in a little circle of light about their halls, men with courage as their stay went forward to that battle with the hostile world and the offspring of the dark which ends for all, even the kings and champions, in defeat. [. . .] Death comes to the feast, and they say He gibbers: He has no sense of proportion.

No one could fail to be impressed by the sustained quality of this writing. Yet more lies in these passages (and in the whole essay) than meets the eye.

Lewis Carroll, like Tolkien, was an Oxford don who spent much time in recounting fabulous adventure stories. In Carroll's case, these were centred on the little girl Alice who visits *Wonderland* (1865) and then steps *Through the Looking Glass* (1871). Tolkien, in his way, is hinting that his lecture on *Beowulf* was about more than just the Old English poem. It pointed to his own work as well, and indeed to much other literary work besides. What his essay amounts to is, at the very least, the intimation of a general approach to literature. More specifically, when we look at Carroll's third great work, his nonsense poem *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876), we find what appears to be a deep concern over the bewildering quest of life which concludes in death. In Tolkien's view of it, this is the theme at the centre of *Beowulf*, of Tolkien's own works and, indeed, of great literature in general.

In my second quotation above from 'The Monster and the Critics', we see Tolkien imagining the use of old stone to build a new tower, from which to see the sea. This is an image which celebrates the renewal of poetic life from older materials. Tolkien's target here was allegory, a textual reading of hidden or symbolic or secondary meanings, which, in his view, amounted to fragmenting the text, pulling it apart, with a resulting loss in understanding. Tolkien in fact castigates allegorical readings of his work in his introduction to *The Lord of the Rings*. The rise of Hitler in World War II? Forget it. It is as if he resented being forced in these books to hold back something powerful, something symbolic, in the chains of an allegory which he says he never intended. In Tolkien's creative writing the tower and the sea are recurrent and important themes, second, probably, only to the tree, which provided Tolkien with another image for story in his work *On Fairy Stories*. In fact, Tolkien's tower-and-sea image in 'The Monsters and the Critics' has a twofold derivation which reflects how this essay looks both outwards to the great tradition of literature of which *Beowulf* is part and inwards, to his own fictional world. Outwardly, more or less the same image was used by the great Victorian writer and poet Matthew Arnold in his critical discussion (1888) of the thirteenth-century *Mabinogion*, a collection of 11 tales in medieval Welsh. Inwardly, this image is central to Tolkien's private tales of Earendil (the wellspring, indeed, of the world of Middle Earth), which I consider later. Of course, the tower is an ancient image, one redolent of associations in literature from the most ancient up to the present. There is no doubt Tolkien meant to touch on this network of allusion as well.

In my third quotation from ‘The Monsters and the Critics’ above, on man’s inevitable overthrow in Time, Tolkien brilliantly encapsulates the main theme of *Beowulf* by recreating for us something of the flavour of the poem itself. Tolkien focuses on a few words fraught with dim echoes of a lost mythology (*heofen, eormengrund, garsecg*). Tolkien is writing more as a poet than an academic here – but it is nonetheless scholarly writing at its best. What he writes may be applied to his own work almost as pertinently as to *Beowulf*. This indicates not merely that he has his own works in mind, but that the influence of the Old English poem, not so much in superficial plot terms, but in what it is *about*, its ethos, has been enormous. While *The Lord of the Rings* is a celebration of what Tolkien found beautiful, more deeply it is an elegy for the passing of such things.

Other sources for *The Lord of the Rings*

It would be wrong to leave you with the impression that *Beowulf*, or even Old English, are the only sources that inspired Tolkien. His writings are saturated with a familiarity and respect for the great works of classical and medieval literature. *The Lord of the Rings* can scarcely be understood without recognising the huge importance of the great Roman epic, the *Aeneid*. The fall of Gondolin, an ancient legend by the time of the hobbits but one which was formative of the world they live in, is based on the fall of Troy in the second book of the *Aeneid* (and the description of Gondolin’s fall in *The Silmarillion* closely matches that in the *Aeneid*). More importantly, Frodo owes much to the depiction of the dutiful Aeneas, founder of Rome, in the Roman epic. Not all Tolkien’s sources were such masterpieces, however.

