

# Norse Influences on Tolkien's Elves and Dwarves<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

The 'mythology' of J R R Tolkien, best known through his seminal work *The Lord of the Rings* [1954-5], has unquestionably had a more profound influence on the fantasy genre than any author before or since. To give a brief overview, Tolkien began what would come to be known loosely as the 'Silmarillion' in 1917 and continued developing his mythology intermittently right up until his death in 1973. In 1937 he published *The Hobbit* in which the hobbit, Bilbo Baggins, undertakes an adventure with a group of dwarves to recover a hoard of stolen treasure guarded by a dragon. Several years later at the insistence of his publishers, Tolkien began work on *The Lord of the Rings* which, after some ten years of interrupted writing, was released in three volumes (*The Fellowship of the Ring* [1954], *The Two Towers* [1954] and *The Return of the King* 1955). *The Lord of the Rings* recounts Frodo Baggins' perilous journey to destroy the Ring of Power created by Sauron, the Dark Lord. Throughout this period Tolkien was also working on his broader mythology, which was published posthumously as *The Silmarillion* in 1977. Edited by his son Christopher Tolkien, and Canadian fantasy writer Guy Gavriel Kay, *The Silmarillion* relates the creation of the world, and the history of the Silmarilli, three jewels composed of the lights of Valinor that are stolen by Morgoth, the first dark lord. Subsequent to *The Silmarillion*, Christopher Tolkien published *Unfinished Tales* [1980] and the twelve-volume *History of Middle-Earth* [1983-1996] which examines the various stages of the development of Tolkien's 'mythology.'

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The recent but inevitable (one is tempted to say doomed) production of Peter Jackson's screen adaptations of the books have renewed interest in the nature of Tolkien's influence on fantasy and popular culture. Amidst the somewhat less than scholarly film companions that have since manifested on book store shelves are a number of studies that have focused on the way in which Tolkien's mediæval sources have been reflected in his works and, by extension, diffused into popular culture. Foremost among these works is Tom Shippey's *The Road to Middle Earth*,<sup>2</sup> which examined Tolkien's methods of invention from a philological perspective. As an example of this method, this study investigates the parallels in the portrayal of elves and dwarves in Tolkien's mythology and two of his most important sources: the *Prose* and *Elder Edda*'s. As it is asserted in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, Tolkien's conception of elves and dwarves 'have come to dominate most genre fantasy'<sup>3</sup> and thus an examination of the sources he drew upon should provide a more accurate picture of the literary influence that has passed from the mediaeval sources into contemporary fantasy.

## Tolkien and the Sources

Much has been said concerning Tolkien's manner of 'invention.'<sup>4</sup> While the business of tracing an author's creative process is dangerous at the best of times, it is worth considering one defining aspect that has made Tolkien distinct from other fantasy authors: his sense of 'historical reality.' As a result of a continued misunderstanding on the part of several readers, he wrote in 1956:

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle Earth*, Boston & New York, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, John Clute and John Grant, editors, London, 1999, 316.

<sup>4</sup> For Tolkien's own views on the matter of invention and sub-creation, see J R R Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories,' *Tree and Leaf*, London, 2001, 3-81. See also Brian Rosebury, *Tolkien: A Cultural Phenomenon*, Hampshire & New York, 2003 and Tom Shippey, J R R Tolkien: *Author of the Century*, London, 2000.

Mine is not an 'imaginary' world, but an imaginary historical moment on 'Middle-earth' which is our habitation<sup>5</sup>.

The distinction is crucial. Middle-earth is not a fictional world separate from our own, such as C.S. Lewis' Narnia. It is rather a kind of 'feigned history,' set in an unknown period of time, but which nevertheless has some 'traceable' connections to recorded history.<sup>6</sup> A philologist by profession, Tolkien approached his own mythology from this distinctly historical point of view. Shippey has best characterised this as the method of 'asterisk reality:' a philological term whereby a theoretical form of a word may be inferred with complete certainty.<sup>7</sup> Tolkien applied this process creatively, not only to his languages but also to the sources he was influenced by, and it can certainly be seen in the case of the *Eddas*. He was acutely aware of the ambiguities and contradictions in the accounts of elves and dwarves and sought to explain them in his own mythological terms through this kind of process.

Before examining Tolkien's own conception of elves and dwarves, it is necessary to introduce his two most influential sources. *The Prose Edda* was written by the Icelander, Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241), and contains one of the most comprehensive accounts of Norse mythology in Icelandic literature. *The Poetic* or *Elder Edda* (a source which Snorri drew heavily upon) was compiled in the 1270s by an anonymous writer and contains a large body of mythological information that is thought to predate the conversion of Iceland in the late tenth century. Both sources were of central interest to Tolkien since they represented some of the earliest accounts of elves and dwarves that were available. In addition, the *Eddas* predated the

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<sup>5</sup> J R R Tolkien, *The Letters of J R R Tolkien*, Humphrey Carpenter, editor, Boston and New York, 2000, 183.

