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Making or Creating Orcs: How Thorin'smut's Free Orcs AU Writes Back to Tolkien

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Thorin'smut, who gave me permission to analyze their story, and Katherine Larsen, who provided invaluable feedback on an early draft of this essay.

Treebeard does not say that the Dark Lord 'created' Trolls and Orcs. He said he 'made' them in *counterfeit* of certain creatures pre-existing. There is to me a wide gulf between the two statements, so wide that Treebeard's statement could (in my world) have possibly been true. It is *not* true actually of the Orcs – who are fundamentally a race of 'rational incarnate' creatures, though horribly corrupted, if no more so than many Men to be met today. Treebeard is a *character* in my story, not me (J. R. R. Tolkien, Letter #153 to Peter Hastings, *Letters*, 1981, 190).

Azog made a thoughtful sound, raking his metal claw through the wiry fur at the top of Lûl's neck, "I wonder how much of who we *are* as Orcs is our nature – and how much is what we were *made* to be. . . . For answer I can only look at our children – at *my son*, Bolg, born free." [P]ride warmed the roughness of his voice, pale eyes shining, "He fights tooth and claw, and names Wargs for his favorite flowers, and dresses himself in weasel skulls because they are pretty (Thorinsmut, "Change," Chapter 6, *Diplomatic Relations*, 2015).¹

Insights into [Tolkien's and Howard's] personal beliefs, their sources, and the relationship each of these factors has on imagined worlds, can provide background and nuanced understanding of Tolkien and Howard and their works, but taken within the context of the Fantasy genre as a whole, those nuances are largely insignificant. What matters, what has shaped the genre most, are the broad brushstrokes which place racial difference at its heart. Middle-earth and Hyboria, which are in many ways very similar, became the default setting for Fantasy, making race the conventional framework around which difference is built in the genre, it shapes worlds, societies, peoples, cultures, and conflicts (Young, 2016, 35).

In *Tolkien, Race, and Cultural History* (2009), Dimitra Fimi argues that when J. R. R. Tolkien's focus on Fairies and Elves as the central subjects of the earliest work in his legendarium shifted to centering Men in *The Lord of the Rings*, the resulting racial hierarchies used to describe different groups of men affected how Orcs and other evil characters were portrayed. Other scholars have noted the

¹ Neither the point of view characters in *The Lord of the Rings* nor the narrative persona refer to individual Orcs as female, but references to half-breed Orcs and to Orcs being able to reproduce on their own in the legendarium indicate the existence of female Orcs. Michael Martinez, in "What is the Munby Letter?," describes Tolkien saying that there are Orc-women in a letter that was auctioned in 2005. The full letter has not been published. Martinez argues that there is no real debate about whether or not Orc-women existed based on content in the published fiction, so the significance of the letter is in Tolkien's own affirmative statement. In contrast to Tolkien's legendarium, Thorinsmut's story includes named female Orcs as point of view characters.

extent to which Tolkien's work has influenced how Anglophone fantasy fiction, films, and games have stereotypically constructed Orcs. Dieter Petzold, in "'Oo, Those Awful Orcs!': Tolkien's Villains as Protagonists in Recent Fantasy Novels" (2010), analyzes four fantasy novels and concludes they perpetuate fantasy clichés about evil despite authors presenting Orcs as focal and even sympathetic characters. In *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to The Hunger Games* (2019), Ebony Elizabeth Thomas shows the extent to which the "Dark Other" is central to Anglo-American fantasy and analyzes how four Black girls are characterized. In *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness*, Helen Young argues that Tolkien's (and Robert Howard's) fiction created a generic setting that is structurally racist and that has been carried over into later fantasy works in all media.² Young concludes that despite attempts to portray the Orcs or other evil characters sympathetically, fantasy texts "perform highly problematic moves and are unable to escape negative racial stereotypes even when they actively seek to challenge them" (88).

While Tolkien's own theories about the origins and nature of Orcs changed over time, resulting in inconsistencies and ambiguities, as shown by the material in *Morgoth's Ring* (1993), one unchanging element is that only Eru could create sentient, independent, language-using beings with both *fëa* (souls) and *hröa* (bodies).³ Another element is that Orcs are always enslaved. According to Tolkien, Morgoth, Sauron, and Saruman could only make their Orcs by corrupting beings who had been previously created by Eru. This process of corruption would include enslaving and raping elvish and human prisoners; Tolkien does specify how the corruption is accomplished, but rape and forced birth would be the only way to create an enslaved race. "Chapter X," which Christopher Tolkien dates to 1959-60, describes how some Orcs changed during later ages after Melkor corrupted and bred the first of the species, an act described as "the most wicked and lamentable of his works in Arda, but not the most terrible" (*Morgoth's Ring*, 416). Some Orcs in later ages could reproduce on their own and, while described as corrupted, are also able to act independently as shown by conflicts with other Orcs and the development of different languages. Other Orcs were Maiar who took the shape of Orcs to lead them. During the Third Age, Saruman rediscovered how to breed Orcs

² Petzold and Young use the sociological meaning of "racist" to mean systemic racism, which is marked by unconscious attitudes embedded in language and existing social practices, rather than individual bigotry. Neither of them makes any claims about Tolkien's, or other authors', intentions or beliefs.