If we turn back to Wormtongue, we find a quite different source, in addition to *Beowulf*. Wormtongue is more fully drawn than Unferth, and in this matter Tolkien was inspired by another fictional character, namely the old witch Gagool, spokeswoman of the king and regaler of newcomers, in Henry Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885). Rider Haggard was a popular Victorian adventure story writer, who managed to compose stories of remarkable narrative force without, however, having much of a gift for putting words together in a well-crafted manner. His better-known stories are set in southern Africa, where Tolkien grew up. Tolkien was heavily influenced by Rider Haggard, at least in terms of incident and plot, although fortunately the constant and vapid philosophising in Haggard has completely washed over Tolkien. There is a journey for four companions across

a waterless desert and freezing mountains also in *King Solomon's Mines*. The picture of Wormtongue as a snivelling wretch, 'a queer twisted sort of creature' as he is described, faithfully adhering to his dispossessed master when all others have abandoned him, coincides with Gagool, the withered and wicked witch in Haggard's novel, who stays loyal to the evil king Twala when all others have gone over to Ignosi, the rightful king of the Kukuanas. Gagool's end comes when she stabs one of those she has guided to the mines and she is crushed under the gate stone as she runs away. With more narrative significance in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Wormtongue stabs Saruman, his very master, before meeting an immediate death at the hands of the hobbits.

The combination in Wormtongue of two such disparate characters, Unferth and Gagool, may be viewed as a minor stroke of genius on Tolkien's part. Viewed from a different angle, however, it could also be viewed as a lost opportunity. As we have seen, Unferth is a mystery, full of inconsistencies. There are two opposing opportunities for anyone who wishes to use him as an inspiration. One of them would be to create a complex character in which these inconsistencies are amplified and investigated. The other is to realign the elements in a new, but straightforward individual. Tolkien has chosen the latter approach. It is interesting that in fleshing out his character, he turned to a relatively modern writer whose characters were really cardboard cut-outs. This is not intended necessarily as a criticism of Tolkien, since his writings do not operate chiefly on the basis of deep characterisation, but it emphasises that his response to Old English sources represents merely one approach among many, a fact which ought to encourage others to develop their own varied responses.

Tolkien's wizard Gandalf

Another character who turns up in Rohan and is central to the whole story of the Ring is worth discussing a little. Tolkien declared in an interview for *The Diplomat*: 'To me a name comes first and the story follows.' Nowhere is this more vividly illustrated than with the wizard Gandalf, with whom we move from Old English into the closely related area of Old Norse. In *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–5), the character of Gandalf, the Grey Wanderer, wielder of the fire of Anor (the sun), has various sources. A major one is surely the Norse god Óðinn, who is a wanderer among men and, in some way, an image of the sun (compare p. 385). The dark side of this Norse god has been hived off onto Sauron, Gandalf's evil counterpart,

whose eye provides such a memorable image in Peter Jackson's three films. The possession of just one burning eye is the prime characteristic of Óðinn in all the sources we have of him. But to return to Gandalf's name. 'Gandálfr' is listed as one of the dwarfs in a verse sequence called *The Catalogue of Dwarfs* (*Dvergatal*) which is contained within an Icelandic poem called *The Seeress' Prophecy* (*Völuspá*). The latter poem is one of the finest and most obscure in Old Icelandic literature. It was composed, perhaps, around the year 1000. Through a seeress, or sibyl, it tells the whole history of the Norse mythological cosmos from first creation to final destruction and subsequent rebirth, but does so in a highly allusive style, using only a few select myths from which highlights are picked and juxtaposed in a non-narrative manner. There are three reasons why the name Gandálfr in particular would have attracted Tolkien's attention, besides the implication that, since we know nothing of the Norse tale that must have attached to Gandálfr's name, we know nothing really about Gandalf either. The first reason is that *The Catalogue of Dwarfs* is an interpolation into *The Seeress' Prophecy*. The second is that *álfr*, the second part of the Norse Gandalf-name, means 'elf', yet the name is included among a list of dwarfs. Third, and most interestingly, is the word *gandr* which is the first element in Gandalf's name. It appears that in pre-Christian Scandinavian religion the *gandr* was a sort of spirit that helped certain special 'seers', communicators with the other world. Today's popular culture would call these people 'shamans', although real shamans belong to different types of society, mainly in Siberia. In the far north of Europe, however, when the Norwegians met their neighbours the Sami (Lapps), they used the word *gandr* to describe the helping spirit which the Sami shaman used to make his contact with the other world. I quote here an account (translated from Latin) from the twelfth-century *History of Norway* (*Historia Norwegiae*). This piece is of interest in its own right and it shows the sort of thing that lies behind Tolkien's creation:

Moreover their intolerable paganism, and the amount of devilish superstition they practise in their magic, will seem credible to almost no one. For there are some of them who are venerated as prophets by the ignorant populace, since by means of an unclean spirit that they call a *gandr* they predict, when petitioned, many things to many people, even as these things are turning out; and they draw desirable things to themselves from far off regions in a wondrous way, and amazingly, though themselves far away, they produce hidden treasures. By some chance while some Christians were sitting at the table among the Sami for the sake of trade their hostess suddenly bowed over and died; hence the Christians mourned greatly, but were told by the Sami, who were not at all distressed, that she was not dead but stolen away by the *gandar* of rivals, and they would

soon get her back. Then a magician stretched out a cloth, under which he prepared himself for impious magic incantations, and with arms stretched up lifted a vessel like a tambourine, covered in diagrams of whales and deer with bridles and snow-shoes and even a ship with oars, vehicles which that devilish *gandr* uses to go across the depths of snow and slopes of mountains or the deep waters. He chanted a long time and jumped about with this piece of equipment, but then was laid flat on the ground, as black as an Ethiopian all over his body, and foaming from the mouth as if wearing a bit. His stomach was ripped open and with the loudest roaring ever he gave up the ghost. Then they consulted the other one who was versed in magic about what had happened to them both. He performed his job in a similar way but not with the same outcome – for the hostess rose up cured – and indicated that the deceased sorcerer had perished by the following sort of accident: his *gandr*, transformed into the shape of a water beast, had by ill-luck struck against an enemy's *gandr* changed into sharpened stakes as it was rushing across a lake, for the stakes lying set up in the depths of that same lake had pierced his stomach, as appeared on the dead magician at home.

Some of all this seeps through into Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*. Gandalf's contest with the Balrog, in the mines of Moria, is partly comparable to this sort of shamanistic contest, although it should be added immediately that a more significant source is medieval vision literature, such as *St Patrick's Purgatory*, where a sinner beholds in a dream the trials imposed on the sinful soul in Purgatory. To some extent Tolkien even seems to have used Dante's thirteenth-century masterpiece, *The Divine Comedy*. There is no space in this chapter to give this discussion the detail it needs. The point here is just to illustrate the breadth, and vividness, of Tolkien's sources.

Tolkien's wizard Saruman

Whereas Gandalf has a firmly Norse origin, Saruman is formed out of Old English. It is worth adding that a third important wizard in *The Lord of the Rings*, Radagast, is derived linguistically from Slavonic. Where Saruman is concerned, Tolkien appears to have created him almost out of a couple of pages of the standard Old English dictionary, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, by Joseph Bosworth in 1838, revised by T. Northcote Toller in 1898 and 1921. In this book the Old English base word *searu* has a long entry because there are many compound words in which *searu* forms the first element. The basic sense of *searu* is 'cunning' or 'treacherous', but a secondary sense of 'weapons' occurs in some cases. Bosworth's and Toller's main entry

(s.v. 'searu') begins by noting that in the immediately following examples of the word, 'it is uncertain whether the word is being used with a good or a bad meaning'. Already we begin to see the origins of a clever character who is wily and given to treachery, with intentions that are uncertain and with the propensity to take up arms against those he has deceived. So it is that Saruman deceives all who trust him, Gandalf included. Further entries for *searu* add flesh to this outline. The (unrelated, but similar-sounding) verb *seárian* is glossed as meaning 'to grow sear, wither, pine away' and the examples given refer to leaves withering. The image of the aged wizard surely stems from this, in particular as he grows more wizened after being cast down by Gandalf and there may be a sideways glance at Saruman's searing or defoliation of the woods around Orthanc, his great tower. This tower itself seems to derive in part from another unconnected, but similar-sounding, entry in the dictionary. *Searoburh* was the Anglo-Saxon name for the city of Salisbury in southwest England, as it was before it was moved from its first location in Old Sarum. This old place is a striking site, now deserted, atop an ancient hill fort, surrounded by great defences and once topped by the spire of the cathedral. In fact, Sarum was a Roman and Iron Age fort far antedating the occurrence of *Searoburh* in Old English. There could be more than a passing similarity here to Saruman's dwelling in *The Lord of the Rings*, for Orthanc is said to have been an ancient construction before Saruman took it over. The word *orthanc* itself is firmly Old English, meaning 'original thought, ingenuity', with an obvious semantic connection to a *searuman*, a 'cunning man'. In fact, in Old English the word *searo-þanc* occurs, 'cunning thought', which directly links Orthanc with Saruman. *Orþanc*, however, has two other meanings: one is glossed in Latin as *machinamenta*, 'mechanical devices'; the other is 'thoughtlessness' or folly. All these meanings come together in the contrivances Saruman was engaged in at Orthanc, in the machines he installed there and in the complete folly of his exploits.