<sup>6</sup> Tolkien estimated the gap between the events in the *War of the Ring* and our present time to be about six thousand years. See Letter 211 in Tolkien, op cit, 278.

<sup>7</sup> See Tom Shippey, op cit, 19-23.

emergence of the folktale influences that were to culminate in the post-sixteenth century equation of elves and dwarves with pixies and sprites, which Tolkien detested.<sup>8</sup> The *Eddas* also posed a difficulty, however, in that they did not provide in any way, a homogenous view of elves and dwarves. Rather, they were riddled with ambiguities and contradictions that, for lack of more evidence, often proved unresolvable. It is the intention of the first part of this study to examine the main difficulties in the Eddic accounts of elves and dwarves and to offer some possible solutions to these problems.

The most significant ambiguity in the sources may best be seen as a problem of categorisation which hinges on a critical passage in the 'Gylfaginning' of *The Prose Edda*. Here a distinction is made between two apparently different races of 'elves':

High said: 'Many splendid places are there. There is one place that is called Alfheim. There live the folk called light-elves, but dark-elves live down in the ground, and they are unlike them in appearance, and even more unlike them in nature. Light-elves are fairer than the sun to look at, but dark-elves are blacker than pitch.'<sup>9</sup>

In this statement, three distinct differences are emphasised between 'light-elves' and 'dark-elves.' Firstly, they are situated in geographical opposites, secondly they differ in appearance, and thirdly that they differ in nature (though this is not explained).<sup>10</sup> While there are markedly fewer references to 'light-elves,' these distinctions are supported by further instances in the texts. The geographical distinction is emphasised when, in order to find a fetter that will bind Fenrir, Freyr's messenger goes **down** into the

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<sup>8</sup> For instance Tolkien cast many aspersions on Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. See Tolkien, *The Letters*, op cit, 143.

<sup>9</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, translated by Anthony Faulkes, Oxford, 1996, 19-20.

<sup>10</sup> See Lotte Motz, 'Of Elves and Dwarfs' in *Arv: Journal of Scandinavian Folklore*, 29-30, 1973-1974, New York, 122 (footnote 39).

world of black-elves.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand light elves are positioned high up in the heavens, and are associated with the light of the sun.<sup>12</sup> In the passage quoted above they are described as 'fairer than the sun' while in 'Skirnir's Journey,'<sup>13</sup> Freyr complains that 'the elf-ray shines day after day, but not on my longings.'<sup>14</sup> Likewise, in 'Vafthrudnirsmal' the sun itself is described as the 'elf-disc.'<sup>15</sup> The contrast is also striking in the rare incidents when appearances are mentioned. The associations with the sun, as we have seen above, serve also to denote the light-elves as beautiful. This is clearly indicated in 'Skaldskaparmal' where Snorri states that, 'using the names of elves is thought complimentary.'<sup>16</sup> A practical example of this is found in the Saga of King Heidrek the Wise by the use of the name Alfildr (elf hair) for a lady 'more beautiful than any other woman.'<sup>17</sup> Of the dark-elves we know little more than that they were 'black as pitch' implying, if we follow the general rule of opposites, that they were very ugly to look upon.

It may be noted that three terms have appeared for 'elves:' light-elves, dark-elves and black-elves. While light-elves are clearly marked out as a separate entity, is it safe to assume that black-elves and dark-elves may be equated? The confusion is exacerbated by the fact that dark-elves are mentioned only once in Snorri's *Edda* and nowhere else. This has further led to the question: if dark-elves and black-elves are the same, why are dark-elves mentioned at all? Tom Shippey's rather hesitant

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<sup>11</sup> Sturluson, op cit, 28, my emphasis.

<sup>12</sup> Lotte Motz, op cit, 96.

<sup>13</sup> It is possible that Skirnir himself could be a light-elf. His name means 'shining one' while Freyr himself is strongly associated with Alfheim ('elf land'). This is conjecture however.

<sup>14</sup> 'Skirnir's Journey' in *The Poetic Edda*, translated by Carolyne Larrington, Oxford, 1996, 62.

<sup>15</sup> 'Vafthrudnir's Sayings' in *The Poetic Edda*, ibid, 47.

<sup>16</sup> Sturluson, op cit, 94. It is notable that the element – 'Ælf' is also used frequently in Anglo Saxon names such as Ælfred, and Ælfwine.

<sup>17</sup> *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, translated by Christopher Tolkien, London, 1960, 67.

solution is to assert that they should be considered different. This follows the line of argument of the nineteenth century scholar, Grundvig, who postulated that dark-elves were 'elves of the twilight,' a separate class of beings altogether.<sup>18</sup> Unaccountably, Shippey forces himself into this conclusion by stating that those who take the simpler two-group solution (light-elves on the one hand and dark/black-elves on the other) are in effect 'throwing away their best text.'<sup>19</sup> By this he seems to imply that to take the view that only two groups exist, scholars must necessarily assert that Snorri himself made a mistake in his own writing. Yet this seems hardly reasonable. We must keep in mind the general purpose of the *Prose Edda* as a manual of poetic diction and, as such, it may not be surprising that a different name for something might crop up from time to time. But regardless of this, there is no other textual evidence that we have to support the dark elf/black-elf distinction and, indeed, they appear to be so similar in every instance that to regard them as the same beings makes far more sense.

