

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

4610 English: Individual Authors: J.R.R. Tolkien

English Student Research

Fall 2017

The Relegation of Bilbo: The Narrative Diminishment of Mr. Bilbo Baggins Across J.R.R. Tolkien's Legendarium

Katherine Stein

Follow this and additional works at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/english_4610jrrt

The Relegation of Bilbo

The Narrative Diminishment of Mr. Bilbo Baggins Across
J.R.R. Tolkien's Legendarium

Katherine Stein

The Relegation of Bilbo

Katherine Stein

Scrawled at the bottom of a student's paper, the first words of the published Legendarium to scratch their way out of J.R.R. Tolkien's pen were written about Mr. Bilbo Baggins and "the hole in the ground" in which he lived (Rateliff xiii-5). While early formulations of wizards, dragons, Dwarves, and Hobbits were cycled through drafts of *The Hobbit* (Porter 37) and *The Fellowship of the Ring* (*Return of the Shadow* 221-229) in quite rapid succession, Bilbo's character resisted to a large extent such dramatic transformations, and the original Hobbit stayed much the same as he was originally formulated, on par with Tolkien's original intentions. Despite the relative clarity with which Bilbo was conceptualized and written, however, Bilbo's role within the Legendarium at large – and even his role within his own text, *The Hobbit* – has proved definitively lacking. With an entire novel devoted to Bilbo (he is *The Hobbit*, after all), and considering the extent to which he is centrally involved with the quest that progresses across *The Lord of the Rings*,¹ the identification of Bilbo's increasingly diminished role across the Legendarium comes not only as an unanticipated reality, but, for Bilbo Baggins fans especially, a distressing one. While he may be protagonist in name, even within his own book Bilbo is not given much action or agency in the conventional heroic sense. Indeed, in the gallant, daring, dragon-slaying sense of the fantasy-genre protagonist, Mr. Bilbo Baggins fails on nearly all accounts. What Tolkien instead provides is a hero of a different variety. The question, therefore, is whether *The Hobbit* ultimately promotes Bilbo's variety of heroism. While Bilbo eventually

¹ Bilbo's involvement across *The Lord of the Rings* exists by merit of his own involvement, his connection to Frodo, and, of course, as a result of his status as not only Ring-bearer, but also Ring-finder.

succeeds in garnering the respect and love of his readers and, to a certain extent, of his fellow characters, by virtue of *The Hobbit*'s relentlessly critical treatment of him, Bilbo exists today nevertheless as an actively and resolutely diminished character.

The real solidification of Bilbo's diminished status arrived with the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. With Tolkien's publication of *The Lord of the Rings* beginning in 1954,² the diminishment of Bilbo's character already visible in *The Hobbit* is extended to the point of active relegation in *The Lord of the Rings*, a particularly unjust reality considering *The Lord of the Rings*' dependence upon Bilbo and his finding of the Ring. Coming to understand why Bilbo – the original Hobbit so professedly beloved by Tolkien – falls from a position of fond narrative centrality to his ultimate status as one who bears the brunt of narrative disparagement deserves investigation. As the Legendarium progresses, Bilbo does not simply fade peacefully out of the narrative as appears to be his happy and just deserts by the end of *The Hobbit*. Instead, the story of Bilbo, the Hobbit who never asked for an adventure in the first place, continues torturously across *The Lord of the Rings*, with Bilbo not only suffering, but also being actively abused by the narrative. In addition to the injustices faced by Bilbo canonically (in his narrative slighting and increasing exclusion), the processes of Bilbo's degradation are apparent upon examination of Tolkien's papers, indicative of Bilbo's increasingly subordinated status in Tolkien's evolving conception of Bilbo's place within the Legendarium.

In conjunction with such intra-narrative devices working to relegate Bilbo across the Legendarium, to Tolkien (and, in time, to his hordes of readers) there came a point when *The Hobbit*, too, ceased to be considered the primary text; *The Lord of the Rings* was no longer “the sequel to *The Hobbit*,” and the original *Hobbit* text was relegated to a secondary (and often

² *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy was published a full seventeen years after *The Hobbit*'s 1937 publication.

parenthetical) role, a reality that extended Bilbo's subversion to an even more potent degree. Thus, in addition to Bilbo's already visibly diminished status within his own text, the subsequent relegation of *The Hobbit* under the larger trilogy establishes Bilbo as an essentially sacrificial figure: a casualty of *The Hobbit's* reduced prominence despite the essential part he plays within the broader narrative. What fond sentiments Tolkien fostered for his dear Mr. Baggins in early formulations of his Legendarium, considered alongside what general fondness exists for Bilbo across Tolkien's extensive fan base and his general indispensability to the Legendarium's central plot, such realities seem fundamentally incongruent with Bilbo's narrative diminishment. This disjuncture, however, stands. Mr. Bilbo Baggins' narrative relegation is enacted with precise and increasingly undeniable intentionality across Tolkien's Legendarium.