It will be noted that Tolkien uses the form *Saruman*, not *Searuman*, as we would expect from the dictionary entries. This stems from different Old English dialects. *Searuman* is a West Saxon, *Saruman* a Mercian form. Tolkien has deliberately given Saruman a Mercian name in order to connect with the position of this character within the realm of Rohan. The Rohirrim in the books call their land 'the Mark'. This is an English form of *Mercia*, a name which is really a Latinised form of Old English *merce* [/meh:rche/], 'people of the frontier'. 'Mark' means a boundary and 'March', a variant of this word, is still used of the Welsh Marches. 'Mark' also describes the

region within a boundary, a borderland. So Tolkien is telling us that Rohan is specifically Mercia, the kingdom in the midlands of England which was ruled by the great King Offa from 757 to 796 (see Chapter 8, p. 233). To some extent, Tolkien is keen to redress, through his fiction, the imbalance of the fact that most of the surviving Old English documents are written in West Saxon. Tolkien felt a strong affinity to the West Midlands, within the ancient realm of Mercia, where his mother's family sprang from.

In some of the other examples we have seen how a story would act as an impulse to Tolkien. The case of Saruman, by way of contrast, illustrates the extent to which his inspiration could be purely linguistic in nature, or rather, how he was inspired by patterns perceived in webs of words that contained something particularly suggestive for him. Whenever we look into the particular ways this inspiration worked, we find an extraordinary depth of knowledge on Tolkien's part, to do with the sources he is using, be they literary or lexical. His fictional works operate on several levels. It is possible to enjoy the scenes in Rohan without a deep knowledge of the sources, but beneath the surface we find further dimensions of meaning penetrating to the depths. We have the history of Middle Earth itself, represented in the meanings of names such as 'Saruman' within the languages (Old English, Old Norse, Welsh, Irish and Scots Gaelic) that Tolkien knew. At the same time we encounter in Tolkien's work an engagement, often of a detailed kind, with the words and the tales of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic Britain. Let's have a look at another example.

Earendil of the Morning Star

Earendil is one of the legendary characters from the First Age, who together form a backdrop to the events of *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–5). He is chiefly commemorated in a ditty composed by Bilbo at the elvish stronghold of Rivendell. However, in *The Silmarillion* (posthumously, 1977), Earendil performs one of the vital roles that save the world. He is a great mariner, who binds a gleaming 'silmaril' on the prow of his ship to pierce the enchanted mists around Valimar, where the Powers dwell. He wins through, to plead for aid in the struggle against the dark lord, Morgoth. However, having set foot on the blessed land, he is not permitted to return, but is fated to sail for ever in the sky, the silmaril still bound on the prow and seen by men as the Morning Star (the planet Venus).

This tale arose out of some lines in a poem Tolkien read as an undergraduate in Oxford. The poem was the ninth-century Old English poem

Christ (known as *Christ I–III*), which was probably edited and bound by the poet Cynewulf who composed the second of its three parts, *Christ II* (see Chapter 7, p. 212). The relevant lines, a hymn to Christ as the Messiah, depict the dawning light, realised as the Morning Star, as a prophecy for his coming to earth:

Eala earendel engla beorhtast,
ofer middangeard monnum sended (*Christ I*, lines 104–5)

Behold Earendel [the Morning Star], brightest of angels,
over middle earth sent to men.

It would scarcely be going too far to say that the thrill Tolkien experienced on reading these lines marked the beginning of the creation of Middle Earth.

The process by which the legend of Earendil (or Earendel in the earlier versions) grew out of these lines is rather complex, however – but it is a good example of the extent to which Tolkien’s imagination was honed towards linguistic inspiration. The focus of Tolkien’s attention was clearly on the word *earendel*, meaning (probably) ‘Morning Star’. The root of the word, found also in *east*, *Easter* and Latin *Aurora*, apparently means the ‘dawning light’; however, as Tolkien recognised, Earendel was also almost certainly seen as a person. If we look to Old Norse, for example, we find stories about Aurvandill, of how, being carried over icy rivers by Þórr, his toe froze, so that the god set it in the heavens as a star in compensation.

