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Tolkien's Philological Philosophy in His Fiction

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Abstract

Reading of several key passages in Tolkien’s works that tie back to and illustrate his deepest-held philosophical beliefs about philology. Among other examples, pays particular attention to Gimli’s speech about the Glittering Caves of Aglarond and to Faramir’s failure to understand the warning implicit in the place-name Cirith Ungol due to the drift of linguistic meaning over time.

Additional Keywords

J.R.R Tolkien; Philology

Tolkien's Philological Philosophy in His Fiction

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That Tolkien's scholarly passions, both literary and linguistic, informed the construction of his mythology is well-known. It is not surprising to find reflexes of Kullervo in the story of Túrin's life, or phonological changes familiar from European languages in his invented Elvish tongues. Since the beginning of Tolkien studies, much work has been devoted to Tolkien's use of his academic background in his fiction. Less frequent, but just as interesting, are instances in which he incorporated not merely his factual knowledge, but his professional opinions. Tolkien indicated that some of his opinions were reflected in *The Lord of the Rings* when in two of his letters, he expressly quoted Gandalf on the proper way to conduct literary criticism in the real world. Other instances of characters reflecting Tolkien's opinions have been adduced in the scholarly literature. Shippey ("History in Words: Tolkien's Ruling Passion") argues that one of Gandalf's speeches can be interpreted as an expression of Tolkien's opinions on etymological reconstruction. Bruce and Bowman both argue that Gandalf's stand against the Balrog and Frodo's flight from the Nazgûl on Asfaloth reflect Tolkien's opinions about the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon.*

To this list of identifications, several more can be added. In this paper, I argue that a particular speech by Gimli adheres as closely to Tolkien's opinions on literary criticism as does the speech by Gandalf that Tolkien twice quoted. I then argue that the Moria episodes, particularly the deciphering of the password at the door and the pause to read the book of Mazarbul, grew out of Tolkien's desire to make a world in which philology is of immediate importance. Finally, I link Faramir's failure to interpret *Cirith Ungol* as "Pass of the Spider" for Frodo and Sam with Gandalf's difficulties in an earlier episode with the password to Moria and also with Tolkien's work on onomastics.

In addition to identifying further instances in which Tolkien's scholarly opinions made their way into his fiction, the present paper argues that he included them not haphazardly, but because they were of great importance to him. Just as his Christian worldview emerged in his fiction, "unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision" (*Letters* 172), so too were his academic values ever present in his mind when he wrote *The Lord of*

the Rings. As a scholar, he believed that there was a proper way to conduct philology, that philology was of greater importance than many academics and non-academics gave it credit for, and that it was important to value a work of art as a whole and as an end unto itself. Within his essays, letters, and speeches he expanded upon these opinions at great length. Within his fiction, he constructed a story in which the things that mattered to him could incontrovertibly matter to the world.

Literary Criticism

Literary criticism was a topic on which Tolkien had strong opinions. He wrote two significant essays on the topic: "*Beowulf*: the Monsters and the Critics" (henceforth BMC) and "On Fairy-stories" (henceforth OFS). In both essays, he was responding to a trend in scholarship that he felt focused on the least important parts of these bodies of work. The scholars to whom Tolkien was responding were more interested in what *Beowulf* could tell them about the historical events of the time than in reading it as a poem. In fact, as a poem, it was often judged to be of poor literary quality. The scholars were also interested in breaking *Beowulf* down into its component parts to discover what elements and perhaps earlier lays had gone into its making. Similarly, the approach to folklore was primarily comparative in nature, comparing stories from different traditions with similar motifs, and reading such stories for personal satisfaction was deemed suitable only for children and perhaps old women. Tolkien argued for the intrinsic literary worth of both *Beowulf* and fairy stories. He insisted that the purpose of criticism should be to read them as works of literature, and that historical or archaeological studies were of only peripheral interest. Though his essay on folklore was less influential, and the primary approach to studying folklore continues to be comparative, "*Beowulf*: the Monsters and the Critics" was a seminal essay in the field of *Beowulf* scholarship and marked a turning point away from an emphasis on source studies and historical studies, toward engaging with *Beowulf* as a self-contained work of art. In writing two such substantial essays, the *Beowulf* one the most important of his academic career, Tolkien made clear the importance to him of holistic study of literature and of treating a work of literature as an end in its own right.