We are left then with our earlier division: light-elves on the one hand and dark/black-elves on the other. Yet this brings us to another question. The fact that light and dark/black-elves are so manifestly different yet bear the same name 'elf' leaves us wondering whether they may be thought of as two different 'tribes,' distantly related, or whether they are separate entities altogether. In *Myth and Religion of the North*, Turville Petre appears to come down on the side of the former, stating that 'Snorri seems to describe two aspects of the elves; they are dead and, at the same time the promoters of fertility; they are beautiful and hideous at once.'<sup>20</sup> His argument rests heavily on the explicit association with the light-elves and Freyr, a member of the Vanir, the family of gods associated with both fertility and death. Yet, given the nature of the portrayal of light-elves and dark/black-

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<sup>18</sup> Tom Shippey, 'Light-elves, Dark-elves, and Others: Tolkien's Elvish Problem,' in *Tolkien Studies*, Vol 1 No 1 (2004), 5-7.

<sup>19</sup> Shippey, op cit, 4.

<sup>20</sup> E O G Turville Petre. *Myth and Religion of the North*, London, 1964, 231.

elves marks them as opposites as we have seen above, the circularity of such an explanation leads us to wonder what he means by 'elves' in the first place. Indeed Turville Petre's point suggests rather the alternative possibility. As he points out, light-elves seem to be heavily associated with life and fertility through their strong association with the sun (as we have seen), and more importantly through their connexion with Freyr. In 'Grimnismal' it is stated:

Alfheim the gods gave to Freyr  
In bygone days as tooth-payment.<sup>21</sup>

Given that Freyr, as a chief member of the Vanir, is associated strongly with fertility, Turville-Petre's connection is convincing. Having noted the antithetical relation of dark-elves to light-elves and the emphasis on their subterranean geographical position, Turville-Petre seems further justified in identifying the dark/black-elves with the dead. Yet rather than being two aspects of the same thing 'at once,' this connection with the dark/black-elves and death instead points to a strong connection with the dwarves.

Dwarves similarly have very strong associations with death. In a fascinating study of dwarf names, Gould has demonstrated this point persuasively by listing a number of dwarf names that clearly fit this association:<sup>22</sup>

...*Nar*, 'corpse,' *Nainn*, 'like a corpse,' *Dainn*, *Dani*, 'like one dead,' *Buinn*, 'prepared (for burial),' *Eggmoinn*, 'slain by the

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<sup>21</sup> 'Grimnir's Sayings' op cit, 5.

<sup>22</sup> Though Gould seems to overstep the mark. He states that 'The dwarves are the dead; they are one phase of the Living Corpse, the *draugr*, that has experienced the First Death and will experience the final and Second Death when the body disintegrates' in C N Gould, 'Dwarf-Names in Old Icelandic' *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 44, 1929, 959. It is hard to see how dwarves may *only* represent the dead when they possess other characteristics that do not seem to bear any relation to it - such as their wisdom and their ability as craftsmen.

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sword.'...*Bumburr*, 'a swollen thing....*Duri*, *Durinn*, *Durnir*, 'a sleeper,' *Dvallin*, 'torpid,' *Loinn*, *Loni*, 'lazy,' *Anarr*, *Onarr*, 'one who stares at something,' *Uni*, 'one who is calm.'<sup>23</sup>

These names, furthermore, cohere with the propensity of dwarves to live under the earth or in mounds, as well as their habit of amassing large amounts of treasure, which are symbolic of grave goods that were placed with the deceased.

In fact, the dark/black-elves appear to bear such remarkable similarity to the dwarves in other instances that they might be thought of as the same beings. Certainly this impression is given several times in the *Prose Edda*. For example, in 'Skaldskaparmal,' when Thor finds out that Loki cut off Sif's hair:

...he caught Loki and was going to break every one of his bones until he swore that he would get black-elves to make Sif a head of hair out of gold that would grow like any other hair. After this Loki went to some Dwarves called Invaldi's sons...<sup>24</sup>

We must assume either that the dwarves lived among other dark/black-elves or were dark/black-elves themselves. The latter statement seems to make more sense and avoids unnecessary complication. Again in 'Skaldskaparmal,' Loki is sent to the 'world of the black-elves' in order to obtain the ransom needed to free Odin and Hœnir when they are captured by Hreidmar and his sons Regin and Fafnir. There he finds the dwarf Andvari.<sup>25</sup> Stanza Nine of 'Voluspa' further confirms this association:

Then all the powers went to the thrones of fate,  
The sacrosanct gods, and considered this:  
Who should form the lord of the dwarves  
Out of Brimir's blood and from Blain's limbs?<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 957-958. It is also significant, as Gould points out, that Odin, the god of the dead, also shares some dwarf names. See Ibid, 960, note 71.

