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Abstract

An engaging linguistic study of the Mirkwood episode in Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, which the author uses as a typical example of the depth and interwoven complexity of the author's linguistic invention. Touches on the linguistic features of a number of real and invented words and concepts relating to spiders, poison, and dwarves.

Additional Keywords

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I can't think where you get all your amazing words from. I think we are both afraid lest you should be carried away by them.
  —Christopher Wiseman to J.R.R. Tolkien, 1915 (Scull and Hammond 2.1106)

All stories begin with words. On the surface, this may seem so obvious as to be hardly worth saying, but in the case of the stories—and the words—of J.R.R. Tolkien, this simple claim means much more. Tolkien was an extraordinarily careful and methodical writer, in whose voluminous writings "[h]ardly a word [...] has been unconsidered" (Tolkien, *Letters* 160).[1] George Steiner, the influential literary critic, wrote that "[w]hen using a word we wake into resonance, as it were, its entire previous history" (*After Babel* 24)—and there is perhaps no writer more attuned to this statement than Tolkien. He relished "wring[ing] the juice out of a single sentence, or explor[ing] the implications of one word" ("Valedictory Address" 224), and for each word he chose, often after protracted deliberation, Tolkien had a whole nimbus of ramifying connotations and implications in mind. Tolkien often tilled the same soil for his fiction as had already yielded such a rich harvest in his academic career; it is quite common to find evidence of the one in the other.

Tolkien's linguistic borrowings were diverse and layered. He liked to imbue words with multiple shades of meaning, even outright double-meanings, within and across languages. He was aware of the etymology of every word he used; even the words he invented had fully realized, albeit fictive, etymologies. A classic example is the Middle-earth toponym, Mordor. In Tolkien's invented Elvish language, Sindarin, the word signifies the "black land, dark country" but in Old English *morðor* was equally dark, meaning "murder." Another is Orthanc: in Sindarin, "Mount Fang," but in Old English *orþanc* is the "cunning mind." In the pages to follow, I would like to explore a particular cluster of Tolkien's carefully-chosen words, all of which come together in a single episode in his first published novel, *The Hobbit*.

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[1] The statement was made in the context of *The Lord of the Rings,* but the point need hardly be argued that this methodical approach governed everything to which Tolkien ever set his mind and hand.

Having thus set the table, let me serve you up a dish of spiders—specifically, the great poisonous Spiders of Mirkwood. For those who need a quick refresher, the quest to win back the hoard of the dragon Smaug had taken Bilbo and the Dwarves into the dark forest of Mirkwood. In spite of repeated warnings not to leave the forest path, hunger and despair eventually overcame their better judgment, and the company does just that: they leave the path, become hopelessly lost, and fall prey to giant poisonous Spiders. Not one of their better decisions! But Bilbo, with his magic ring, is not captured; instead, he masters his fear and sets about drawing the Spiders away from the captured and helpless Dwarves, singing a song to infuriate them:

> *Old fat spider spinning in a tree!*
> *Old fat spider can't see me!*
> *Attercop! Attercop!*
>   *Won't you stop,*
> *Stop your spinning and look for me!*
>
> *Old Tomnoddy, all big body,*
> *Old Tomnoddy can't spy me!*
> *Attercop! Attercop!*
>   *Down you drop!*
> *You'll never catch me up your tree!*
>   (Tolkien, *Annotated Hobbit* 8.211)

What are we to make of Bilbo's taunt of "Attercop! Attercop!"? Casual readers often assume Tolkien invented the word, but in fact he did not. Like "Middle-earth," "mathom," "orc," and so many others, this is one of those archaic words Tolkien rescued from obscurity, thereby awakening its entire previous history. It really means nothing more than "poisonous spider."[2] The Anglo-Saxon compound *átor-coppe* goes back more than a thousand years to some of the earliest Germanic literature. I do not know of any occurrence of this compound form in Old Norse (one does find *köngur-váfa*, in which the second element, rather chillingly, means "ghost"), but would have been *eitr-koppr*. The Old English compound did make its way into Medieval Welsh as *adargop*, eventually shortened to Modern Welsh *adrop*.[3]