Bilbo in *The Hobbit*

While Hobbits in themselves are rather diminishable creatures almost exclusively taken with eating and other sorts of fatuities (*The Letters* 38), Bilbo's character in particular embodies these tendencies and shortcomings to exaggerated extents. The preference given to these instances of foolish Hobbit-like behaviors are emphasized to cringe-worthy extremes across *The Hobbit* in ways the other Hobbits of the Legendarium largely avoid. Even the stature of Bilbo is emphasized disproportionately, often cited in direct relation and allusion to his incapacity, incompetence, and general unpreparedness. In the first chapter of *The Hobbit* alone, Bilbo is continually referred to as "the poor little hobbit" (*The Hobbit* 10), and the word "little" is used condescendingly in direct relation to Bilbo within that first chapter no less than seven times (*The Hobbit* 3-26), functioning to indicate an inherently negative element of Bilbo's character that moves definitively beyond his physical stature. In further analysis of the language surrounding

references to Bilbo throughout the *Legendarium*, he comes off as “one of the most dramatic hobbits,” and “screams,” “sneezes,” “squeaks,” and “begs” (Porter 48), all verbs surrounding Bilbo specifically that lend his character a distinctiveness that is not one of active heroism (let alone agency), and mark him from the beginning as a more reactive rather than proactive character to an ultimately comical and rather obnoxious degree.

What seems to be one of the primary mechanisms for Bilbo’s success and distinction is his familial and genealogical positioning. Understanding Bilbo as the product of well-timed optimal genetic location half-way between adventurous Took and sensible Baggins is emphasized from the text’s beginning and continued throughout. From *The Hobbit*’s start, as Green points out in his rather relentlessly genealogical reading of the text, “Bilbo’s name – a short name in a long sentence” – is dropped “deep in the fourth long paragraph [of] a rambling discussion of Bilbo’s mother and hobbits in general” (Green 38), the implications of which include the fact that “although he has prominent family connections, Bilbo is not a prominent person. Like a child, he is defined as an offshoot of his family, his ‘house’” (Green 38). Such a reading is enforced and reasserted throughout the text of *The Hobbit*, as different impetuses behind Bilbo’s thoughts and actions are constantly framed by what is “Tookish” and what is more “Baggins-like,” which subsequently work to boil down his individual position and behaviors.³ Nevertheless, the diminishment of Bilbo to the level of optimal ancestral positioning is confirmed in “The Quest of Erebor,” a retelling of *The Hobbit* from Gandalf’s perspective, when Gandalf reveals that, among other considerations that factored more minimally into his decision, “I said to myself: ‘I want a dash of the Took (but not too much...)’ and I want a good

³ Such attention to Bilbo’s genetic and ancestral status involves also the disturbing implications of forays into racial science.

foundation of the stolder sort, a Baggins perhaps.’ That pointed at once to Bilbo” (“The Quest of Erebor” 345).

In terms of narrative content and action, Bilbo, more than any other Hobbit in the Legendarium, lacks a distinctive sense of agency and heroism – a reality emphasized especially throughout his own text, *The Hobbit*. Initial readerly impressions of Bilbo set the bar quite low in terms of expectations of heroism, ultimately making it rather easy for Tolkien to demonstrate character growth after one of readers’ first impressions of Bilbo include him collapsing into a babbling, shrieking fit after merely hearing Thorin’s prefatory remarks on the nature of the Quest (*The Hobbit* 16-18). In conjunction with this initial impression are the ways in which characters relate to and talk about Bilbo. Gandalf, especially, remains one of the most skeptical characters, a sense enforced by Tolkien’s later “The Quest of Erebor.”⁴ With this later supplement to *The Hobbit* narrative aside, however, the construction of Gandalf’s dialogue in reference to Bilbo is precisely crafted to be rife with disclaimers and riddled with doubt as to the status and capability of Bilbo as a member of the party (let alone as a protagonist), as is visible through assertions like “I have chosen Mr. Baggins and that ought to be enough for all of you. If I say he is a Burglar, a Burglar he is, or will be when the time comes... You may (possibly) all live to thank me yet” (*The Hobbit* 19). Such constructions of doubt are reflected also in the commentary of the Narrator, whose voice in *The Hobbit* is especially frequent and distinctive, and, thanks to the pseudo-historical premises of the Legendarium’s construction, relate ultimately back to Bilbo’s own penning of his first adventure.