<sup>24</sup> Sturluson, op cit, 96.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 100.

<sup>26</sup> 'Seeress' Prophecy,' op cit, 5.

'Blain' may be rendered as 'the dark or black one.'<sup>27</sup> As such, the equation of Blain with dark/black-elves is not difficult to make, and we may thus safely infer the connexion between dark/black-elves and dwarves even from their point of origin. The geographical similarity between the two is self-evident, since their relationship with the earth is repeatedly made explicit, as we have seen already.

Despite the strength of this evidence, there is one difficulty that becomes immediately apparent if dark/black-elves and dwarves are to be considered the same. Apart from being ugly, the only distinguishing physical characteristic of black-elves that is made explicit in the sources is the fact that they are quite literally 'pitch black.' There is nothing to suggest however, that dwarves share this physical feature. In 'Alvissmal' Thor asks the dwarf Alviss:

What sort of man is that, why so pale about the nostrils,  
Did you spend the night with a corpse?  
The image of an ogre you seem to be to me,  
You are not meant for a bride.<sup>28</sup>

Thor's question concerning the paleness of Alviss may be taken a number of ways. If the statement was to fit the fact that dwarves are black, it might be said that Alviss was pale with *fear* at the anticipation of Thor's retribution. But such an interpretation seems rather stretched given that (highly uncharacteristically) Thor does not respond to Alviss violently. It is far more probable that the description of Alviss as pale was used to emphasise the way in which dwarves stay out of the sun, a pertinent fact to highlight given the ending of the story.<sup>29</sup> Having said this, there are also no other known accounts of dwarves turning to stone in the sun. While dwarves are often stated to live under ground, we may reasonably assume that the more extensive stories

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<sup>27</sup> 'Seeress' Prophecy,' op cit, 264, note five.

<sup>28</sup> 'All-wise's Sayings,' *The Poetic Edda*, op cit, 109.

<sup>29</sup> By repeatedly asking questions, Thor tricks Alviss into staying out until the sun rises; whereby he turns to stone.

surrounding dwarves such as Andvari or Regin took place in daylight. We also have dwarf names such as Blóvur 'the shining one,' Dagfínnr 'day-finder' or 'day-magician,' Fáinn 'dhining,' Fár 'dhining,' Glóinn 'the glowing one,' and Ljómi 'glow, gleam, shine.'<sup>30</sup> These names, with their obvious association with the day seem rather incongruous with the Alvis story. As a result we are left to wonder precisely where 'Alvismal' fits in more generally with the Norse mythological scheme – a question entirely open to conjecture. For now at least, we may relegate this anomaly to the contradictory nature of mythology. As we have seen already, the evidence overwhelmingly supports the association of black/dark-elves with dwarves.

The powerful but highly enigmatic figure of Volund, known for his notable title as 'prince of the elves' bears particular relation to this question, since he is commonly used as an example of the only explicitly named 'elf.' His significance is furthered by his several but brief appearances in Anglo-Saxon writing, most notably in *Beowulf*<sup>31</sup> and *Deor*<sup>32</sup>, indicating his original mythological prominence. Yet Volund, despite his obvious importance, is also extremely difficult to categorise in the light-elf/dwarf dichotomy as set out above, making his title 'prince of the elves' even more puzzling.<sup>33</sup> It seems a worthwhile project to examine the figure of Volund in more detail, and determine how

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<sup>30</sup> Gould op cit, 943; 943; 945; 946; 948; 950.

<sup>31</sup> *Beowulf*, translated by David Wright, Suffolk, 1968, 37.

<sup>32</sup> 'Deor,' *Old and Middle English Poetry*, edited by Duncan Wu, Cornwall, 2002, 10-12.

<sup>33</sup> Perhaps as a result scholars seem particularly hesitant to place him as either a dwarf or a light elf. John Lindow, in his *Handbook of Norse Mythology*, while never expressly stating it, seems to imply that Volund falls into the latter category since he mentions Volund under his entry for *Elves*; John Lindow, *Handbook of Norse Mythology*, Oxford, 2001, 110. Lotte Motz, on the other hand, takes Volund to be a dwarf, though he similarly gives no detailed reason for doing this. See Motz, *Of Elves and Dwarves*, op cit, 93. Both opinions are characteristic of a marked hesitancy among scholars to place Volund in either camp.

he fits in with the mythical scheme of elves and dwarves as we have defined it above.