Where would Tolkien have gotten such a strange, archaic word? In April 1915, while still an undergraduate student, Tolkien made notes on the 13th-century poem "The Owl and the Nightingale," "chiefly about its vocabulary"

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[2] See, for example, Gilliver, *et al.*, 91–2; and Rateliff 321n27.
[3] Where Tolkien writes, "Attercop! / Down you drop!", it's not *too* far-fetched to think Tolkien could be punning on the Welsh, pointing out (beyond the literal meaning of the lines) that Old English *átor-coppe* eroded ("dropped down") into Welsh *adrop.*

(Scull and Hammond, I:62), of which *attercoppe* is a conspicuous example (occurring at line 600).[4] There are other, and earlier, possibilities as well. Tolkien was friend and student to the Wrights, Joseph and Elizabeth. Joe Wright, who had played a key role in setting the young Tolkien on the philological path that would occupy him to the end of his days, produced a stunning six-volume work of scholarship, *The English Dialect Dictionary*, from 1898 to 1905, in which Volume I contains a substantial entry for *attercop* (91). But perhaps an even more direct influence on Tolkien was a work by Professor Wright's wife, Elizabeth. During 1912, just as Elizabeth Wright was finishing her own book, *Rustic Speech and Folk-lore*, Tolkien was often at the Wrights's home studying under their combined tutelage. In the fifth chapter of her book, "Archaic Literary Words in the Dialects," Lizzie Wright writes with characteristic wit that "[m]any a delightful old word which ran away from a public career a century or two ago, and left no address, may thus be discovered in its country retreat, hale and hearty yet, though hoary with age" (36–7).[5] She goes on to discuss several examples of such words, the first of which is *attercop*, and I feel sure this would have stuck in Tolkien's memory, even though Mirkwood is hardly a country retreat!

Some years later, Tolkien might have seen the poem by Robert Graves, "Attercop: The All-Wise Spider," published in 1924. Tolkien used the word *attercops* himself in early drafts of the poem "Errantry," published in *The Oxford Magazine* in 1933 and probably composed a few years before. (As a side note, *attercops* did not survive into Tolkien's revision of "Errantry" for *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* in 1962.) In *his* poem, Graves is more complimentary to the reviled creature ("Attercop, whose proud name with hate be spoken"), but the poem and its use of this archaic word could well have been prominent enough to catch the ear of Tolkien, himself a young poet at the time. Tolkien later described Robert Graves and a lecture he (Graves) gave in 1964: "A remarkable creature, entertaining, likeable, odd, bonnet full of wild bees, half-German, half-Irish, very tall, must have looked like Siegfried/Sigurd in his youth, *but* an Ass. […] It was the most ludicrously bad lecture I have ever heard" (*Letters* 353). Speaking of wild bees, in Old Swedish, a *kopp* was a bee as well as a spider. But of course, now we're just having fun—the kind of fun Tolkien liked to call a "low philological jest" (*Letters* 31).

Returning to real etymology, the first element in *attercop* goes back to Old English *átor* (variously spelled, *áter*, *áttor*, *ǽtor*, etc.), meaning "poison"; cognate forms Tolkien would have known from the other medieval Germanic

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[4] It is probable that the line in question, *bute attercoppe and fule uliȝe* ("but spiders and foul flies"), gave Tolkien the name of the chapter, "Flies and Spiders."

[5] For more on Tolkien's relationship with the Wrights, and particularly the influence of Lizzie Wright, see Ryan.

languages include Old Norse *eitr*, Old High German *eitar*, Old Saxon *êttar*, *hêttar*. Among the modern languages, the word survives in Swedish and Dutch *etter*, Danish *edder*. In Modern English, the word *adder*, a kind of poisonous snake, is a red herring. It derives not from *átor* "poison" but from Old English *nædre*; however, it could be that *átor* influenced the shape and meaning of *nædre*.

The second element, *cop(pe)*, is usually said to mean "spider"—it survives in Modern English only in *cobweb*—but it probably came to refer to the arachnid relatively late, and there is much more to say about its earlier etymology. There are three possibilities: (1) "head," (2) "cup," and (3) variously "pock, bag, blister"; but when you boil these down, they all point to a single source: a Proto-Indo-European root, **keup*, meaning "a hole, a hollow," which in turn gave us the more familiar Indo-European root, **kaput*, meaning "head." What is a head, after all, but the hole or hollow where one keeps one's brain?