³ See Letter #153 "To Peter Hastings" (draft, September 1954) which is the source of one of the three quotes that begin this essay. The draft of this letter is cited in Christopher Tolkien's notes in sections VIII, IX, and X of *Morgoth's Ring* (408-424). These sections are a series of short pieces in which Tolkien considers different theories about the origin and nature of Orcs (413); two are described as informal pieces while the third, X, was a "finished essay in a good typescript," found complete with carbon, and manuscript information (415).

and Men, recreating Melkor's and Sauron's earlier work (*Morgoth's Ring* 418). Tolkien explains that some Orcs--like Sauron's--could be reduced to an "ant-like life" or to acting like "herds, obeying instantly as if with one will" (421). Tolkien explains that Melkor did not need to control his Orcs in the same way that Sauron does which resulted in Sauron's Orcs, unlike Morgoth's, unable to survive their maker's defeat. After Frodo destroys the Ring, the impact on Sauron's forces is described in just these terms.⁴

While the epitextual letters and the *History* provide a wealth of additional material to consider in making the type of arguments Young describes as "nuanced," the evidence about Tolkien's writing processes and theories is curated, recursive, and, in addition, often contradictory as Verlyn Flieger has shown in recent work.⁵ Most of the additional material was published after his death although there are likely materials that have not yet, and may never be, published. The posthumous publications changed critical analysis of his work, especially, but not only, in regard to Orcs and the nature of evil. Earlier critics who had only his two published novels to work with commented on the flatness and simplicity of Tolkien's good and evil characters, starting in 1956 with Edmund Wilson's often-cited and criticized review, "Oo Those Awful Orcs!: A Review of *The Fellowship of the Ring*" (1956). Since the publication of the *Letters* and the *History of Middle-earth*, however, analysis of the origins and natures of the Orcs has grown into a body of complex interpretations grounded in philosophy and linguistics (Komornicka, 2013; Shippey, 2000; and Tneh, 2011) as well as history, specifically, the influence of medieval constructions of race, the scientific racism of the 19th century, and challenges to that ideology during the 20th century, and the wars of the 20th century (Fimi, Tally). However, while Tolkien may have argued that his Orcs were not "irredeemably bad" (Letters #153, #269), the potential for free will and possible redemption he claimed for them can be difficult to see in *The*

⁴ "The Captains bowed their heads; and when they looked up again, behold! their enemies were flying and the power of Mordor was scattering like dust in the wind. As when death smites the swollen brooding thing that inhabits the crawling hill and holds them all in sway, ants will wander witless and purposeless and then feebly die, so the creatures of Sauron, orc or troll or beast spell-enraptured, ran hither and thither mindless; and some slew themselves, or cast themselves into pits, or fled wailing back to hide in holes and dark lightless places far from hope" (*The Lord of the Rings*, Book 6, Chapter 4, "The Field of Cormallen").

⁵ Neither "But What Did He Really Mean" (2014) nor "The Arch and the Keystone" (2019) are about Orcs or racism. However, Flieger's argument about the existence of conflicting evidence in what he wrote about religion (2014) and about the numerous contradictions in his essays, fiction, and paratextual works which have led to a number of conflicting interpretations (2019) emphasize the necessity for scholars to acknowledge ambiguities and conflicts in the legendarium which cannot be easily resolved, especially not by cherry-picking quotes.

Lord of the Rings.⁶ While Tolkien's epitextual materials support academic analysis of the complexity of his fiction, his philosophical and theological writings are neither as widely read as the fiction nor have they had (or are likely to have) any significant impact on the racist tropes in popular fantasy described by Petzold and Young.

The question I consider in this project is the extent to which it is possible for writers to decenter and thus diminish, if not completely remove, racist tropes by "writing back" to Tolkien's legendarium. Petzold, and Young make compelling arguments about the ubiquity of racist tropes but focus primarily on the phenomenon rather than types of resistance. The concept of "writing back" is explored in Dallas John Baker's essay, "Writing Back to Tolkien: Gender, Sexuality, and Race in High Fantasy" (2017). Baker defines the concept of "writing back" as "a commonly used literary strategy employed by feminist, postcolonial, and queer writers to reclaim, re-imagine and complicate normative or marginalizing narratives that are colonial or widely disseminated" (133). While he does not list fanfiction writers, there is nothing in his argument that excludes fanfiction.⁷

In this essay, I consider how one transformative work, Thorinsmut's *Free Orcs AU*, writes back to Tolkien's construction of Orcs.⁸ "AU" is an abbreviation for the genre term of "Alternate Universe."⁹ The AU is a fifteen-part series that is 87,000 words long. For this essay, I draw from material in the primary storyline as well as a secondary storyline concerning Bilbo and several chapters focusing on female Orcs. The primary storyline begins with Part 1, "Diplomatic Relations," continues in "The Fell Winter in Gundabad" (Part 3), "Trade Caravan to Gundabad" (Part 7), and concludes in "To the End" (Part 15). The background of the story is

⁶ Shippey and Tally (2010) have both discussed the extent to which the Orcs in *The Lord of the Rings* exhibit their own sense of morality and free will, but neither scholar engages with the racialized stereotypes that concern Petzold and Young.