Volund resembles the dwarves in two highly significant respects: first as a figure of power, and second as a figure of a master-smith. His powerful nature is alluded to several times in the poem. It is notable for instance, that Nidud and his men do not dare to confront Volund openly. Rather, they must journey 'by night.'<sup>34</sup> Despite clearly being well-equipped for battle,<sup>35</sup> instead they must accost Volund while he is asleep and alone. When Volund is bound and taken to Nidud's hall, the queen immediately recognizes the threat he poses:

...his eyes awful, like the adder's glittering.  
Sever ye soon his sinews' might,  
Let him sit henceforth in Sævarstath.<sup>36</sup>

Not only does the queen order that he be crippled, he is also taken to a desolate place, so as not to pose a direct threat to the king. Finally, when he tells the king that he has butchered his sons, Nidud states that:

There is no man so tall that he could capture you from a horse,  
Nor so powerful that he could shoot you down from below,  
There where you hover against the cloud!<sup>37</sup>

Dwarves, similarly, are often implied to be extremely powerful.<sup>38</sup> The figure of Alviss in 'Alvissmal' comes to mind, the only instance when Thor does not seem to be able to use violence.

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<sup>34</sup> 'Lay of Volund,' in *The Poetic Edda*, op cit, 103.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 104.

<sup>36</sup> 'Lay of Volund,' in *The Poetic Edda*, translated by Lee M Hollander, Austin, 1962, 163.

<sup>37</sup> 'Lay of Volund,' in *The Poetic Edda*, translated by Larrington, op cit, 108.

<sup>38</sup> Though there are exceptions. One thinks of the dwarf Andvari who must buy his life by handing over his treasure to Loki. Also in the *Saga of King Heidrek*, the dwarf ransoms himself by making items for his enemy. It is notable in both these instance however that the dwarves are caught outside their homes. See Lotte Motz, 'The Craftsman in the Mound,' in *Folklore*, Vol 88, 1977; 46-60.

Regin, another important dwarf,<sup>39</sup> described as 'wise, ferocious and knowledgeable about magic,'<sup>40</sup> is also implied to be very powerful. His family (quite remarkably) are able to hold three of the Gods, Odin, Hœnir and Loki for ransom while Sigurd himself has to kill Regin while he is asleep, fearing that the dwarf will exact vengeance for the death of his brother when he awakes.<sup>41</sup> The resemblance between Volund and powerful dwarf figures is thus striking.

The most important similarities between Volund and the dwarves are the associations with smithying and treasure.<sup>42</sup> It is said that Volund possessed 'seven hundred in all' rings, a statement which reminds us strongly of the dwarf Andvari. When Nidud finds Volund's dwelling abandoned, they replace all the rings except one which Volund misses (though he is beguiled into believing the taker to be his lost wife). A very similar situation occurs twice in the Sigurd legend. Firstly after being sent out by Odin, Loki forcefully takes all of Andvari's treasure, including a ring he tries to hide. According to 'Skaldskaparmal:'

The dwarf asked him not to take the ring from him, saying he could multiply wealth for himself from the ring if he kept it.<sup>43</sup>

The same incident is repeated when the Æsir stuff the otter skin with gold, except for one ring which Odin unsuccessfully attempts to withhold.<sup>44</sup> The repetition of this theme in the story of

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<sup>39</sup> We know that Regin is a dwarf through a statement in Voluspa. See 'The Seeress's Prophecy,' op cit, 5. Also he is described in *Reginssmal* to be 'a dwarf in height.' See 'The Lay of Regin,' op cit, 151.

<sup>40</sup> 'The Lay of Regin,' op cit, 151.

<sup>41</sup> 'Lay of Fafnir,' in *The Poetic Edda*, translated by Larrington, op cit, 164. Incidents of being 'stabbed in the back' seem to be perpetuated throughout the stories of the Volsungs. Hreidmar, Regin, Fafnir and Sigurd are all killed in such a similar way.

<sup>42</sup> Indeed Volund's fame as a master smith extends to distant heroic lays such as *Beowulf* where the hero boasts that Volund is the maker of his corselet. See *Beowulf*, op cit, 36

<sup>43</sup> Sturluson, op cit, 100.

<sup>44</sup> It is possible that this ring is the legendary *draupnir*, which was taken from

Volsung suggests some allusion on the part of the poet to the Niflung treasure, and thus, by association, Volund is connected with the dwarves through Andvari's original ownership of the gold.<sup>45</sup>

Similar associations exist between the figure of Volund and the dwarves with regards to swords. It is notable that the queen explicitly identifies Volund's vengeful anger because his sword is taken along with his ring.<sup>46</sup> Strangely, (for the space it takes up in the poem) his sword plays no real part in the narrative. However, the fact that it warrants such a mention may indicate its importance in the corpus of myths that are no longer extant. A stanza later he states:

There shines at Nidud's belt a sword,  
Which I sharpened most skillfully as I knew how;  
And I tempered as seemed to me most fitting;  
The shining blade is forever carried far from me,  
I shall not see that brought to Volund in the smithy.<sup>47</sup>

The emphasis placed on Volund's effort at sharpening his sword is significant since the making of sharp swords is a distinguishing characteristic of dwarven smiths. There are two important occurrences of this in Norse mythology. Most relevant to the case of Volund is the sword Gram, made for Sigurd by Regin and renowned for its sharpness. Out of all the sources, *The Volsung Saga* goes the greatest length to describe the forging of Gram:

Sigurd hewed at the anvil and split it to its base. The blade did not shatter or break. He praised the sword highly and went to

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Baldr's funeral pyre How it might have got into Andvari's hands remains a mystery.