⁴ Considering Gandalf’s status in Middle Earth as such a potent source of wisdom and infallibility, Gandalf’s doubt in Bilbo’s competency not only taints other characters’ perceptions of Bilbo, but inevitably affects the way in which Bilbo is perceived by readers as well. While Gandalf’s ultimate surprise and pleasure in Bilbo’s eventual success is gratifying – as is their lasting friendship – such doubt, visible within the pages of *The Hobbit* and reiterated later in “The Quest of Erebor,” is indicative of Bilbo’s subordinate narrative status.

While not exclusively reflective of Bilbo's shortcomings alone, Gandalf is additionally up front about the lack of heroism to be found within Middle Earth at its present moment, as he admits, "I tried to find [a mighty Warrior, even a Hero]; but warriors are busy, ...and in this neighbourhood heroes are scarce, or simply not to be found... That is why I settled on burglary... And here is our little Bilbo Baggins" (*The Hobbit* 21). The rhetorical significance of the distinction here made between "burglar" and "warrior" is sustained throughout the text of *The Hobbit* as yet another means of Bilbo's diminishment, and is visible across Tolkien's different drafts and evolving conceptualizations of Bilbo and his novel. The modes by which this burglar-warrior dichotomy (as relating to Bilbo specifically) runs throughout *The Hobbit* relates back to Tolkien's conception of Bilbo as a character who is fundamentally unable to serve in the role of hero 'proper,' as many of the roles that would conventionally be saved for a text's protagonist are shuffled off to other characters that serve otherwise in merely minor capacities (Bard the dragon-slayer, for instance).

The precedent thus established at the novel's beginning continues in varying degrees through the remainder of text. Throughout the narrative there are moments in which the Dwarves are forced to carry Bilbo bodily along, instances that lack any modicum of agency, and one such occurrence of which proves later to be vital to the fate of Middle Earth when Bilbo is dropped by Dori, faints, and wakes up to his famed encounter with Gollum (*The Hobbit* 61-64). Even in one of *The Hobbit's* many climaxes, poor Bilbo is knocked unconscious and misses the entirety of the final battle (*The Hobbit* 260).⁵ Put together, such collective instances of inaction, dependence, and overall lack of agency can thus point to the conclusion that Bilbo's

⁵ A novel's climax is, of course, conventionally the instance in which protagonists are expected to come fully into their own and demonstrate the final development and solidification of their agency and heroism. This is clearly not the case here.

diminishment is enacted to such an extent that even Bilbo's role within his "own" novel (in which he is not only the protagonist but the namesake), amounts to being little more than the supporting character of his own story. Bilbo's status as protagonist appears thus to be merely nominal. After all, it is Bard who slays the dragon and saves the townspeople, the Eagles who intercede to save the day in the final battle, and the Arkenstone is buried with Thorin.

With all this said, however, it would be inaccurate to claim that Bilbo possesses no agency and undergoes no dynamic development or fails to accomplish anything of note. Indeed, to ignore the moments of Bilbo's agency would be an injustice to the relatively rare moments of heroism Bilbo is allowed and, ultimately, a misreading of the narrative. Momentarily setting aside the mechanisms of Bilbo's diminishment, an acknowledgment of the instances and varieties of Bilbo's heroism is essential for a subsequent demonstration of the opportunities Tolkien later utilizes to rescind them and to relegate both Bilbo and his novel to the margins of *The Lord of the Rings'* success and acclaim. Although demonstrating dynamic character development in Bilbo after his initial episode in Bag End is not difficult, as Bilbo's decision to embark upon the journey at all can be thus seen as an instance of this, there is, indeed, an undeniable progression of Bilbo's character. Among instances of Bilbo's agency that, mapped along the narrative structure of the text, progress increasingly in terms of his direct involvement and contributions, include his intervention with the trolls in "Out of the Frying-Pan Into the Fire" (Chapter VI); his discovery of the Ring in "Riddles in the Dark" (Chapter V); his action and agency in Mirkwood when the group battles the spiders in "Flies and Spiders" (Chapter VIII); his work and orchestration to break his companions out of the dungeons of the Wood-elves in "Barrels out of Bond" (Chapter IX); his brave and clever acts of intervention and diplomacy with Smaug in "Inside Information" (Chapter XII); and ultimately, his diplomacy in negotiating

around the possession and passing on of the Arkenstone in “A Thief in the Night” (Chapter XVI).