⁷ Robert Tally mentions, briefly, Tolkien fan fiction in "Let Us Now Praise Famous Orcs" in order to speculate that fanfiction must contain stories from the Orc's point of view. However, he does not discuss any stories and, as Petzold and Young argue, texts that simply shift the point of view to the Orcs can still incorporate racist elements. Thomas explores counterstorytelling, including Afrofuturist work, as well as fandom and fanfiction in her monograph but is working with contemporary children's and YA fantasy rather than Tolkien. *The Dark Fantastic*, however, is an excellent model for scholarship in future.

⁸ In the early stages of this project, I read a number of stories that included Orc characters on the Archive of Our Own. The stories confirmed my sense from past reading in the fandom that the majority of fan works do not challenge Tolkien's construction of Orcs. When I found the *Free Orcs AU*, the differences in the series were immediately apparent and significant enough that I decided a close analysis of a single work would be useful.

⁹ The Alternate Universe genre is defined as a work of fanfiction that changes one or more of the elements of the source text: "Broadly, an AU may transplant a given source work's characters to a radically different setting, shift the genre in which their adventures occur, and/or alter one or more of their professions, goals, or backstories" ("Alternate Universe," *Fanlore*, 2020).

that the Free Orcs fought their way out of slavery in Mordor, led by Azog, and settled in Gundabad, north and west of Erebor. "Diplomatic Relations" begins with a delegation of Free Orcs coming to propose trading agreements with the Dwarves of Erebor. Azog and Thorin are the alternating point of view characters in "Diplomatic Relations," "The Fell Winter in Gundabad," and are major characters in "To the End" which is about how combined Dwarf and Orc forces defeated Sauron's army in the North during the War of the Ring. Thorin and Azog are killed fighting back-to-back, but their alliance is victorious against the forces of Mordor, some of whom desert on the field of battle and are welcomed by the Free Orcs. After the battle, their heirs, Fili and Bolg commit to carrying the alliance their uncle and father began into the future ("To the End").

As a result, Tolkien's plot is transformed from a quest to destroy Sauron's Ring to a story about how Dwarf and Orc relationships, personal and cultural, are developed through the trade and political agreements, as well as foregrounding the experiences of Orcs who were enslaved by Sauron and fought for their freedom. These events take place during the decades before Bilbo finds the Ring. A secondary narrative in the series is Bilbo's discovery of the Ring, his partnership and travels with Bofur, his friendship with Free Orcs, and the Orcs' assistance in the quest to destroy the Ring, covered in "The Deep Road (Part 5)," "The Story Told" (Part 13,) and "The Council of Elrond" (Part 15). Part 9, "Do Not Ask" provides a backstory of slavery for Golb, a female Orc Bilbo meets in "The Deep Road."¹⁰

Thorinsmut's AU premise for the series is that:

Erebor prospers. The arkenstone [sic] was never found, the sky is free of dragons, and the royal line free of any madness. The Orcs meanwhile waged a bitter civil war, but now a group of free Orcs have become a powerful trading force in the North (Author's Notes, "Diplomatic Relations").

I argue that Thorinsmut's AU premise, and the resulting deletions and transformations of Tolkien's characterizations, plot, setting, and themes in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, generate a characterization of Orcs and their culture that differ significantly from Tolkien's. Deleted elements include Smaug's attack on Erebor; the creation of Orcs through the enslaving of elves and humans; the anti-Semitic stereotypes of the Dwarves; and the Catholic allusions.¹¹ Transformed elements include changing Tolkien's war between Dwarves and Orcs

¹⁰ The main series can be found at <https://archiveofourown.org/series/70926>.