<sup>45</sup> This assumption is strengthened by the direct reference on the part of Volund to the Niflung treasure. There is some textual ambiguity surrounding this however.

<sup>46</sup> 'Lay of Volund,' in *The Poetic Edda*, translated by Lee M Hollander, op cit, 163.

<sup>47</sup> 'Lay of Volund,' in *The Poetic Edda*, translated by Larrington, op cit, 105.

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the river with a tuft of wool, which he threw against the current. The sword cut the wool in two when the tuft ran against the blade.<sup>48</sup>

The other famous sword that is described as the work of dwarven smiths is Tyrfing. Again, the sharpness of the sword is emphasized when Svafhlami attempts to rid himself of the dwarf which placed a curse on him:

Then Svafhlami struck at the dwarf with the sword, and the ridges of the blade were hidden in the stone...<sup>49</sup>

In both instances sharp swords are distinctly the work of dwarven smiths. Similarly in the Lay of Volund, a sharp sword is expressly stated to be made by the master-smith who is enraged at its theft. It seems reasonable then to assert a strong association between Volund and dwarven smiths.

If we now return to our original question concerning the use of Volund's title as 'prince of the elves,' we shall see that the evidence we have examined strongly suggests that, if Volund is not actually a dwarf himself, he is far closer to the dwarves than to 'light-elves.' To describe Volund as 'the only figure explicitly assigned to the elves, as scholars have done,<sup>50</sup> is misleading since to do so implies (against the available evidence) that he is a light-elf. In fact, dwarf names are very common in the Norse mythological corpus. In a wider sense Volund is an excellent demonstration of the ambiguity that surrounds elves and dwarves, even in spite of their more solid categorisation in the *Eddas*, as we saw previously. Having examined the nature of elves and dwarves in Norse mythology and ambiguities that surround them, it is worthwhile examining how they are reflected in Tolkien's mythology.

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<sup>48</sup> *The Saga of the Volsungs*, translated by Jesse L. Bylock, London, 1999, 60.

<sup>49</sup> *Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, op cit, 68.

<sup>50</sup> Lindow, op cit, 110

## Tolkien and the Elves

Tolkien's thoughts on the light/black-elves/dark-elves<sup>51</sup> division in the *Prose Edda* are clearly reflected in the account of the elves' awakening at Cuiviénen and their subsequent march to Valinor. Chapter Three of the *Silmarillion*, 'The Coming of the Elves,' describes the three tribes of the Eldar<sup>52</sup> (a collective term for all the elves) who undertook the long journey at Oromë's bidding. The first and smallest of these tribes are the Vanyar (Fair Elves), the second are the Noldor (Deep Elves), and the third and greatest host is the Teleri (Sea Elves). The three hosts together are termed the Light Elves<sup>53</sup> since they entered Valinor and beheld the light of the Two Trees.<sup>54</sup> There was however a great number of elves who either refused to take part in the march, called the Avari (the Unwilling), or who strayed or were lost along the way, called the 'Úmanyar' (those not of Aman). Both are called 'the Moriquendi, Elves of the Darkness, for they never beheld the Light that was before the Sun and Moon.'<sup>55</sup>

Since the narrative tends to concentrate on the Noldor (a subgroup of the Light Elves), little enough is said concerning the nature of the 'Dark Elves.' Something is revealed however in Tolkien's essay 'Quendi and Eldar,' written around 1959-60,<sup>56</sup> where it is stated that the Moriquendi (Dark Elves):

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<sup>51</sup> Throughout this discussion, Tolkien's Light Elves and Dark Elves shall be capitalised as a means of distinguishing them from their Norse equivalents.

<sup>52</sup> Though prior to the Lhammas manuscript, the term Eldar only referred to the Elves that had seen the light of the Two Trees. This term was to be replaced by the name 'Light Elves.' See discussion below.

<sup>53</sup> J R R Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, Ed. Christopher Tolkien, London, 1999, 51.

<sup>54</sup> These are the two trees, Laurelin and Telperion, that lit the world before the creation of the sun and moon. They were created by Yavanna and Nienna and were one of the greatest works of the Valar.

<sup>55</sup> Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, op cit 51.

<sup>56</sup> J R R Tolkien, *The War of the Jewels*, edited by Christopher Tolkien, London, 2002, 359. See Christopher Tolkien's commentary.