Unsurprisingly, he held the same opinions about the study of his own work. On a number of occasions, Tolkien expressed concerns that his fiction would be read mostly with an eye to what he was thinking when he wrote it, either what he had been reading that it resembled it or what events in his life might have inspired it. For instance,

> I fear you may be right that the search for sources […] is going to occupy academics for a generation or two. I wish this need not be so. To my mind it is the particular use in a particular situation of any motive, whether invented, deliberately borrowed, or unconsciously remembered that is the most interesting thing to consider. (*Letters* 418)

His essays, being nonfictional, overtly express a disapproval of this sort of source criticism and of biographical criticism, but interestingly, Tolkien also pointed to a fictional passage in which he said the same thing, more indirectly. In two letters written near the end of his life (*Letters* 414; 424), Tolkien quoted the following exchange between Saruman and Gandalf to discourage his reader from analyzing his fiction into its component parts.

> "White!" [Saruman] sneered. "It serves as a beginning. White cloth may be dyed. The white page can be overwritten; and the white light can be broken."
>
> "In which case it is no longer white," said [Gandalf]. "And he that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom." (*The Lord of the Rings* [*LotR*] II.2.259)

Saruman's sartorial choices per se can hardly merit such weighty disapproval as expressed in Gandalf's speech. Gandalf is instead reacting to the way in which Saruman's robe is symbolic of his approach to the world. It is no surprise, given Tolkien's two essays on the subject, to see Gandalf the Wise advocating for a holistic study of the world while the depraved Saruman the White rejects the color of his own epithet and wears robes that refract white light into its component colors.

In the two letters in which he quoted Gandalf's words, Tolkien was reacting to the prospect of analysis of his own work. He responded to a request for help with an academic project by saying "I should not feel inclined to help in this destructive process" and "I dislike analysis of this kind" (*Letters* 424). Unfortunately, we never find out in Carpenter's edition of his letters what "this kind" was, i.e. the nature of the specific project to which he was responding. His use of the word "destructive," though, aligns with his criticisms in OFS and BMC of what he considered the destructive analysis of fairy stories and of *Beowulf*. These include the breaking of the text into component parts, such as tropes, and the hunt for the origins of the text, whether from the events of his life or from the works he read that might have inspired him. Of this sort of work, he wrote,

> When they have read [*Lord of the Rings*], some readers will (I suppose) wish to 'criticize' it, and even to analyze it, and if that is their mentality

> then they are, of course, at liberty to do these things—so long as they have *first* read it with attention throughout. Not that this attitude has my sympathy: as should be clearly perceived in Vol I. p. 272: Gandalf: 'He that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom.' (*Letters* 414)

Tolkien, then, made explicit the applicability of Gandalf's words to his own priorities in academic research. This identification opens the door to asking whether there might be other passages that can be read in the same manner. Shippey has turned up one. When recounting Gollum's history to Frodo, Gandalf describes a young Sméagol as "interested in roots and beginnings" (*LotR* I.2.53). As Gollum, Sméagol goes to live under the roots of mountains in the belief that they hold "great secrets […] which have not been discovered since the beginning" (54). But, Gandalf tells Frodo, "there was nothing more to find out, nothing worth doing" (55). Shippey convincingly argues that this expresses Tolkien's view of the practice of reconstructing etymological roots for their own sake ("History in Words: Tolkien's Ruling Passion" 30). Tolkien, in other words, believed that reconstruction for its own sake was not worth doing. Instead, reconstruction should serve some other end, such as understanding the forms attested in a language, or writing a poem in Gothic, or inventing a "lost" Germanic language such as Gautisk.