From these reconstructed roots developed such related words as Sanskrit कूप /kūpa/ "a pit, well, hollow, cavity"; Greek κύπελλον "a cup, goblet," from κύπη "a hole, hollow"; and Latin *caput* "head" and *cupa* "vat, cask, butt" (the latter is, through French, the source of the Modern English word, *butler*). Moving forward into the Middle Ages, we have Old Church Slavonic *kupa* "a cup," OE *copp*, *cuppe* "a cup, vessel," ON *koppr* "a cup, small vessel," and Middle High German *kopf* "a drinking vessel." That last word may look familiar. In Modern High German *Kopf* has shifted its meaning to "head," along with another noun, *Haupt*, which is phonologically related. Modern Dutch, Danish, and Swedish all have *kop(p)*, meaning "a cup"; and moreover, Afrikaans gives *kop* the additional connotations of a "hilltop" and (informally) "common sense" (i.e., what's *in* your *kop*).

What about "pock, bag, blister"? Where in the world do those come from? Well, the first is clear enough: a *pock* is a small hole, related to the American southern dialectal *poke*, which is a *bag* (cp., "a pig in a poke"). These two, *pock* and *bag*, are clearly related to PIE **keup* "a hole, hollow," not linguistically but by sense. But what about "blister," which seems to be the odd one out? Well, in addition to the meanings of both "cup" and "head," Modern Frisian *kop* also has the sense of "blister, bubble, pock," and so it's no great leap—at least from Frisian—to the sting of a poisonous spider.[6] Why care about a uniquely Frisian etymology? Two reasons. First, Modern Frisian is the closest living Germanic language to Modern English. Second, there is evidence that "the Mercian dialect [of Old English] was partly of Old Frisian origin" (Skeat,

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[6] This leap, great or not, was not mine originally; the theory was first expounded in a couple of wonderful 19th-century essays published in the proceedings of The Philological Society of London. See Wedgwood 6. More especially, see Adams's excellent and thorough essay, "On the Names of Spiders," especially 217.

Principles 41n1).[7] Mercian, of course, was Tolkien's preferred dialect of the ancient Anglo-Saxons.

We have thus found a kind of double meaning—"head" versus "cup"—is the second element of *attercop*. Spiders are both "heads of poison" and "cups of poison," and they may even have "bags of poison" or deliver a "pox of poison." And this is not the end of our odyssey through Tolkien's wonderful words and their double- or even triple-meanings. Tolkien uses a second archaic word for "spider" in *The Hobbit* in another of Bilbo's infuriating verses: "Lazy Lob and crazy Cob / are weaving webs to wind me" (*Annotated Hobbit* 8.212). Like *attercop*, Tolkien plucked *lob* from the Old English corpus, where *lobbe* is "spider." Quite close phonologically, a fact which could hardly be lost on Tolkien, is another Old English word, *lybb*, meaning "poison" or "sorcery by drugs" (also sometimes used positively, meaning "medicine"). And this provides a perfect segue to my next point of literary linguistics.

Tolkien's Attercops live in a forest called Mirkwood. Tolkien took the compound name for his forest from the Old Norse *Myrkviðr* (cf. *Lokasenna*, in the Poetic Edda). He also extrapolated an unattested Old English form, **Myrcwudu*, for use in his own legendarium (Gilliver, *et al.* 165).[8] The first element, English *mirk*, later *murk(y)*, means "dark(ness)" in all the Germanic languages, as in Old Norse *myrkr*, Old English *mirce*, *myrce*, Old Saxon *mirki*; and in Modern Norwegian and Swedish *mörk*, Danish *mørk*. As Robert Orr has demonstrated, the root has left a footprint in the Slavic languages as well (cp., Bulgarian мрак, Russian морока, Slovenian *mrak*, etc.). Even in Tolkien's own invented languages, we have Quenya *morë* and Sindarin *môr* "dark." All of these derive from an IE root, **mer*, meaning "to flicker" (cp., Lithuanian *mirgéti* "to glimmer"). From this in turn derives the Primitive Germanic root, **merkwia*, meaning "twilight," a word quite redolent of Tolkien's description of Mirkwood.