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Were regarded as greatly inferior to the Kalaquendi, who had experienced the Light of Valinor, and had also acquired far greater knowledge and powers by their associations with the Valar and Maiar.<sup>57</sup>

Thus the vital differentiation between Light Elves and Dark Elves in Tolkien's mythology is not that they undertook the journey but that the former beheld the Light of the Two Trees while the latter did not.<sup>58</sup> Interestingly this is reflected elsewhere. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, when Frodo, Sam and Pippin come across Gildor and his company (expressly stated to be High Elves)<sup>59</sup> it is stated that:

They bore no lights, yet as they walked a shimmer, like the light of the moon above the rim of the hills before it rises, seemed to fall about their feet.<sup>60</sup>

Likewise when the party comes across Glorfindal in *The Fellowship of the Ring*:

To Frodo it appeared that a white light was shining through the form and raiment of the rider, as if through a thin veil.<sup>61</sup>

Dark Elves on the other hand are never described in this way. Legolas, belonging to the Sindar of Mirkwood (Dark elves) is distinguished as being the son of Thranduil king of the Wood Elves, but he is never described as having the kind of hidden power that Glorfindal or Galadriel possess. Indeed, if we consider the general portrayal of the Wood Elves in *The Hobbit*, we find that they are certainly more prone to error than their Light Elf relatives, 'more dangerous and less wise.'<sup>62</sup> Similarly at the

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 373. See Christopher Tolkien's Commentary.

<sup>58</sup> Elu Thingol for instance did not technically take part in the journey but beheld the light of the Trees. Despite this he is not counted as a Dark Elf.

<sup>59</sup> J R R Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, London, 1993,114.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 115.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 279.

<sup>62</sup> J R R Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, London, 1993, 162.

Council of Elrond it is the Wood Elves that let Gollum escape from captivity.<sup>63</sup>

The characteristics that Tolkien attributes to his 'Light Elves' certainly recall their Norse equivalents who were heavily associated with the sky and the light of the sun. The Light Elves of the *Silmarillion*, in like manner, are portrayed as being physically bright – a possible Tolkienian explanation for the Norse terms such as 'elf-ray' and 'elf-disc' found in the *Elder Edda*. In addition to this they are associated with the Two Trees, which were to become the sun and moon after Morgoth's disastrous incursion into Valinor.

However, Tolkien's conception of the light/dark/black-elf division is different from that established in Snorri's *Edda*. Rather than equating dark-elves with black-elves, Tolkien has instead disregarded the latter term, favouring the less ambiguous name - 'dwarves' while giving to the term 'dark-elves' a new distinction of its own. With this change comes a necessary shift in polarity. Whereas with Snorri, light-elves are defined negatively with black-elves or dwarves, in Tolkien's mythology the polarity exists between two sub-groups of elves. It is of great interest however that despite this change, Tolkien's 'Dark Elves' took on certain features of the dark/black-elf/dwarves even though they are of a fundamentally different race. With one exception,<sup>64</sup> Tolkien's conception of Dark Elves remained stable, but this was not so with the Light Elves.

In the 'earliest *Silmarillion*' manuscript, written in 1926<sup>65</sup> the three hosts of elves undertaking the journey are divided differently:

...one under Ingwë (Ing) after called the Quendi (or Elves proper, or Light-elves), one under Finwë (Finn) after called the Noldoli

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<sup>63</sup> Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, op cit, 335.

<sup>64</sup> The story of Eöl 'The Dark Elf.' See Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, op cit, 151-162.

<sup>65</sup> J R R Tolkien, *The Shaping of Middle Earth*, Christopher Tolkien, editor, Vol 4, London, 1993, 11. See Christopher Tolkien's commentary.

(Gnomes<sup>66</sup> or Deep-elves), one under Elwë (Elu) after called the Teleri...<sup>67</sup>

These resemble quite closely the three tribes of elves that are present in the published *Silmarillion*. It is distinctive that in this case Light Elves are not a collective term for all the elves that came to Valinor, but rather a particular group of these led by Ingwë. Slightly more detail about this division is given in the typescript of the 'Quenta' of 1930<sup>68</sup> where it is stated that:

...the Light-elves [are] beloved of Manwë, who ever knew something of the mind of the Lord of the Gods.<sup>69</sup>

It is notable that the distinguishing characteristic of Tolkien's 'Light Elves' in this version is their close relationship with the Valar, not the fact that they had beheld the light of the two trees, since both the Noldori and the Teleri would also have experienced the Light of the Trees. This difference reflects an interesting shift in Tolkien's emphasis on the Norse sources. Whereas in the later conception, the elves resemble the Norse association with light and the sun, this earlier conception stresses instead a geographical characteristic of the Light Elves. Earlier we saw that the light-elves inhabit the heavens. What is of further note is the geographical proximity of the light-elves with the gods themselves.<sup>70</sup> Elves are commonly mentioned in conjunction with gods, as in the repeated statement in 'Voluspa': 'What ails the Æsir and what the alfs?'<sup>71</sup> This formula is frequently used in other poems such as 'Skirnir's Journey'<sup>72</sup> or in

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<sup>66</sup> For discussion on the term 'Gnomes' for the Noldor see Shippey, *The Road to Middle Earth*, op cit, 293.