¹¹ The issue of anti-Semitism in Tolkien's portrayal of the Dwarves has been discussed in depth in essays by Rebecca Brackmann (2010) and Renée Vink (2013). I find Brackmann's argument concerning the presence of "changes, alterations, and biases in Tolkien's text" to be convincing (104).

to a story about trade and alliance; incorporating Orcs as major point of view (POV) characters; shifting the setting to the Dwarf and Orc homelands; and challenging Tolkien's linguistic discrimination in his handling of Elf and Orc languages.¹²

The deletions and transformations decenter the Whiteness of Tolkien's Men and Elves and disrupt, to some extent, the racist tropes of Tolkien's Orcs that Young and Jolanta N. Komornicka have identified. The tropes Young identifies are "skin color, be it green, brown, or black; extreme aggressiveness and irrationality; primitive, disorganized cultures; and homelands which are outside the borders of civilization" (89). These characteristics are similar to Classical racist stereotypes which Young argues were applied in the Middle Ages to "Jews, Mongols, and Muslims," changing and persisting into the imperialist 19th century (88). These slurs and the imagery associated with the fictional Orcs follow the same systemic racist logic as the White/Black racialized binary (93-96). In "The Ugly Elf: Orc Bodies, Perversion, and Redemption in *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*," Komornicka identifies a significant racialized characteristic of Tolkien's Orcs. They have no family: "unlike the elves and men from whom they derive, orcs lack the most fundamental aspect of figurative blood: family."¹³ As a result, their only genealogy is their corrupt descent from elves and men" (91).¹⁴ Komornicka's

¹² In *The Road to Middle-earth* (2003), Tom Shippey discusses how Tolkien's linguistic esthetic was foundational to his creation (113-117). I use "linguistic discrimination" here to foreground how linking the phonological ugliness of Orc language(s) to their racial evil and corruption is an example of what is now understood as one type of racial discrimination. See: "Understanding Linguistic Discrimination: Consequences and Policy Responses" by Lena Neur (2019).

¹³ In "Demonizing The Enemy, Literally: Tolkien, Orcs, and the Sense of the World Wars" (2021), Robert T. Tally argues that Tolkien "gives different groups of orcs distinctive cultures, languages, and even families" (53). I would agree that there are some named Orcs who are father and son (no mention ever being made of mothers), but this information is limited to immediate and living family members. The elaborate genealogies supplied for the other peoples of Middle-earth do not exist for the Orcs. I would also argue that the lack of information about the Orc cultures, languages, and families in comparison to the information provided about Elves, Dwarves, Men, and Hobbits (in the narratives and in the Appendices) serves to Other the Orcs. Tolkien's linguistic discrimination concerning Orc languages supports Tally's argument about the demonization of Orcs in the legendarium.

¹⁴ The idea of the Orcs' being of corrupt descent--meaning, that the prisoners taken by Sauron and their children throughout the ages were "corrupted" by slavery, torture, and rape--is implied if not developed in detail by Tolkien. However, as a short piece by Alex Lewis, "Elvish Seduction by Orcs (not to mention Dark Lords!)" (2000), illustrates, general acceptance of this fictional genealogy highlights its dependence on systemic racist and misogynistic stereotypes. Lewis considers the implications of Elves having the ability of being able to choose to go to the Halls of Mandos, that is, to commit suicide, in the context of the backstory of Elvish prisoners of war. Thus, Elves who did not choose to suicide when captured can be seen as choosing the "seduction" that follows being enslaved. Lewis concludes that Elves, especially in the later ages, "ought to have laid down and died and gone to Mandos and saved themselves the trouble and strife of being thralls and helping Morgoth's war efforts along the way, not to mention add to his orcish numbers if they were females," speculating that "any elves that did bear children to orcs were seduced and stayed willingly. And we

essay focuses on how the implications of their corrupt genealogy are shown in their corporeality, especially their blood, actual and figurative, in the context of Augustine's theory on the nature of good and evil. Her analysis of the extent to which the lack of family functions as a racist trope in Tolkien's work is the first, as far as I know, to identify that characteristic which makes a useful addition to Young's longer list.

The key elements that Thorinsmut deletes from their AU are Smaug's attack on Erebor; the characterization of Orcs as inherently evil; their descent from enslaved Elves and Men; the characterization of Dwarves as inherently greedy; and, finally, the Catholic themes. Smaug's attack on Erebor is removed as part of the AU premise, and the rest result from Thorinsmut's worldbuilding. Deleting Smaug's attack on Erebor means that the Dwarves are not driven out or required to work with Gandalf to recover their treasure and homeland. Throughout the series, Orcs are presented as one of the various species of Middle-earth rather than as the descendants of imprisoned Elves or Men.¹⁵ There is no reference to Tolkien's creation story of the Orcs. Instead, a variety of Orc characters, male and female, who fought and won their war for freedom, have settled an unpopulated area in the North and are creating a culture and a future for their children by reaching out to establish connections with the Men and Dwarves who live in the region. A number of major characters POV characters are Orcs, all of whom are shown as exerting free will as rational beings who opposed Sauron, fought to make sure their children would be born free, welcome escaped Orcs from Mordor in the present of the narrative, and provide information about Sauron's nature, and Ring, to those opposing him by sending emissaries to Rivendell to Elrond's council ("Council").

know that female elves had control over their bodily functions and chose when to bear a child. They must have been seduced by the evil ones and chosen to have these babies" (19). The phrasing Lewis uses is similar to the rhetoric of systemic racism that Hortense Spillers analyzes in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (2000). Spillers argues that the white racist perception in the United States that Black families are illegitimate is caused by the history of slavery and the erasure of the rape of Black women. I am not arguing that the Orcs are an allegory for the African peoples who were enslaved in the U.S. I am arguing that Lewis' argument about "seduction" is based on the same racialized assumptions about slavery.