So where's the double-meaning? Let us recall Tolkien's interest in Finnish. The Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*, was a profound influence on Tolkien, and echoes of it have found their way into many of his stories, most especially the tale of Túrin Turambar.[9] As it happens, there is a Finnish word, *myrkky*, which is quite close phonologically, but which doesn't mean "dark" at all; rather, it means "poison," just like the first element of *attercop*. Cognate to these are Estonian *mürk*, Saami (Lappish) *mir'hku*, and Hungarian *méreg*, all

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[7] This was Skeat's first, and more circumspect, suggestion of a connection between the two languages. He went on to elaborate, with evidence, in several other works, including a notable letter to *The Academy* on "The Frisian Origins of the Mercian Dialect."

[8] One also finds these forms in *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, published only last year, e.g., 131, 227–8, 369, 371.

[9] For a good treatment of the subject, see West.

meaning "poison"—and all looking like the first element in Mirkwood. Russian *моръ* "plague, pestilence" may also share a connection.

Is this a mere coincidence? It could be, but there are intriguing reasons to suppose it might not be. We know Tolkien studied not just the literature of Finland but also the language. It is, moreover, now well established that he modeled many aspects of his own invented language, Quenya, on Finnish. The word *myrkky* does not occur anywhere in the *Kalevala*; however, we do find the phrase *kuolla myrkystä* "to die of poison" in Charles Eliot's *Finnish Grammar* (143), the very book Tolkien took out of the Exeter College library, at least twice, for use in his studies of the Finnish language (Scull and Hammond, II:463). (By the way, I am told by Petri Tikki that Eliot's form is grammatically incorrect [it should be *kuolla myrkkyyn*]; Tolkien evidently wasn't the only Oxford academic to have trouble with the language!)

And just as Tolkien developed a Finnish-like language in Quenya, he developed a Hungarian-like language as well. This tongue, which Tolkien called Mágo or Mágol, is inchoate and fragmentary, but it was originally devised around 1930 as a Mannish language.[10] Tolkien later pondered whether he might repurpose the language, writing "Ork, Orkish" at the top of the manuscript, but he reconsidered and struck through these words, writing a definitive "no." But at least one genuine Mágol word made it into *The Hobbit* itself in an Orkish usage: *bolg* "strong," used by Tolkien as a name for one of great Goblins of the North. I find this reason enough to suppose that Tolkien's Hungarian-inspired language was close at hand as he worked his way through the later chapters of *The Hobbit*.

The linguistic relationship between Finnish and Hungarian (sibling languages of the Finno-Ugric family) is analogous to that between Tolkien's own Quenya and Mágol, even though for the latter Tolkien didn't get much further than a scant vocabulary (there are no extant Mágol words for "spider" or "poison," for example[11]). But clearly, there is a plausible philological connection between a *dark* wood and its *poisonous* inhabitants, as well as reason to suspect that Tolkien had the necessary background knowledge to make the connection,

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[10] Evidence of Mágol in *The Hobbit* establishes a date before 1937, and a more definite date of c.1930 is supported by the fact that Tolkien produced a Mágo(l) typescript on the same Hammond typewriter he used to type the 1930 *Qenta Silmarillion*. In addition, the manuscripts were put into a brown envelope mailed to 22 Northmoor Road, Oxford, where Tolkien lived up until 1930. I am told the postmark on the envelope is difficult to read, but may be 1928. I am indebted to Patrick H. Wynne for detailed information on the Mágo(l) manuscripts. These remain unpublished as of this writing; however, Wynne is currently editing them for publication in the linguistic journal, *Vinyar Tengwar*.