Yet a third passage may be read with applications to Tolkien's academic opinions. When Gimli is rhapsodizing about the beauty of the Glittering Caves, Legolas warns,

> "Maybe the men of this land are wise to say little: one family of busy dwarves with hammer and chisel might mar more than they made."
>
> "No, you do not understand," said Gimli. "No dwarf could be unmoved by such loveliness. None of Durin's race would mine those caves for stones or ore, not if diamonds and gold could be got there. Do you cut down groves of blossoming trees in the springtime for firewood? We would tend these glades of flowering stone, not quarry them. With cautious skill, tap by tap—a small chip of rock and no more, perhaps, in a whole anxious day—so we could work, and as the years went by, we should open up new ways, and display far chambers that are still dark, glimpsed only as a void beyond fissures in the rock." (*LotR* III.8.548)

The language used in this passage echoes the language Tolkien favored when discussing literature. It reminds one first of the famous analogy in "*Beowulf*: the Monsters and the Critics," in which Tolkien compares *Beowulf* criticism to a tower that has been knocked down by those who are more interested in what

they can dig up of its component parts, than in what the tower has to offer as a whole.

Moreover, in both of his essays on literary criticism, Tolkien compares the practice of using stories as sources of information to "quarrying."

> *Beowulf* has been used as a quarry of fact and fancy far more assiduously than it has been studied as a work of art. (BMC 5)

> Such studies are, however, scientific (at least in intent); they are the pursuit of folklorists or anthropologists: that is of people using the stories not as they were meant to be used, but as a quarry from which to dig evidence, or information, about matters in which they are interested. (OFS 38)

The image of quarrying is vivid enough to have been frequently quoted or alluded to[1] when discussing Tolkien's opinions on literary criticism. Gimli's denial of quarrying in favor of treating the caves as a work of art seems strikingly in line with Tolkien's approach to literature. Like the *Beowulf* poem, the cave is to be actively engaged with, not merely passively enjoyed, but in non-destructive ways. As Tolkien says of literary criticism, using a metaphor in which a story is soup and its tropes, symbols, and influences are the ingredients: "I do not of course forbid criticism of the soup as soup" (OFS 40). The anxious tapping and chiseling that Gimli envisions can be compared to literary criticism of a work as a whole, or perhaps even better, to the reworking of mythology into something new that is its own work of art, such as Tolkien engaged in.

Finally, the chambers that will be opened up in Gimli's vision reminds one of Tolkien's metaphors of new horizons. This image was one he often used metaphorically to describe literature and art (including his own), as well as literally to describe the physical landscape. It is clear from his writings that the image of dimly glimpsed landscapes resonated deeply with him, and that he constructed his mythology accordingly. For instance, he wrote to his son Christopher that

> A story must be told or there'll be no story, yet it is the untold stories that are most moving. I think you are moved by *Celebrimbor* because it conveys a sudden sense of endless *untold* stories: mountains seen far

[1] Baltasar 19; Bratman 89; Drout, "Tolkien's Medieval Scholarship and Its Significance" 135; Drout, "Introduction" xxx; Flieger, "'Do the Atlantis story and abandon Eriol-Saga'" 50; Flieger, "There Would Always Be a Fairy-tale: J.R.R. Tolkien and the Folklore Controversy" 28; Flieger, *Splintered Light* 14; Shank 149; Shippey, "Tolkien and Iceland: The Philology of Envy" 195.

> away, never to be climbed, distant trees (like Niggle's) never to be approached—or if so only to become 'near trees' (unless in Paradise or N's Parish)." (*Letters* 110-111)

In the short story "Leaf by Niggle" (henceforth "Niggle") to which Tolkien alludes here, Niggle's art is, in some mystical way, the landscape itself. Previously in Niggle's life, "He had never before been able to walk into the distance without it turning into mere surroundings" ("Niggle" 114). This is why Gimli and the other dwarves must proceed so slowly with the chambers; for there is a charm to knowing that new chambers await, and rushing spoils that sense of inaccessible distance. In Niggle's Parish, "As you walked, new distances opened out; so that you now had doubled, treble, and quadruple distances, doubly, trebly, and quadruply enchanting" ("Niggle" 114). In a letter in which Tolkien describes the writing of "Leaf by Niggle," he draws comparisons between himself and Niggle. Of particular interest to us is his state of mind at the time of writing the story as he describes it in the letter: "I was anxious about my own internal Tree, *The Lord of the Rings*. It was growing out of hand, and revealing endless new vistas" (*Letters* 321). Likewise,