¹⁵ In Chapter 9, of *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History*, "A Hierarchical World," Fimi notes the different terms that characters in *The Lord of the Rings* use: these include, *race*, *Peoples*, *Kindred*. She concludes that it important to pay attention to the choices he makes as well as distinguishing between "race" as a descriptive term, and "as an ideology" (132). Given that the concept of different human "races" is, as Fimi shows, a construct of the 19th century's scientific racism, I am not sure that it can ever be seen as a "descriptive" rather than ideological term in our Primary World in the 21st century. For that reason, I use "species" here to foreground that I see Thorinsmut's Orcs as a separate group of peoples from Elves, Dwarves, and Men, with their own evolutionary history, and to avoid normalizing the idea of different races existing, whether those races are distinguished by differences of language and culture (medieval) or skin color (modern).

The stereotype of the Dwarves as consumed with desire for precious metals and jewels is presented only to be debunked when Azog repeats it to Thorin, causing one of the number of arguments he and Thorin have about the differences between Orcs and Dwarves in "Diplomatic Relations."¹⁶ Their arguments foreground racist stereotypes the Dwarves have of the Orcs and the Orcs have of the Dwarves through Thorin and Azog's dialogue and their internal reflections related through their alternating as point of view characters. They come to realize that the stereotypes which dehumanize enemies are the result of their ignorance of each others' cultures and historical conflicts. Their arguments, and conversations, lead to a growing friendship and alliance as they move from expressing their own prejudices through challenging and debunking what the other says, and eventually realize that what they think of the other culture is wrong:

That is not to say they always saw eye to eye. It was inevitable that they would clash. Their peoples were so different, and so many of the things they knew of each other were lies. Thorin lost his temper when Azog suggested that it might be common for Dwarves to kill their own kin for gold – when everyone knew that kin was more precious than any treasure. Azog snarled with his sharp teeth just inches from Thorin's face when he suggested that Orcs were cannibals.¹⁷

Sometimes they could laugh together about the lies they'd been told, like the day they determined that Orcs were not born of mud and Dwarves were not born of stone. They were both born of the wombs of bearers.¹⁸

The deletion of Catholic themes is achieved by removing the Elves almost entirely from the series. There is no portrayal of Galadriel which removes the Marian imagery, as well as no use of lembas, with its resonances with communion

¹⁶ When Azog's warg, Lûl, has puppies, Thorin comments that Dwarves would be willing to pay high for the animals, and Azog tells him that "'There are some things too precious to have a price,' Azog growled, ' . . . or at least among Orcs, there are.'" Thorin's first response is anger: "You mean to imply, once again, that Dwarves would sell our own mothers if we could get a good price. . . . If the pups are *not for sale*, they are *not*. I can *understand* that."

¹⁷ In "Deep Road," Golb and the friendly Orcs who rescue Bilbo in the Misty Mountains after he is lost and has found the Ring warn him not to assume all Orcs he meets will be friendly. They explain that reports that Mordor Orcs do kill and eat people are true are because they are slaves who are always starving.

¹⁸ Thorinsmut blends book and film elements in the series: here, specific stereotypes about the unnatural generation of Dwarves and Orcs are debunked.

(Lakowski, 2015). Only one of the named Elven characters from Tolkien's legendarium appears in the AU, and only briefly.¹⁹

Elements that are transformed include the war between Dwarves and Orcs; the major point of view characters; and settings. A war between Orcs precedes the opening of the story in "Diplomatic Relations" during which a trading agreement between the Dwarves and Orcs that serves as the foundation for an alliance is made. The major POV characters in the main series are Dwarves and Orcs; the secondary narrative which focuses on Bilbo and the Ring does include a hobbit's point of view, but also a dwarf's, Bofur. Men as well as Elves disappear almost entirely from the story. The settings are the Dwarf and Orc cities in their Northern homelands rather than the cities of Men or Elves.²⁰ Finally, in the "Council of Elrond," Tolkien's construction of the Elves and their language as beautiful and morally superior in contrast to the Orcs and their language as ugly and depraved is judged by Bilbo to be discrimination. Elements that are not transformed are the Ring, and Sauron's evil. If anything, Thorin's transformations foreground the evil of Sauron's millennia-long enslavement of the Orcs to a greater extent than Tolkien's novels do.²¹ Finally, the theme of the necessity of different peoples cooperating to oppose Sauron is heightened by including the Free Orcs among the Free Peoples of the West.