<sup>67</sup> Tolkien, *The Shaping of Middle Earth*, op cit, 13

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 76. See Christopher Tolkien's commentary.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 151.

<sup>70</sup> See also Lotte Motz 'Of Elves and Dwarfs,' op cit, 95.

<sup>71</sup> 'Voluspa,' *The Poetic Edda*, translated by Lee M Hollander, op cit, 10.

<sup>72</sup> 'Skirnir's Journey,' in *The Poetic Edda*, translated by Larrington, op cit, 62, stanzas 7 and 17.

'Thrym's Poem.'<sup>73</sup> In 'Grimnismal' it is stated that: "The land is sacred which I see lying / Near the Æsir and elves."<sup>74</sup>

Assuming the formula has meaning above its function as an alliterative device, such a statement would indicate the closeness of the light-elves' habitation with that of the Gods. Tolkien's Light Elves fit this characteristic exactly. On the other hand, dark/black-elves are implied to live far off from the gods' dwelling. Odin must send a messenger (Skirnir) to the world of the black-elves<sup>75</sup> to get the fetter Gleipnir made, from which we may infer that the journey was a long one. This is made more likely by the fact that Skirnir also undertakes an arduous journey, this time on Freyr's behalf to win the hand of Gerdr.<sup>76</sup> This geographical characteristic of the black/dark-elves/dwarves certainly fits with Tolkien's dwarves, who universally dwell far away from the gods in Middle-earth<sup>77</sup> and who live underground in caves. However Tolkien's Dark Elves also exhibit this similar characteristic, demonstrating the occasional crossover between dark-elves and dwarves that Tolkien drew from the Norse sources. Thingol<sup>78</sup> for instance, ruler of the only formidable kingdom in Beleriand comprised of Dark Elves dwelt in Menegroth, an elaborate system of underground caves, which he had enlisted the help of dwarves to build. In *The Hobbit*, Bilbo and the dwarves are captured by Wood Elves (also Dark Elves) where they are imprisoned in a large underground fortress.<sup>79</sup>

While this element was to remain in the later mythology, Tolkien changed his emphasis on the Eddic portrayal of light-elves. In

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<sup>73</sup> 'Thrym's Poem,' in *The Poetic Edda*, ibid, 98, stanza 7.

<sup>74</sup> 'Grimnir's Sayings,' in *The Poetic Edda*, ibid, 52.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> 'Skirnir's Journey,' in *The Poetic Edda*, ibid, 61-68

<sup>77</sup> With the exception of Gimli, who departs with Legolas to Valinor after the overthrow of Sauron. It may be noted that 'Gimle' is the Norse name for the heaven that will exist after Ragnarök. It is possible that Tolkien intended this association to be carried with Gimli the dwarf.

<sup>78</sup> Though Thingol is not technically a Dark Elf himself.

<sup>79</sup> Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, op cit, 167.

the sketch of the Lhammas<sup>80</sup> the new distinction was made that is present in the published *Silmarillion*. Here, the Light Elves now appear as a collective term for all the elves that went to Valinor and saw the light of the two Trees.<sup>81</sup> The change seems to be a logical one, given that the distinction between Dark Elves and Light Elves makes more sense. The geographical proximity to the gods was to remain in the collective term for Light Elves, but with far less emphasis than it was given before. In a broader sense these changes in conception are indicative of the close relationship Tolkien had with the *Prose* and *Poetic Eddas*. While Tolkien changed his mind about Light Elves in his own mythology, his insistence on drawing from the Norse portrayal of light-elves remained highly consistent.

Significant difficulties and ambiguities surrounding the light/black-elf/dwarf dichotomy exist in the *Prose* and *Elder Eddas*. However, the balance of evidence suggests that it is possible to identify a basic distinction between light-elves on the one hand and black/dark-elves/dwarves on the other. These ambiguities are, unsurprisingly, reflected in Tolkien's own work and are particularly evident in his division of Light Elves and Dark Elves as seen in *The Silmarillion* and his previous drafts. Based on these divisions, it is apparent that Tolkien drew heavily upon the Norse sources. This is attested to in the close parallels between Tolkien's Light Elves and Dark Elves and references to these beings found in the Norse mythological corpus. In a broader sense, these parallels attest to the profound influence that the *Eddas* had on Tolkien's work, testimony to the ever present and vibrant link that exists between the fantasy genre and the mythologies of the past.

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<sup>80</sup> J R R Tolkien, *The Lost Road*, Christopher Tolkien, editor, Vol 5, London 1993, 166-7. See Christopher Tolkien's commentary.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 198.