> Part of the attraction of The L.R. is, I think, due to the glimpses of a large history in the background: an attraction like that of viewing far off an unvisited island, or seeing the towers of a distant city gleaming in a sunlit mist. To go there is to destroy the magic, unless new unattainable vistas are again revealed. (*Letters* 333)

These endless new vistas, the new distances that opened out in Niggle's Parish, and the glimpses of towers in a mist, all resemble Gimli's "far chambers that are still dark, glimpsed only as a void beyond fissures in the rock."

All of these parallels in language and image, therefore, suggest that Tolkien's opinions on literature are expressed in Gimli's speech. He intended Gimli to discourage the sort of work that he saw as destructive, including quarrying, in favor of artistic appreciation of the whole. Gimli and Gandalf therefore speak in harmony with each other on this issue, and in harmony with Tolkien throughout his life. Tolkien's essays were both composed in the 1930s. The bulk of *The Lord of the Rings* was written in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In 1971 and 1972, he quoted Gandalf's words with an application to the study of literature. He died in 1973. Tolkien expressed these opinions throughout his life in every genre in which he wrote, from the personal to the professional. The interested reader may see Fisher for a fuller selection of Tolkien's quotes on the subject.

It little matters, then, how consciously Tolkien may have had literature in mind when writing Gimli's speech, any more than when his

philosophical worldview emerges on the page. Whether or not he specifically thought of himself as rewriting the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon* when writing Gandalf's stand against the Balrog (see Bruce and Bowman), his non-fictional writing clearly indicates his belief that Byrhtnoth makes the wrong decision, and he just as clearly believed that Gandalf makes the right decision under similar circumstances. He was writing, in other words, his fiction and nonfiction from a consistent set of values. Likewise, a speech such as Gimli's, whether or not Tolkien wrote it with "*Beowulf:* The Monsters and the Critics" in mind, may be read as an expression of Tolkien's academic values.

Inscriptions and Manuscripts

One striking feature of Middle-earth is the presence of long-lived characters who make the distant past immediately relevant. Gandalf's discovery and decipherment of a manuscript by Isildur leads him to the conclusion that the ring of invisibility currently possessed by Frodo is in fact the One Ring of Sauron. The millennia-old manuscript is made key to the advancement of the plot. This is no accident. Tolkien once said that Middle-earth was motivated by his desire to have a world in which "a star shines on the hour of our meeting" could be a normal greeting (*Letters* 265). Likewise, there are numerous instances that show that he wanted a world in which ancient history was immediately relevant. The presence of immortal characters makes this possible in Middle-earth in a way that it is not in real life. Though no millennia-old manuscript, notwithstanding examples such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, is likely to have an immediate impact on the world comparable to Isildur's manuscript, Tolkien nevertheless wanted to use these fictional devices to drive home the point that even in the real world, the value of legend and of language is widely underestimated.

Several episodes in *The Lord of the Rings* highlight the importance of philology, and Gandalf is a major player in many of them. Because he is, however, fallible, like all the characters, Tolkien is able to use him both to show successes and failures of philology. For instance, Gandalf's difficulty interpreting the password to Moria serves a brilliant dual function of both highlighting the perils of thinking too much about philology, while emphasizing the importance of getting the philology right. Gandalf's great learning leads him to overthink the matter, which in turn leads him to parse the word *mellon* incorrectly. The correct parsing is needed for the Company to gain entrance to their destination.