While, by the end of the text, Bilbo has earned his title as “burglar” and the Dwarves (even Gandalf and the Elves) recognize and respect him to a certain extent, in keeping with the narrative mechanisms of Bilbo’s constantly diminished narrative status, despite the progression of his heroism, the final words of the text function ultimately to revoke the validity of his development and accomplishments, with Gandalf reminding both Bilbo and readers that “You don’t really suppose, do you, that all your adventures and escapes were managed by mere luck, just for your sole benefit? You are a very fine person, Mr. Baggins, and I am very fond of you; but you are only quite a little fellow in a wide world after all!” (*The Hobbit* 276). Whether explicit or implicit within original conceptions of the narrative itself, as a result of later edits or alterations, or via the plot and dominance of the later trilogy, even instances of Bilbo’s relative action are subject to readings that reduce his agency and that enforce readings of Bilbo that are diminished and subverted despite his active and integral contributions to the plot of *The Hobbit* and eventually *The Lord of the Rings*.

Bilbo in Early Drafts

In initial drafts and plot sketches, Tolkien originally intended for Bilbo (not the rather abruptly inserted Bard) to slay the dragon. While a relief to many who read Tolkien’s initial plot outlines,⁶ Tolkien’s eventual withdrawal of this dragon-slaying protagonistic heroism away from

⁶ Such relief comes not only because of the essential incongruence of Bilbo’s character in such a scene, but also because of the moral ambivalence ensconced within Smaug’s murderer striking while he sleeps, a plot point that, if kept, would have casted doubt on the morality and goodness of Bilbo, qualities otherwise granted to him without much cause for doubt.

Bilbo speaks to a consciousness on Tolkien's part of Bilbo's diminished status as protagonist and hero. Tolkien, too, realized that as a result of the way in which he had constructed Bilbo's character, Bilbo could never be a warrior or slay Smaug, and must instead be relegated to more liminal acts. Regardless, Tolkien's initial plot notes read thus:

Burglary is no good – a warrior in the end. But no one will go with him. Bilbo puts on ring and creeps into dungeon. and hides. Dragon comes back at last and sleeps exhausted by battle. Bilbo plunges in his little magic knife and it disappears. he cannot wield the swords or spears. Throes of dragon. Smashes walls and entrance to tunnel. Bilbo floats <away> in a golden bowl on [Dragon's] blood, till it comes to rest in a deep dark hole. When it is cool he wades out, and becomes hard & brave. (Rateliff 496)

Despite the incongruity of such a climax for Bilbo's character and its dependence upon standard elements of fantasy plot-structure, Tolkien's inability to give Bilbo this act of heroism nevertheless contains implications of the impossibility of Bilbo as a protagonist with definitive and active agency.

In this vein of narrative insertions considered but not included in final editions of the novel, one of the scenes in which Bilbo arguably demonstrates the most active agency is in his battle with the spiders. Using Sting,⁷ the Ring, and the bit of luck that he so fortunately seems to have an indefinite supply, Bilbo single-handedly frees his companions and defeats the spiders. In original formulations, however, Bilbo wielded even more agency and was thus subsequently forced to depend less on his liberal supply of luck. Indeed, in early drafts, Bilbo did not depend upon good fortune to help him find the spiders; instead, Bilbo depended upon his own

⁷ Within the text, it is specified that it is Sting, Bilbo's sword, of which the spiders "had become mortally afraid" (*The Hobbit* 152). Note that the spiders were not, in fact, afraid of Bilbo (the wielder of Sting), but merely afraid of the sword itself, yet another instance in which the potential power of Bilbo is deflated.

resourcefulness, as “the spider that Bilbo killed... had left a trailing thread the hobbit finds, and Bilbo follows the thread back toward the path and past it to the colony, winding the excess string into a ball as he goes” (Olsen 159). With this draft scrapped, however, what Bilbo and the narrative are left with is Bilbo’s continued reliance on luck. Once again of course, Tolkien’s edits rob Bilbo of further agency and active heroism. While readings of Bilbo’s heroic dealings with the spiders without knowledge of original iterations might leave readers defensive of Tolkien’s treatment of Bilbo and confident in the degree of heroism he exhibits, knowledge of Tolkien’s initial formulations wherein Bilbo was instilled with more substantive skills and more proactive roles paints a picture of diminishment rather than promotion, especially when coupled with other instances of drafts edited to imbibe Bilbo with decreasing agency or heroism.