[11] There is a Mágol word for "dark(ness)," *lún*. This is cognate to words in the Elvish languages (cp. Quenya *lumbe* "gloom, shadow") and not to the Germanic etymon in the first element in Mirkwood.

very likely in Finnish and possibly in Hungarian. There is even a further tantalizing etymology to be glimpsed in the Eldarin base MERÉK (struck out and replaced with MBERÉK), which gave the Quenya word, *merka*, meaning "wild"—as in the Wilderland east of the Great River. That these resemble Hungarian *merég* no doubt *is* mere coincidence—or serendipity—but it serves to demonstrate how far down the rabbit hole it is possible to go!

But there is still much more. Who else have we got in the Mirkwood episode besides the Spiders, Mr. Baggins, and his little sword, Sting? Why, Dwarves, of course. But what, if anything, do dwarves and spiders have in common? It just so happens that dialectal Swedish uses the word *dverg* for both dwarf *and* spider. Welsh exhibits the same behavior, where *corr* is both dwarf and spider, "the name being probably given from the mythical skill of the dwarfs in handicraft" (Adams 221). Likewise, the Breton language of northwestern France, closely related to Welsh. The idea seems to have been that dwarves were reputedly so skilled in metal-working that they could rival the intricate construction of a spider's web. Now, Tolkien demonstrates a good foundational knowledge of Swedish in the "Nomenclature" he prepared for translators of *The Lord of the Rings*, and he knew Welsh even better, but how much did he know about dialectal forms? In a memorial essay, Tolkien's friend and colleague Simonne d'Ardenne recalled that Tolkien's "knowledge of languages other than his native English was amazing […]: Old Celtic, Old Welsh, Old Norse, Old French among many others, to say nothing of the profound knowledge of Latin and Greek […], and not only the languages themselves, but their remote dialects!" (d'Ardenne 35).

There are other sources from which Tolkien could have learned of this connection as well. Jacob Grimm points out the philological and folkloric connection between dwarves and spiders in his *Deutsche Mythologie*, a voluminous work of scholarship which Tolkien knew intimately. Grimm notes that "[t]he Swed[ish] *dverg* signifies araneus [i.e., spider] as well as nanus [i.e., dwarf], and *dvergs-nät* [i.e., a dwarf's net] a cobweb" (Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology* Vol. II.471).

There is another medieval text which connects dwarves and spiders, in this case contextually rather than linguistically. Among his notes to the chapter "Flies and Spiders" in *The Annotated Hobbit* (rev. ed.), Douglas Anderson alludes to the Lacnunga (or, "Remedies"), a medieval English collection of medicinal and magical remedies, charms, and spells to ward off or cure an assortment of monsters and maladies. The book Anderson cites[12] is too late to have influenced Tolkien, but several other editions and discussions of the Lacnunga were

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[12] Grattan and Singer's *Anglo-Saxon Magic and Medicine: Illustrated Specially from the Semi-Pagan Text Lacnunga* (1952).

published before *The Hobbit*. The contents of the collection, written in Old English, Old Irish, and Latin, are quite varied, but among them, one text in particular stands out for present purposes: a charm to protect against dwarves.

Actually, the late 10th- or early 11th-century manuscript (British Library MS Harley 585, folio 167) reads "wið **weorh** man sceal niman […],"[13] but **weorh* is clearly in error for *dweorh* "dwarf," as all subsequent editions and discussions, as well as contextual evidence in the Lacnunga itself, agree.[14] One of the earliest translators, Thomas Oswald Cockayne (whom Tolkien mentions by name in his watershed essay on *Beowulf*), rendered this line, "[a]gainst a **warty eruption**, one must take [various steps …]" (43), which is puzzling. It must be because Cockayne failed to realize the manuscript contained a scribal error; yet so far as I know, **weorh* has no meaning in Old English at all, "warty" or otherwise. Cockayne must simply have been guessing at the meaning. In any case, since Cockayne, it has been agreed this is a charm against *dwarves*, just as there are charms against elves and other sprites and the various maladies they were believed to cause.