As a result of Thorin's transformative choices, the religious elements of Tolkien's novel disappear to be replaced by an historical, materialist, and secular story that is, nonetheless, strongly engaged with individual and group relationships and with opposing the evil of slavery. The Free Orcs ally themselves with the Dwarves in large part because of the personal relationship between Thorin and Azog. "Diplomatic Relations" begins with each of them pretending to be of a lower status than they are (Azog passing as a warg handler, and Thorin going by Thori, presenting as a Dwarf craftsman). They end up as friends with a strong erotic and sexual component created in part by their shared commitment to improving the lives of their people through an alliance. Thorin leads a caravan of Dwarves to bring

¹⁹ "The Council of Elrond" chapter is narrated through the point of view of an Orc, Ilzkaal, and the only Elves mentioned in the narrative itself are unnamed guards and a brief reference to Legolas: "The prince of Mirkwood, Legolas, was less surprised at her presence. He had enough dealings with Erebor to be accustomed to the idea of free Orcs. Unsurprised, but displeased--and in no place to judge either with the decorative stitching on his tunic dyed with Orcish Tyrion purple."

²⁰ Some of the stories in the secondary plot line about Bilbo's discovery of the Ring are set in the Shire, and there two parts of the primary narrative set in Rivendell.

²¹ Gandalf is the only one of Tolkien's characters in *The Lord of the Rings* I can find who expresses any pity for those enslaved by Sauron: "'You think, as is your wont, my lord, of Gondor only,' said Gandalf. 'Yet there are other men and other lives, and time still to be. And for me, I pity even his slaves'" (*The Lord of the Rings*, Book Five, Chapter 4, "The Siege of Gondor"). The Orcs are never offered the chance for surrender or mercy as are the others who fight for Saruman and Sauron, the Dunlendings and then men of Rhûn and Harad. In contrast, Thorin's Free Orcs offer refuge to any Orcs who escape Mordor or who desert Sauron's armies on the battlefield ("To the End").

food to Gundabad during "Fell Winter;" Azog brings Free Orc troops to help defend Erebor during the War of the Ring in "To the End."

These deletions and transformations also result in a characterization of the Free Orcs and their culture that writes back, to some extent, to the racialized tropes of skin color, and, to a greater extent, to stereotype of uncivilized homelands, and static cultures described by Young. Skin color is downplayed to in the series although the use of Jackson's Azog who is a pale, or white Orc, raises the question of colorism in Orc culture. Orc skins are variously colored, but the color of character's skins is rarely described. A search for color terms in an electronic version of the AU shows that *black* or *white* are used as adjectives describing characters' hair or beards, Azog's warg, or objects such as steel tools or furs. Even when Thorin hides to watch the trade delegation entering the Mountain at the start of the series, when his hatred and loathing for them is at its greatest, he does not focus on skin color but gait:

Thorin watched, hidden in the shadows, as *Orcs* entered through the Great Gates of Erebor.

It took *all* his self control to stay still and silent, when all he wanted was to take his sword in hand and drive the miserable, limping, sulking things back *out* of his mountain.

He pressed himself back further into the shadows and watched the hideous creatures tread where no Orc should ever have set foot.

The rare times an Orc's skin color is given tends to be in stories or scenes with female Orcs, specifically Golb, Flaguz, and Ilzkaal. Golb leads the group of Free Orcs who rescue Bilbo after his encounter with Gollum. She is described as "gray skinned and heavily scarred" ("Deep Road").²² Her kindness and care for Bilbo, as well as the group reuniting him with Bofur and the Dwarves, are the focus of the story. In "Do Not Ask," a stand-alone chapter which is more a prose poem than a story, an ambiguous narrator who is either an omniscient narrator or, possibly, Golb talking about her life in the third person as a way of distancing herself from the traumatic events, describes Golb's experience of slavery and fighting for freedom. Her love for the "lost children" she was forced to bear in slavery is described as well as her fight to become free. Readers--or listeners--are

²² In this story, Bilbo finds the Ring while travelling with his partner, Bofur, selling toys. When Bilbo is lost under the mountains, he encounters a strange twisted creature in the caves, and comes away with a gold ring, then is rescued by and travels for some time with the Free Orcs. During his time with them, he begins to learn their language and, in later parts of the series, visits Gundabad with the Dwarves and becomes friends with Azog and his family.

commanded not to "ask of the children of her old age, the children she bore by *choice* in the freedom of Gundabad."