Bilbo in “Riddles in the Dark”

Even elements of textual instances retained in final editions that involve a more heroic Bilbo still manage to invite readings and understandings that subvert Bilbo’s role and protagonistic status. As is the case in the majority of Bilbo’s more active roles within *The Hobbit*, Bilbo’s meeting with Gollum is enacted by pure chance.⁸ Considering the later-added significance of what was initially formulated as Bilbo’s lowercase-r magic ring that was later transformed into the tremendous malignance and lurking agency of the One Ring of Power, Tolkien substantially edited the text of “Riddles in the Dark” to change the texture of Gollum and the Ring and to iron out the mechanics of the way in which Gollum comes to relinquish it (Rateliff 731-748). With the larger context of this chapter in mind, such a scene (even with edits

⁸ Depending upon how one prefers reading Tolkien, this may also be read as luck, fate, or a mode of divine intervention.

withstanding) seems only to be another episodic adventure within which, in this chapter, Bilbo is lucky enough to land himself a neat invisibility ring that will help him in later adventures and that is acquired with the typical mixture of Bilbo's good luck and resourcefulness.

While readings of this scene in its *Hobbit* context alone are relatively benign as far as the role of Bilbo is concerned, in consideration of this chapter as a piece of the wider Legendarium this changes, for, as John D. Rateliff points out in his acclaimed *The History of The Hobbit*, “many who read or re-read *The Hobbit* after *The Lord of the Rings* unconsciously import more sinister associations for the ring into the earlier book than the story itself supports” (Rateliff 174-175). Thus, as a result of the nature of the capital-R “Ring” of the trilogy, retroactive readings of this scene entail a sacrifice of Bilbo's competency to the invisible yet implied orchestration and agency of the Ring in its understood ploy to be reunited with Sauron.⁹ Indeed, the influence of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy on the status of Bilbo and *The Hobbit* are indeed considerable, and is ultimately the primary means by which Bilbo's narrative subjugation is enacted at large.

Granted, while broader readings of “Riddles in the Dark” withdraw agency from Bilbo, this mode of reading is counteracted by another element that gets similarly undue prominence: the significance of Bilbo's pity harbored for Gollum that prevents him from “stab[bing] the foul thing” (*The Hobbit* 81). In the context of *The Hobbit* alone, this act holds no particular import or significance. However, in the historical lens by which readers of *The Lord of the Rings* approach the text, Bilbo's spur-of-the-moment decision to spare Gollum is elevated to what verges on almost religious significance and that elevates Bilbo's act to the level of a capital-letter-concept, with Tolkien himself later writing that “it is the Pity of Bilbo and later Frodo that ultimately allows the Quest to be achieved” (*The Letters* 191). This retrospective emphasis on Bilbo's act

⁹ Sauron lurks around the edges of *The Hobbit* as “the Necromancer.”

marks a noteworthy reversal of the pattern overwhelmingly transposed onto readings of Bilbo that are enacted at his expense to withdraw rather than bestow significance upon him and his actions, though again, the existence of simultaneous modes of readings of the Ring work to negate this.

Bilbo in Context

Considering the tremendous status and acclaim of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, both *The Hobbit* and its bumbling little protagonist are not only overshadowed narratively (for indeed, the stakes of *The Hobbit* are irrefutably materialistic in contrast to the noble cause of Frodo and the Fellowship), but, in considerations of Tolkien's broader Legendarium, the variety of Bilbo's heroism in *The Hobbit* is also of a nature that is easily forgotten, easily overlooked, and easily dismissed. Indeed, upon examining plot points that within the context of *The Hobbit* illustrate dynamic character growth and read as heroic, these same plot-points, considered in the context of more historical or holistic analyses of the Legendarium, are too easily lost, forgotten, or overshadowed. Take, for example, Bilbo's orchestration of the Dwarves' escape from the Wood-elves and his diplomacy with Smaug and the Arkenstone. While such acts are key within the plot of *The Hobbit* itself, they are nonetheless accomplished within historical blind-spots.