Gandalf's decision to pause the Company in their desperate journey through Moria in order to read a book in poor light likewise stems from his—and Tolkien's—belief in the importance of philology. In hindsight, the Book of

Mazarbul would better have been read at leisure in Lothlórien, for it reveals nothing that aids them in their fight, and indeed delays their escape. While on a literary level, the scene serves to honor the fallen dwarves and to foreshadow the fate of the Company while building suspense, on the plot level it leads to the wounding of Frodo and Sam, to the destruction of the Chamber of Mazarbul, and perhaps ultimately to Gandalf's death. "Why did I delay?" Gandalf laments (*LotR* II.5.323).

Why indeed? It helps to remember that the last time Gandalf encountered a manuscript that had long gone unread since its creation, it revealed to him that Frodo's ring was the ring cut from Sauron's hand by Isildur, author of this millennia-old manuscript. He could not know in advance that the book of Mazarbul would not be similarly important, given that they are standing in the place in which the book was written, and they are having some difficulty finding their way through. Gandalf's deep philological interests,[2] reflecting Tolkien's, may at times lead him astray, but ultimately they make the defeat of Sauron possible.

Gandalf the Wise is an obvious medium for Tolkien to illustrate the importance of philology in Middle-earth and the proper way to go about it. Gimli is a less obvious choice, for he evinces no interest in literary learning whatsoever. Tellingly, it is Gandalf, not Gimli, who puzzles out the Book of Mazarbul in its poor condition. Gimli's only contribution is to identify the hand that wrote the Elvish characters, and he bases this deduction on his personal knowledge of his kinsman Ori, not on his paleographic learning. He fails to interpret the S rune borne by Saruman's orcs, attributing it instead to Sauron, in yet another instance in which the plot rides on the correct interpretation. Though Gandalf gives Gimli the book of Mazarbul with instructions to pass it on to Dáin, Gimli never speaks of it again, neither to decipher passages in the better reading conditions of Lothlórien that may have been obscure to Gandalf in Moria, nor to explain his lack of engagement with the book by by saying it was lost in any of his many adventures. We never learn any more of this book's fate.

Gimli's role is thus more indirect than Gandalf's. Gimli helps provide the link between the physical landscape and Tolkien's scholarly interests: language and literature. On the numerous occasions that have been elaborated on above, Tolkien drew comparisons between literature, including his own, and the landscape. Indeed, the book of Mazarbul itself, in being read to us in

[2] Given the evolution of Gandalf's character into someone so learned, Tolkien was later concerned by Gandalf's failure in *The Hobbit* either to read the runes on the swords or to decipher Thorin's map. The former he tried explaining by describing the swords as covered in goblin blood, which can only be cleaned at Elrond's house, but his revision of *The Hobbit* was never finished or published (Rateliff, "History of the Hobbit" 811).

tantalizing fragments and never alluded to again, serves the purpose of a dimly glimpsed landscape. As Tolkien says, "To go there is to destroy the magic, unless new unattainable vistas are again revealed." In this way, Gimli's approach to philology, via the landscape, is proper. His journey into the caves of Aglarond stands in contrast to Gollum's. Gollum provides an example of getting philology wrong. He delves endlessly into roots without gaining anything that might add to his appreciation of the object in question, unlike Gimli who gains an appreciation of the caves of Aglarond and indeed enhances their beauty.

Another domain in which Tolkien tied the landscape to philology and thought that people often got it wrong was onomastics. Both his scholarly work on English names and his choice of place names for Middle-earth, and the interactions of characters with these place names, send the same message: philology is of real importance.

Onomastics

Like Gandalf, Faramir is easy to link to Tolkien and his thinking. Tolkien said that if any of his characters resembles him, it is Faramir (*Letters* 232). When he wrote of Faramir's unexpected appearance during the writing of *The Lord of the Rings* that "I am sure I did not invent him […], though I like him" (*Letters* 79), it is not hard to understand why a character so similar to him appeared without conscious effort. He wrote approvingly in the same letter of Faramir's opinions on martial glory and true glory, calling Faramir's reflections "no doubt sound" (79), and he bequeathed to Faramir his own dream of a wave engulfing a green island (213).