In "Trade Caravan," a story about negotiations between Dwarves and Orcs about joint mining ventures, Flaguz, who is on the "council of elders of Gundabad" is described as having "dark scars against the green mottled skin of her neck." Thorin is the point of view character here, and he has already learned through his friendship with Azog that scars in Orc culture denote the honor and bravery of those who fight and lead. In both these cases, the female Orcs are leaders.²³

In contrast to Golb and Flaguz, the major Orc characters have pale/white skin: Azog; his son, Bolg; and Bolg's daughter, Ilzkaal, whose skin is described as one point as "[gleaming] like mother-of-pearl" ("Wildflowers"). The phrase, "pale Orc," implies that white skin is unusual enough to be noted as a variation on the Orc norm. The fact that the white Orcs are leaders in the series raises the question of whether there is a type of colorism among Orcs, as well as whether this narrative choice, carried over from Peter Jackson's *Hobbit* adaptation, reinforces racist stereotypes based on skin color.²⁴ Michael Martinez, in "Why Is Azog Called the White Orc?" (2012), argues that, while there is no canon support for white orcs specifically, the Uruk-hai are described as having dark skin. Thus, Martinez argues, the need to distinguish visually between the different groups of Orcs in the films might have led to Jackson showing some orcs as pale. I would argue that systemic racism does not require individual intentionality to operate, so it is possible that Martinez's rationale for Azog to be white could have been a conscious decision of filmmakers and that the resulting film and transformative works based on the film canon also reinforces racist stereotypes.

The extent to which racist and colonialist tropes endure even in works that attempt to counter them are discussed in scholarship on Tolkien. In "World Creation as Colonization: British Imperialism in 'Aldarion and Erendis'" (2005), Elizabeth Massa Hoiem develops a postcolonial analysis of "Aldarion and Erendis" that argues Tolkien's decision to make key Second Age characters both artists and colonizers weakened his anti-imperialist stance because: "The link he establishes between artist and colonizer makes Tolkien sympathetic to the imperialist mindset, and his critique of colonization is finally compromised by his exaltation of artist as subcreator." (76). Young, in her chapter on "Orcs and Otherness" describes how individual in interactive games players attempt to change racist elements in the orcs as well as how the gaming companies have changed descriptions of orc characters and homelands in recent years. She concludes that individual players' choices do not remove tropes built into these games and that, finally, "whether orcs are viewed positively by the majority of players or not, moreover, does not negate the racial

²³ Free Orc culture in the AU is significantly more egalitarian than any of Tolkien's cultures.

²⁴ I am grateful to Katherine Larsen for raising this question while reading an early draft of the essay.

logics which are build into the world" and that the racialized colonialist logics are always present (107).

The Lord of the Rings is set at the end of the Third Age, focusing on events that lead to the Fourth Age, in a world that has already seen the destruction and decline of the empires of Númenor and Gondor. Despite their decline from earlier ages, Gondor, and the diminished strongholds of the Elves, Rivendell, and Lóthlorien, are the centers of power and resistance against Sauron and Mordor although other peoples are also involved.²⁵ The homelands of the Dwarves are in the North, removed from the centers of civilization which are the primary focus of Tolkien's narrative.²⁶

The *Free Orcs AU* centers Erebor and Gundabad as the primary settings of the narrative. Both cultures are undergoing change due to their interactions. Erebor is not destroyed by Smaug and so retains its status as the center of Dwarf civilization. The parts of the series set in Gundabad shows how the Free Orcs are creating their own civilization. They retain what sustained them during slavery and create new ways of living, freely adapting and learning from the other peoples they interact with. The most significant elements that were retained from slavery are the Wargs and a drink, described as ginger-beer, *bulmos akrum* in their language, which has its own ritual of preparation. In "Diplomatic Relations," Azog meditates on the importance of the Wargs which is known only to the Orcs:

The Wargs were a *part* of the Orcs. When they were slaves they at least had the Wargs. When they had nothing, when they *starved* and they had *nothing* they still had each other and the loyalty of the Wargs.

In "The Deep Road," when Bilbo asks to help with preparing the *bulmos akrum*, they allow him to do so but only while explaining to him the history and meaning of the drink:

Golb explained, and told stories in a gravel-rough voice as Bilbo carefully ground the spices in a mortar as instructed. The scarred Orc told of death-marches – across deserts where the only water was fouled with salt and alkali and undrinkable – through disease-ridden bogs where the water was full of mud and rot and mosquito larva– stories of when the only water to

²⁵ In "The Window on the West," Faramir explains how the Rohirrim were "kin from afar off," descending from lower-ranked Númenoreans," so were ranked by Gondor as "Men of the Twilight," although they have changed over the years, as has Gondor, who "can scarce claim any longer the title High."

²⁶ The Dwarves of Erebor and Men of Dale fought against the forces of Sauron in the North, and Celeborn and Galadriel overthrew Dol Guldur, but these exploits are only briefly described in Appendix B.

drink was fouled with the corpses of battle, or poisoned by an enemy, or too foul to drink in any number of ways.

"...but we had the *bulmos akrum*." Golb said, "We always had our *akrumlob*, and she purified the waters so the Orcs could drink. She kept us strong and cared for us, so we'd *live* when we could've died. In the deepest despair we always had the *bulmos akrum*, and the Wargs, and each other" ("The Deep Road").