Granted, while historical lenses of analysis are generally irrelevant for the purposes of literary analysis, historical readings of Tolkien's Legendarium are essential given the nature of Tolkien's construction of the historically self-conscious Middle Earth and Legendarium at large. Thinking historically therefore, each of these acts, conducted, as they are, in the oftentimes literal shadows, operate within historical blind spots that, in traditional modes of historiography, would amount, at best, to marginal citation. Reading the events of *The Hobbit* historically, without

Bilbo's own chronicling and documentation of his deeds and adventures, public knowledge or memory of Bilbo's acts of heroism would thus be a historical impossibility. Bilbo's variety of heroism is not one compatible with the history books, as is evidenced by Gandalf's perspective in "The Quest of Erebor" and Bilbo's notable absence in *The Silmarillion*. Granted, while analyses of this variety are inevitably complicated by Bilbo's ostensible involvement in chronicling and passing on the history of Middle Earth, regardless of the status of Bilbo's historical authorship, the fact remains that Bilbo's various identities and works of heroism as a burglar, a spy, a diplomat – and one who spends much of his time invisible – are identities, in general, that operate outside the typical reaches of historiographical narrative.

Bilbo and Luck

Shrinking textual analysis back to the level of *The Hobbit* once again, Bilbo's continual use of the supernatural objects so handily at his disposal (namely, the ring and his sword, Sting) are written into *The Hobbit* to a degree that seems to withdraw independent agency because of the lengths to which Bilbo is dependent upon them to succeed. While Bilbo must supplement his luckily-acquired magical items with his own skill, the fact remains that without them, not much could have been accomplished. While the Dwarves are not bothered by the supernatural gifts the ring grants Bilbo, they lack the more analytical and skeptical lens of readers and audiences. With the Dwarves able to see that Bilbo "had some wits, as well as luck and a magic ring – and all three are very useful possessions" (*The Hobbit* 153), more informed or skeptical readers are not likely to be that easily convinced, especially considering the extent to which Bilbo's successes hinge almost exclusively upon the use of the magical tools he so luckily happens across.

Indeed, the very fact that Bilbo is constantly and disproportionately reliant on his supply of luck works ultimately to reduce his agency, as many of his more significant acts are chalked up merely to good luck.¹⁰ While it is Bilbo's use of the luckiness with which he is granted that enable him to be successful, Bilbo's seemingly infinite store of good luck gets him so far in so many contexts that his luckiness across the narrative is an undeniably visible way in which Tolkien reduces Bilbo's agency and activeness as a protagonist, with Bilbo's ample supply of luck subverting the circumstances surrounding the use of his skills. While it would be one thing if "luck" was a common method used by Tolkien in constructing the circumstances of his plots and the construction of his characters, through analysis of the frequency of the word "luck," it turns out that even use of the word "lucky" in *The Hobbit* outpaces inclusions of the same word within the contexts of Tolkien's other texts, thus demonstrating the uneven extent to which Bilbo's character is tied up with the concept as distinct from other characters across the Legendarium. Used in *The Hobbit* alone forty-seven times, "luck" only appears in *The Fellowship of the Ring* twenty-one times, within *The Two Towers* eleven times, within *The Return of the King* nineteen times, and within *The Silmarillion* no times at all ("Keyword Frequency, 'luck'"). Such numbers enforce the implication that, while other characters must depend on skill alone much of the time, Bilbo was simply "born with a good share" of luck (Olsen 160).

Bilbo Across the Legendarium

With elements of *The Hobbit* yielding readings of Bilbo that, despite his evident importance within the narrative, nevertheless work to subvert and diminish his place, it is within

¹⁰ Indeed, Bilbo is, as a character, described as "lucky" so often that his luckiness seems almost to verge on a character trait.

The Lord of the Rings and Tolkien's other subsequent texts that include (or fail to include) Bilbo that truly work to solidify his undeservedly diminished status within the Legendarium.

Examining Tolkien's evolving understandings of and attitudes towards Bilbo, Bilbo's enacted subversion is increasingly evident across the Legendarium's creation as visible by Bilbo's positioning within *The Lord of the Rings*, "The Quest of Erebor," and the pseudo-historiographical work *The Silmarillion*. While there is a predictably immense depository of information to analyze across the dimensions of these texts, the ensuing references and implications ensconced are necessarily condensed and abbreviated given the parameters and scope of this paper.

Tolkien's feelings towards Bilbo (especially at the beginnings of Tolkien's foray into Middle Earth) were fond and complementary, and in many of his earlier letters, Bilbo and his narrative are used as central locating points in Tolkien's discussion of the larger Legendarium, with scattered references to other points within the Legendarium as compared to "Bilbo's days," which thus serve to illustrate the centrality Bilbo initially occupied within Tolkien's mind and throughout the early crafting of Middle Earth's canon.¹¹ In conjunction with Tolkien's evident fondness for Bilbo are the reasons behind Tolkien's initial trepidation in crafting a sequel at all, as he writes "I fear I squandered all my favourite... characters on the original 'Hobbit' (*Return of the Shadow* 43), while expressing also a subsequent disinclination to disrupt Bilbo's happy ending (*The Letters* 38).