These resemblances between Faramir and the author mean that it is especially significant when one of Faramir's episodes hinges on a linguistic detail. When Faramir meets Frodo and Sam in Ithilien, he tries to dissuade them from taking the pass of Cirith Ungol, saying that "there is some dark terror that dwells in the passes of Minas Morgul," and that "If Cirith Ungol is named, old men and masters of lore will blanch and fall silent." Yet when Frodo asks him "what do you know against this place that makes its name so dreadful?" Faramir says only that he knows nothing certain (*LotR* IV.6.692). Given that Faramir is a fluent and perhaps near-native speaker of Sindarin, it has mystified some readers why Faramir does not at least tell Frodo and Sam that *ungol* means "spider" in Elvish (Hammond and Scull 481). Knowledge of what to expect on the road ahead, even if he cannot dissuade them from their path, can only be to the good.

The two references to the "name" of Cirith Ungol in the exchange between Faramir and Frodo may give a hint. Tolkien had a deep personal interest in onomastics, and particularly in recovering half-remembered myth

by etymologizing proper names. For instance, he wrote a paper proposing an Indo-European etymology for the name *Nuada* of a Celtic god (Tolkien, "The Name 'Nodens'") and in doing so, derived an argument for the ancient functionality of the god from his name. Similarly, he proposed etymologies for the surname Neave of his Aunt Jane and for the English place name Hinksey, that linked these names respectively to the legendary figures Hnaef and Hengest from Anglo-Saxon mythology (Shippey "Tolkien and the *Beowulf*-Poet" 17; "A Look at *Exodus* and *Finn and Hengest*" 184-185). In this way, Tolkien believed, Anglo-Saxon myth has not entirely vanished, but a memory is still preserved in the surrounding landscape and its inhabitants. Just as Tolkien argued in "On Fairy-stories" that one of the functions of the fairy-story is "Recovery," he used philological techniques to effect a recovery that brings the past into the present and makes it real and immediate.

The failure of the people of Gondor to parse *Cirith Ungol* as "Spider Pass" and remember that it is inhabited by a giant spider-like creature, even when they know that it is a pass in which some dreadful terror dwells, is a failure similar to the forgetting of English names. Gondor is losing touch with its past. In the case of Cirith Ungol, of course, the ancient figures from myth still live, whereas Hengest is not likely to invade Hinksley in the foreseeable future. In his fiction, Tolkien was able to give philology an importance to the plot that it does not possess in real life, but he did so in order to communicate that he nevertheless believed philology *is* important, even now. Perhaps the fate of the real free world will never depend on a three-thousand-year-old text, but a people will lose a very important part of its heritage if no effort is made to keep in touch with the past. Gandalf rebukes Théoden for forgetting that the name *Entwood* is not a string of meaningless syllables, but preserves a memory of a time when Ents and mortal Men met. Theoden should not be so surprised to see the Ents walking again out of what he calls "the shadows of legend" (*LotR* III.8.549-50). One imagines that Tolkien would have liked a long-lived Hengest to come striding out of Hinksley.

Even given how commonplace such forgetting is, it remains less than obvious why Faramir, as a man of a land where much learning is still preserved in writing, unlike in Rohan, and as someone who deeply values old lore, does not think to connect the nameless terror of Cirith Ungol with the "spider" of its name, when wondering specifically what might be up there. Unlike in *Hinksley*, no phonological change has rendered this name unrecognizable: it translates quite straightforwardly as "Pass (of the) Spider," which is exactly what it is. Unlike the people of Rohan, who are given to singing songs rather than writing books, Faramir cannot have forgotten that *ungol*s are real creatures in the way that Théoden's people have forgotten about Ents, though he may be thinking of small *ungol*s rather than one of

Shelob's size. If phonological change cannot be responsible, then, we must look to semantic change for the solution to the mystery.

Though the tongues of the elves are slow to change, and the men of Gondor are conservative, nevertheless Tolkien makes it clear that men, with their shorter lives, are more changeable than elves, and linguistic change is faster too among them. Faramir laments the decline of Gondor and its people, saying they have become Middle Men, with a memory of other things (Tolkien, *Two Towers* 323). On their tongues, even if they made an effort to preserve the ancient pronunciation of words, words would inevitably acquire new meanings and lose old meanings. The use of a single word to convey many related meanings is known as polysemy. Semantic change such as polysemy is the most plausible explanation for Faramir's failure to communicate anything more specific than "terror" to Frodo and Sam.

