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Charms

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Recommended Citation

Leibiger, Carol A. "Charms." *The J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment*, edited by Michael D.C. Drout, Routledge, 2006, 91-92.

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Charms

As a philologist and Professor of Anglo-Saxon, Tolkien was familiar with “minor” works of Old English (OE) literature like the Anglo-Saxon charms. These texts were communicative acts, applications of verbal magic in which language was used to affect material reality (Nöth, 63). As in most Indo-European languages, OE charms consisted of an optional epic introduction, which identified the evil or related an analogous situation (e.g., illness or infection) and how it was overcome, demonstrating the power of the cure (Grendon, 111), and the incantation itself, in which the desired result was “modeled in language” (Zimmer, 68-69). Underlying the charms was the assumption of the “power of the word” to change reality (Grendon, 119). We find echoes of OE charms in the verbal magic performed in *The Lord of the Rings*, and the charms also shaped aspects of the story.

Two charms from the eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon magico-medical text *Lacnunga* (Ms. Harley 585, British Library), the “Nine Herbs Charm” (*Nigon Wyrta Galdor*) and “Against a Sudden Stitch” (*Wið Færstice*) appear to have influenced Tolkien’s writing of *The Lord of the Rings*. The “Nine Herbs Charm” was an incantation uttered over nine powerful plants (mugwort, plantain, chamomile, apple, fennel, chervil, betony, nettle, and lamb’s cress [Dobbie, cxxxiii]) to intensify their ability to counteract nine poisons and nine infections or illnesses from *onflygnum*, flying infections thought to enter their victim through the mouth and ears (Storms, 196-197; Abernethy 21-22). Pettit has suggested that Tolkien used this nine vs. nine opposition in Elrond’s assembling of the nine-member Fellowship of the Ring to oppose the nine Black Riders of Mordor (41 fn.; FR, II, iii, 275). The numbers three and nine occur with greater frequency than any other numbers in the Anglo-Saxon charms (Grendon, 122; Grattan and Singer, 44); as Chevalier and Geerbrant point out, three is a number used in Indo-European cultures and, in

fact, almost universally, to represent wholeness or completeness (997). Nine, as the square of three, shares and perhaps intensifies this quality.

The second charm used by Tolkien, “Against a Sudden Stitch,” is meant to counteract rheumatism or lumbago (Storms, 140; Hauer, 250) or a sudden stabbing pain of unknown origin (Pettit, 39), understood as the result of a dart or knife shot into the victim by mysterious riders, witches, demons (i.e., Germanic gods from a Christian perspective [Grenden, 215]), or elves on a burial mound or hill. The exorcist uses the herbs feverfew, nettle, and plantain and a knife to extract or neutralize this dart, which then melts. Pettit argues convincingly that this charm influenced Tolkien in his depiction of the Black *Riders*’ attack on the Fellowship on the *hill* Weathertop, Frodo’s stabbing by the *Witch* King of Angmar using a *Morgul Knife*, and Frodo’s experience of “pain like a *dart*” (FR, I, xi, 195-196), and his subsequent healing by Elrond, who finds the sliver of the knife and extracts and *melts* it (Pettit, 41; FR, II, I, 221-222; my emphasis).

There are several instances of actual charms in *The Lord of the Rings*, most of them associated with Tom Bombadil (his charming of Old Man Willow [FR, I, vi, 120] and the barrow wight’s spell [FR, I, viii, 141] and Tom’s counterspell [FR, I, viii, 142]). Zimmer adduces these instances of magic and adds Gandalf’s breaking of Saruman’s staff in *The Two Towers* (67; TT, III, x, 583). Interestingly, Tolkien’s charms lack an epic introduction, but they do contain the conclusion of the typical Anglo-Saxon metrical charm, in which an evil being is deprived of power, sent to sleep, or cast out of its habitation through the use of language.

See also Elf Shot; Leechbook and Herbarium

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