¹¹ An instance of this can be seen in Tolkien's 1949 letter wherein he references more deeply historical components of the Legendarium as framed by "Bilbo's days" (*The Letters* 134). By 1954 however, Bilbo's former centrality had already eroded, as evident within Tolkien's 1954 letter where instead of referencing "Bilbo's days," Tolkien employs the positioning of Frodo and *The Lord of the Rings* within the Legendarium, comparing events instead to "Frodo's day" (*The Letters* 186).

Apparently however, Tolkien found a way to come to terms with these initial problems, and there is within his letters a marked shift in tone and content in writing about Bilbo and *The Hobbit* once settled into a “sequel” plot line with which he was happy. Granted, Tolkien did visibly struggle with the prominence of Bilbo’s position across *The Lord of the Rings*. Some iterations included Bilbo as the text’s primary character (*Return of the Shadow*), while other formulations included “a glimpse of Bilbo” merely “for old times’ sake” (*The Letters* 121). The final product of Tolkien’s labors, however, contained within it content that worked to diminish and subvert Bilbo even more than had already been done in *The Hobbit*. Indeed, Tolkien’s relation to the original plot-constructions and characters of *The Hobbit* and its relation to its sequel *The Lord of the Rings* shifted tremendously from Tolkien’s early frustrations wherein “Mr Baggins... exhibited so fully both the Took and Baggins side of [Hobbits’] nature” that “I cannot think of anything more to say” (*The Letters* 24), to conscious preference of what was initially pitched and conceptualized as *The Hobbit*’s sequel, to the extent that Tolkien self-prescribed the trilogy as his “magnum opus” in 1946 (*The Letters* 119) and one he considered to be “very much better (in a different way)” (*The Letters* 134).

Such dramatic shift in opinion has its implications upon the ways in which Bilbo’s role is constructed, re-negotiated, and eventually de-emphasized to even larger extents than that to which was evident in Bilbo’s own text, *The Hobbit*. Written in 1954 and initially intended to be a part of *The Return of the King*’s appendices, “The Quest of Erebor,” detailing Gandalf’s telling of the events of *The Hobbit*, is the most explicit and direct instance of Bilbo’s relegation, which chronologically reinforces Tolkien’s conscious decision to subvert the position, narrative, and reliability of Bilbo upon completion of his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Within the “Quest of

Erebor,” Gandalf’s telling of *The Hobbit* narrative challenges Bilbo’s narrative reliability,¹² renegotiates readers’ understanding of the goodness and perceptiveness of his character, and, as seen, reduces Bilbo’s status as Gandalf’s chosen Hobbit as able to be explained away by nothing more than ancestral identity, with the text depicting Bilbo overall as an inconsequential yet convenient figure who functions only as an obliging, clueless pawn.

Pulling Bilbo and the modes of his subversion throughout the Legendarium, the degree to which his diminishment is enacted is evident in the frequency with which his name is referenced. Tracing this throughout the different texts, the name “Bilbo” is found an unsurprising 549 times within the roughly 275 pages of *The Hobbit*, a number that drastically dips upon consideration of the trilogy: in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Bilbo is mentioned 321 times, in *The Two Towers* Bilbo is mentioned only 8 times, and in *The Return of the King*, he is mentioned 32 times (“Keyword Frequency, ‘Bilbo’”).¹³ Across the different mentions of Bilbo within the trilogy, there exist scattered instances of his further subversion and diminishment. While throughout *The Lord of the Rings* Bilbo has Frodo and Sam who, in varying degrees, defend him and remind characters (and readers) of his existence, there nevertheless exist some references that continue to disparage Bilbo. One such instance occurs in *The Fellowship of the Ring* in an exchange between Frodo and Gandalf in the Mines of Moria, as Gandalf remarks “‘I never told him, but [the Mithril coat’s] worth was greater than the value of the whole Shire and everything in it.’ Frodo said nothing... Had Bilbo known? He felt no doubt that Bilbo knew quite well” (*The*

¹² The questioning of Bilbo’s reliability that “The Quest of Erebor” prompts goes further to problematize the position of the various texts within the Legendarium that Bilbo ostensibly wrote or translated, infusing all sorts of additional complications.

¹³ All references to Bilbo within *The Return of the King* take place beyond the 900-page mark, with his name mentioned so frequently only because of Bilbo’s re-entry into the narrative.

Fellowship of the Ring 310). This instance unites the two modes of reading Bilbo: with doubt and skepticism, or with belief, both of which are readings with textual backing and evidence.