Tolkien gives us some hint of the existence of semantic change in the word *ungol*. Neither Ungoliant nor Shelob is what the modern reader thinks of as a real spider, but only "spider-like." When Frodo and Sam meet Shelob, she is described as "most like a spider" (*LotR* IV.9.725), and has some anatomical features that are not observed in the spiders of the real world, such as compound eyes, and a stinger (Hammond and Scull 490-491; 493; 496.). Shelob's descendants in Mirkwood are not as terrifying as she, but they are described as spiders. "Ungol" therefore is used variously of Ungoliant, Shelob, the creatures of Mirkwood that feature in *The Hobbit*, and, presumably, the more familiar spiders found in one's house. It is common for a people entering a new geographical territory to apply familiar animal words to species that have never been encountered by speakers of their language before. This can lead to confusion such as that between *bison* and *buffalo*, or the North American elk (*Cervus Canadensis*), which is not the same as the European elk (*Alces alces*). Speakers familiar with Ungoliant entering Middle-earth might have encountered smaller, everyday creatures that resembled her and called them by the name *ungol*, thus expanding the use of the word to a wider range of referents. This process of semantic generalization is a common one in language change, and Tolkien would have been extremely familiar with it. Metaphorical extensions of animal words would have been equally familiar to Tolkien. A rat, in English, can be either a rodent or an informer. An *ungol*, then, might well be either a spider or any metaphorical web that one wants to avoid. In other words, any trap.

With all these possibilities for linguistic change, the most likely explanation for Faramir's "nothing certain" when answering Frodo's question about the name *Cirith Ungol* is that Faramir is holding in his mind all the polysemous and metaphorical meanings of the word; whereas the creature in question—Shelob—is simply so much like a spider that simply saying "spider"

to Frodo and Sam would have prepared them as well as anything. Faramir's failure to produce the simple and obvious meaning is paralleled by Gandalf's failure to immediately produce the password to Moria, which is so simple that the "learned lore-master" (*LotR* II.4.308) overlooks it.

Semantic changes, like the phonological changes seen in *Hinksley*, are an inevitable feature of human language. They made it possible for Tolkien to pursue a career in philology, but at the same time they conceal much information about legends of the past that he was eager to know. This dilemma was on his mind when he constructed his Elvish tongues, and no doubt it played a role in his choice to carefully craft the linguistic changes seen in those languages, while placing linguistic change under greater conscious control of his Elves than humans have over their languages. He would have liked, no doubt, humans to change our languages consciously, according to aesthetic principles, rather than haphazardly as we do, losing much that is good in the process.

Both Gimli's expansion of the Caves of Aglarond, "tap by tap," and the elements of linguistic change that lead to the difficulties understanding the origins of place names, reflect the inevitability of change. Though Tolkien was well-known for being of a conservative bent, he was opposed to what he called the practice of "embalming": trying to freeze the world in a desired state and allow no further progress (*Letters* 151-152). His theological views did not permit a return to the past.

> Mere *change* as such is not represented as 'evil': it is the unfolding of the story and to refuse this is of course against the design of God. But the Elvish weakness is in these terms naturally to regret the past, and to become unwilling to face change; as if a man were to hate a very long book still going on, and wished to settle down in a favourite chapter. (*Letters* 236)

As an author, as a Christian, and as a linguist, Tolkien recognized the changing nature of the world, but at the same time he wished not to destroy it heedlessly, or to lose touch with the past in a headlong rush toward progress. His engagement with literary works as a pieces of art, his creation of new myths and reworking of old myths, his study of linguistic change, and his creation of new languages, complete with patterns of phonological and semantic change, all reflect both his longing for the past and his vision of the world—both his fiction world and the real world in which he lived—as a story that does not come to an end, but is ever-changing in accordance with its creator's design.

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