Thus brightness was associated with *earendel* from the beginning. But where has Tolkien got the idea of linking him with the sea from? Three possible sources suggest themselves. There is another word in Old English, *ear*, a poetic word which means ‘ocean’ (on poetic vocabulary per se, see Chapter 11, p. 318). This word is probably unrelated to *earendel* but the similarities of the words were probably suggestive to Tolkien. Moreover, the icy rivers of the Norse tale of Aurvandill suggest a watery element to the tale of Earendil. Finally, strange as it may seem, there is a link with *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (1601). Shakespeare’s play goes back to a Danish Latin chronicle called *The History of the Danes (Gesta Danorum)*, written by Saxo Grammaticus in the late twelfth century (see p. 107). In Saxo’s chronicle a certain Horwendillus (i.e. Aurvandill/Earendil) is the father of Amlethus (i.e. Hamlet). Amlethus appears originally to have been some sort of personification of the raging ocean, a connection with a shadowy reflection still in Shakespeare’s play, whose Hamlet, feigning madness, walks along the sea shore, talking of sand as the meal of the sea.

The association with the sea naturally suggests a ship. Where was Earendel to get his vessel? Tolkien turned to another legend, preserved in just as fragmentary a state: that of Wade, father of the legendary smith Wayland. Wade is mentioned twice by Chaucer, who revealed he had a famous boat (see Chapter 4, p. 109). Wade's ship is cited also in 1598, in Thomas Speght's edition of Chaucer. Speght made the frustrating comment: 'Concerning Wade and his bote called Guingelot, as also his strange exploits in the same, because the matter is long and fabulous, I passe it over.' Guingelot is a Norman French version of an original *Wingelot*, the very name of Earendel's ship in Tolkien. The name is highly unlikely to be original as the name of Wade's ship. It is Celtic in origin and is, in fact, probably a mistake on Speght's part. It is more usually found as the name of Sir Gawain's horse in the Arthurian cycle, including in the English *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which Tolkien edited and translated. This very anomaly may have been the thing that attracted Tolkien. In his world, the anomaly disappears and *Wingelot* becomes 'Foam Flower', a beautiful name, the meaning of which derives in part from the fortuity that *lôte*, clearly derived from *lotus* (a flower with a strong literary tradition going back to the Homeric *Odyssey* and later including Lord Alfred Tennyson), already meant 'flower' in Elvish, Tolkien's invented language.

In these tales of Wade, there is little sense of pressing purpose, which is so characteristic of the Earendil story in Tolkien. However, this proves to be a later feature of the legend. In the early versions presented in the *History of Middle Earth* volumes, Earendel arrives too late in Valimar to ask for help. He sets sail in the sky merely in search of his beloved Elwing and his association with brightness comes from the diamond dust he picks up in Eldamar, not from having a *silmaril* on his prow. All the elements that dignify the legend as we know it from *The Lord of the Rings* are later features.

Conclusion

I started with *The Lord of the Rings* film in order to show how an informed and critical approach may help illuminate what the director, Peter Jackson, has and has not achieved on the basis of Tolkien's novels. Such an approach demands that we move beyond the film to the book Tolkien actually wrote. Yet to understand Tolkien we have, again, to look at him critically to see what he is really doing, what he is concerned with. In a word, we are confronted with the major literary principle of *allusion*. All great literature alludes to other literature, considers it, answers it, manipulates it. Tolkien is

no exception. He does, however, allude perhaps more than most to ancient literatures, in particular to Old English and Old Norse, and to understand him presupposes a knowledge of this literature. This chapter aims to show, largely through Tolkien's own words, why he found this literature important enough to bother paying it so much attention. In writing it, I hope I have encouraged readers to think of looking at this literature for themselves. It goes without saying that the same critical and questioning approach I have encouraged from the beginning is all the more necessary when we look at Old English and Old Norse literatures, but I leave this side of things for later chapters.

Many of my points do not relate to Old English. It has been my deliberate aim not to divorce Old English from the many other sources of inspiration for Tolkien. To achieve any level of understanding, be it of Tolkien or of the Old English and other literatures which inspired him, it is vital to perceive Old English not as an isolated subject, but as part of a truly worldwide web of literature and culture, which crosses time, place and language. Together with the other literary traditions, Old English forms an artistic tradition, a glory of mankind whose majesty shines out to all who wish to see it. As one great poet, thinking of another Dark Age, once said of the glories of his 'Golden Hall':

lixte se leoma ofer landa fela (*Beowulf*, line 311)

its light shone over many lands.

Translations and texts

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The Wanderer. One of the finest short poems in Old English. Translation in Bradley's anthology.

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