The work the Free Orcs do to build their homes and their culture focuses on trade which supports the development of technologies and the arts, and the choices they make in terms of bearing and raising children, including how they educate them.²⁷ These aspects of their culture are in contrast to how they survived during their slavery. Marriage was not allowed them before, but Azog considers that it might become a part of their customs now that they are free. A discussion between Azog and Bolg in "Trade Caravan" makes it clear that female Orcs chose who to "bear and raise a child with," with Azog telling his son that his mother was the one who initiated their relationship. When Thorin leads a caravan of dwarves to take food to Gundabad during the Fell Winter, one result of their stay with the Orcs is described:

They had all seen happy Orclings being cuddled by their parents, and the tenderness in the eyes of bearing Orcs as they nursed their babies – and Thorin knew how they were feeling, that confusion when *he* had first begun to see Orcs as *people* like any other people ("Trade Caravan").

There are numerous instances in which Thorin's narrative emphasizes how prejudice and stereotyping is related to ignorance: an entire essay could focus on analyzing those instances which show how characters and groups learn and overcome their ignorance. One of the most important way of overcoming ignorance is learning each others' languages. In the secondary narrative, Bilbo's desire to learn languages embraces not only Elvish but at least one of the Orc's languages.

Fimi discusses how Tolkien's personal associations, what Shippey called his linguistic esthetic, operate in his legendarium:

What makes Tolkien Elvish languages look and sound beautiful while the Black Speech seems harsh and unlovely, is in my opinion the same reason

²⁷ Chapter 1, "Arrival," describes the trade goods: "[t]here was sweet ambergris for perfume, worth more by weight than gold, gathered from the coasts of Forochel by Lossoth Men – traveling south and east by way of trade with the free Orcs. . . . Finally there was the dye. Tyrion purple. Royal purple. The rarest of colors that never faded and would only brighten with wear. It was worth more per ounce than rubies."

for Tolkien's subjective like and dislike of some languages: we accept Tolkien's personal preferences at their word. Readers of Tolkien's language learn to associate Quenya and Sindarin with the elegance and beauty of the Elves, Dwarvish with the steadfastness of the Dwarves and the Black Speech with the evil of Sauron. *Our attitudes to Tolkien's invented language will always be defined by Tolkien's own preferences and by the perceptions of these languages in the invented world of Middle-earth.* (Fimi 115, emphasis added)

As Thorin's AU shows, there are readers who do not passively accept Tolkien's linguistic discrimination and who choose to counter racist stereotypes about language. In "Council of Elrond," one of the few parts of the series that transforms one of Tolkien's scenes (as opposed to creating events based on the AU premise), Azog's granddaughter, Ilzkaal, is sent with some other Orcs to bring information about Sauron, his Ring, and Mordor. She and her companions are halted at the gate, stripped, and put under heavy guard. Ilzkaal, who has been raised to become the Orc ambassador to the Elves knows their language and so can understand the threats and insults of the guards as they stand around her though she does not respond, and they, presumably, cannot imagine that an Orc can know their language.

"And you are not to speak that foul tongue of yours in this place." Ilzkaal was instructed, and she gritted her teeth and bore it.

"*Narsnaga Mordorab.*" a clear voice broke in, and Ilzkaal could not contain her small jolt of surprise to hear Orc speech— but neither could the Elf guards. They turned to see a tiny person with big furry feet, his hair in long white braids clasped in gold, leaning heavily on a cane.

Bilbo, who is living in Rivendell and who learned the language of the Orcs in his travels with Bofur, has also spent time at Gundabad, also with the Dwarves. Bilbo knows Ilzkaal's mother and father as well as her grandfather. In this scene, he challenges the Elves for their treatment of the Orcs who have come to help them, including the attempt to deny them their language, to silence them:

"A language is only as foul as the intentions of those speaking it." Bilbo answered, "and it's Sindarin that sounds foul here..." He glanced toward the Elves who'd been making the most threats, but they would not meet his eyes.

Bilbo judges the Elves and finds them wanting in this moment. Their response, not meeting his eyes, show they are ashamed of their behavior. This scene foregrounds the folly of the essentialist assumption of linking the sound of a language with the

morality of the speaker. Bilbo's greeting Ilzkaal in Orcish and chiding the Elves for the ugliness of their hate is one of the most important moments of Thorin's "writing back" to Tolkien through transformative fiction.

Thorin's series inspired other fans to write stories set in their alternate world. While I do not have the space in this essay to consider those stories--or some additional transformative series that center on the Dwarves--I hope to do so in future work.²⁸ I also realized while writing this essay that the scholarship on Tolkien fanfiction tends to focus almost entirely on the stories about Hobbits, Men, and Elves. While arguably, this focus reflects the extent to which fan writers focus on the heroes of the legendarium, the question of how the Tolkien fandom engages with Tolkien's Dwarves, especially in the wake of Jackson's film series, *The Hobbit*, is a gap that I believe needs to be addressed in future scholarship.

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²⁸ I was also not able to consider the queer elements of the series as a whole which has a number of interspecies relationships and queer and trans* characters.

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