As part of the charm's elaborate procedure, one must sing a curious incantation, which begins, *hér cóm ingangan inspiderwiht* "here came along a spider wight" (42), where a wight is just an archaic word for "creature" or "person" (cp., Tolkien's Barrow-wights). What the incantation really means, though, is not quite clear. According to Walter John Sedgefield, another early discussant, "[t]he incantatory passage is full of obscurities, but the general meaning can be puzzled out […]: the sense is that the spider is to ride off, using the dwarf-demon as his horse. . . . As soon as they have ridden away, the wounds begin to cool" (419).[15]

Much more recently, Philip Shaw has written that "[t]he term *spidenwiht* [sic] is one of the best-known cruces of Old English literature, and, indeed, the history of the English language" (101). If he is not overstating the matter, then such a crux would certainly have attracted Tolkien's attention at some point during his career. We can't be certain that "spider" was even the intended meaning, and Shaw goes over several possible theories to explain the word (including, again, scribal error). What is clear is that there is no such Old English form, and though the Modern English "spider" is clearly related to OE *spinnan* "to spin (e.g., a web)," no one has conclusively accounted for the word's sudden appearance in Middle English as *spinnere, spi(n)þre, spi(n)ther*. In any event, it

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[13] For the facsimile manuscript of this passage, see Cockayne 42 (translation on the facing page).

[14] See, for example, Bosworth and Toller 1192, Grattan and Singer 160 (and note 12).

[15] For Sedgefield's edition of the text of the charm, see 358.

seems not to have come directly from Old English.[16] In his Middle English Dictionary, Francis Henry Stratmann gives as a probable source Middle Low German *spinnere*, which is as good a theory as any I've seen. But whatever the word *inspiderwiht* was originally meant to convey, the editions of the Lacnunga in print before *The Hobbit* was published all say the word meant a spider. One can imagine Tolkien reading this and grumbling, "Rubbish! There is no such attested form!"

Could the charm have put dwarves and spiders together in Tolkien's mind, or reinforced a connection already there? Certainly it could have, assuming this is a text he read and a crux he pondered. It could well be that he made notes on this very subject, now locked away somewhere in the bowels of the Bodleian, awaiting the careful and patient attention of a scholar on a mission. Even if Tolkien never became entangled in the web of the Lacnunga and its riddles, the connection between dwarves and spiders is attested in other works (such as Grimm's) which Tolkien knew very well indeed. It may reveal something more of Tolkien's awareness of this connection that in *The Children of Húrin*, he gives Mîm the Petty Dwarf a telling metaphor: "Do you fear that you have followed a spider to the heart of his web? […] Nay, Mîm does not eat Men. And a spider could ill deal with thirty wasps at a time" (133). Again, dwarves and spiders.

So, we have a collection of double-meanings and even triple-meanings, ranging fairly widely among languages we know Tolkien studied and with strong ties to the setting, characters, and creatures in his first published novel. Whether consciously intended or not, such interwoven meanings, like the strands of a spider's web—or perhaps Ariadne's thread—help us to appreciate the ever rewarding complexities of Tolkien's imagination. To circle back to *The Hobbit* once again, Tom Shippey tells us, "[m]ost of *The Hobbit* suggests strongly that Tolkien did not work from ideas, but from words, names, consistencies and contradictions in folk-tales" (*Road* 92). I began by noting that all stories begin with words, but another way to express the same idea is to say that all stories are webs, and their storytellers spinners. Like the "*ammen und spinnerinnen*, 'old grannies and poor spinteresses'" Jacob Grimm once spoke of (quoted in Shippey,

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[16] Some have pointed to an Old English word, *spíþra* "spider?" as a possible direct antecedent, but this word is highly suspect. It is recorded only once in the entire Old English corpus (cf. Cockayne's *Leechdoms*; but in this case, Volume II) but can hardly be considered reliable for reasons already discussed. Cockayne himself does not include the word in his accompanying glossary; it appears even he was unsure of the word. It is cited, for the sake of completeness only, in the 1921 supplement to Bosworth and Toller's *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, and in John R. Clark Hall's *Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, where it is explicitly marked as uncertain (316). As with *spiderwiht*, scribal error seems to be the likeliest explanation for this attestation; it could be in error for *spiwða* "vomiting."

"History in Words" 27), storytellers are the keepers of institutional knowledge on how tales—and the words from which they are built—change over time. And perhaps the many-clustered eyes of attercops may allow us to see the many different angles of meaning in each word a little more clearly.

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