A final principle point of analysis in considering Bilbo's positioning within *The Lord of the Rings* is to assess his inclusion in the party sailing off to the Undying Lands at the end of *The Return of the King*. Despite Tolkien's plans to kill Bilbo off before Frodo returns, Tolkien renegotiated his original plans, and Bilbo's fate ends in the West. In working through this decision across his letters, Tolkien details the reasons behind Bilbo's eventual inclusion. Instead of allowing or conceptualizing Bilbo himself as a character worthy of ending in the Undying Lands for his own sake, in keeping with Bilbo's relegated position within the Legendarium, Tolkien writes that Bilbo's "companionship was really necessary for Frodo's sake" (*The Letters* 328). Almost as an afterthought, however, Tolkien seems reminded of Bilbo's dual status as Ring-bearer, upon which he adds, "But he also needed and deserved the favour on his own account" (*The Letters* 328). Across Tolkien's letters as well are similar rationales for the eventual (though ultimately theoretical) inclusion of Sam into the Undying Lands, a positioning that emphasizes the inherent interconnectedness and parallel narratives existing between Bilbo and Sam. While a comparison of the two characters is undoubtedly rich and worthwhile considering the two characters' relatively diminished roles and lowered statuses and the popular reception and broad beloved-ness of Sam as contrasted to Bilbo's status as one more frequently forgotten, such analyses of their parallels and points of contrast remain outside the bounds of this work.

The Wayfarer

While the fact remains that it is only thanks to Bilbo that the Ring of Power emerged from the depths of the Misty Mountain in the Third Age at all, as well as the fact that Bilbo's

role in the upbringing and education of Frodo were instrumental in crafting him into the suitable protagonist *The Lord of the Rings* required, the points of Bilbo's historical and narrative importance come at the cost of narrative subversion. In a less explicated sense, a dimension of Bilbo's narrative function is his status as historiographer and translator, which ultimately situate Bilbo ambiguously as the unseen, invisible agent behind the crafting of readers' exposure to Middle Earth. Despite this more metafictional positioning, however, the fact remains that despite Bilbo's inherent importance to the Legendarium, his role and his character are diminished and subverted as a result of the ways in which Tolkien's conceptions and understandings of Middle Earth's narratives evolved. With the enactment of this relegation taking place with varying levels of explication, the most definitive illustration of Bilbo's narrative subversion can be found within *The Silmarillion*, the most historical of all Tolkien's works. With the name Bilbo mentioned not at all, there remains a single fleeting glimpse of the life of Bilbo Baggins and his There and Back Again Journey – vivid and rife with Dragons and barrels and Elves and Hobbit-holes – all reduced into a single anonymous sentence: “[The Ring] was found again, by a wayfarer, fleeing into the depths of the earth from the pursuit of the Orcs, and passed into a far distant country” (*The Silmarillion* 302). Thus, such is the historical lens and prevalence of Bilbo Baggins. Despite his many titles: that of Burglar and Barrel-Rider and Luckwearer and Ringwinner and riddle-teller and uncle – all are reduced to “wayfarer.” And, although readers of Tolkien will remember Bilbo differently, the perspective and relative prevalence of Mr. Bilbo Baggins' final title speaks volumes.

Works Referenced

- Green, William H. *The Hobbit: A Journey into Maturity*. Twayne Publishers, 1995.
- “Keyword Frequency, ‘Bilbo.’” *LOTR Project*,
<http://lotrproject.com/statistics/books/keywordsearch>.
- “Keyword Frequency, ‘Luck.’” *LOTR Project*,
<http://lotrproject.com/statistics/books/keywordsearch>.
- Olsen, Corey. *Exploring J.R.R. Tolkien’s The Hobbit*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012.
- Porter, Lynnette. *The Hobbits: The Many Lives of Bilbo, Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin*. I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., 2012.
- Ratcliff, John D. *The History of the Hobbit*. Harper Collins, 2011.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Edited by Humphrey Carpenter with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. “The Quest of Erebor.” *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-Earth*, edited by Christopher Tolkien. Ballantine Books, pp. 335-351.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Return of the King*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Return of the Shadow: The History of the Lord of the Rings Part One*, edited by Christopher Tolkien. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Treason of Isengard: The History of the Lord of the Rings Part Two*, edited by Christopher Tolkien. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Two Towers*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The War of the Ring: The History of the Lord of the Rings Part Three*, edited by Christopher Tolkien. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Silmarillion*, edited by Christopher Tolkien. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2001.