

Opinion: Tolkien and Race (The Primary-source Accounts) and the Adaptations

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When *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* was released in 2022, a furor among some of the fans echoed a similar furor among some *Star Wars* fans when the 2017 *Last Jedi* introduced Kelly Marie Tran as Rose Tico. Besides pointing to the systemic racism endemic in American culture, *The Rings of Power* controversy also brought to the surface a complex issue that has long festered in Tolkien studies: Tolkien's ideas about race and his enmeshment in the 19th-century British project of empire building. While race is very important in reading both Tolkien and the adaptations of his work, in this special issue of *Popular Culture Studies Journal* we are interested in and focused on language, particularly conlangs. But because Tolkien's conlangs are spoken by the different "races" in his fiction, the one inevitably invokes the other, and a characteristic of conlangs is that they can disrupt how power works in fiction and reveal how power works in the "real world."

Race

Born in 1891 in South Africa, where his father had been stationed as manager of a bank (Carter 18-22), Tolkien lived almost his entire life in England and was a man of his time, both subject to and beneficiary of the racialized structures in his society, as are we all. Evidence from both his fiction and personal correspondence show that he thought about race and did not think darker skin unilaterally meant inferiority. On the other hand, the ancient literary symbolic structure associating darkness with evil and light with good – which underlies his fiction – has effects in a racialized world, regardless of origins and intentions. Also, as an inheritor of the British Victorian world and as a philologist, he would have been aware of the complexity of the lexical item "race," beginning according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* in the early-modern era, as "a house, family, kindred," "An ethnic group [...] a tribe, nation, or people" and "The offspring or posterity of a person; a set of children or descendants" (race). In works of fantasy and science fiction, also, race

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signifies different species. Generalizing about race in Tolkien's works is made even more complex in part because of the sheer number of years he spent writing about Middle-earth, which gave his ideas a chance to evolve over a long time. Adding to the complexity is that he writes about a big area: he is writing an imagined pre-history of our world, of Eurasia, the Greater Middle East, and North Africa. (We can culturally locate the Hobbits' shire with England as it is embedded in Europe.) Finally, not only did his own ideas develop but so did the world around him, making it complex to talk about race in particular because of what changed in the U.K. as well as Europe over those many years.

Like Ursula Le Guin later, in his fiction Tolkien mentions without emphasis the varying skin colors of his characters. In the first section of the Prologue to *The Lord of the Rings*, for example, Tolkien writes of Hobbits,

Before the crossing of the mountains the Hobbits had already become divided into three somewhat different breeds: Harfoots, Stoors, and Fallohides. The Harfoots were browner of skin, smaller, and shorter, and they were beardless and bootless; their hands and feet were neat and nimble, and they preferred highlands and hillsides. The Stoors were broader, heavier in build; their feet and hands were larger, and they preferred flat lands and riversides. The Fallowhides were fairer of skin and also hair, and they were taller and slimmer than the others; they were lovers of trees and woodlands.

(2)

Here we find Tolkien explicitly noting differences in skin color among the Hobbits, who have intermarried over the years, and stating clearly that the largest group of Hobbits, the Harfoots, are brown rather than white. And he goes further when he contrasts the darker skin of Samwise Gamgee (Sam) and Frodo Baggins in *The Lord of the Rings*. In "The Stairs of Cirith Ungol" chapter of *The Two Towers*, Tolkien contrasts Frodo's "white forehead" and Sam's "brown hand" (714). Tolkien repeats the description of Sam's skin color in "The Tower of Cirith Ungol" chapter in *The Return of the King*, describing it as "his faithful brown hobbit-hand that had done such deeds" (915). These descriptions of skin color do not seem to suggest inferiority, as Sam is presented as such a positive character, though he is working class and belongs to a lower class than Frodo does.

Other groups in Tolkien's fiction are racialized as well: most notably Orcs, but the Rohirrim, the Dúnedain, the Bree-landers, the Easterlings, and the Haradrim (also sometimes called Southerners, but generally what we would think as coming from the near East and Northern Africa) are identified as belonging to different

racism and ethnicities. In a letter to Forrest J. Ackerman concerning Morton Zimmerman's 1958 proposed screenplay of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien takes issue with the Orcs' feathers and beaks in the script, then describes how they are presented in the books, in the process using grossly dehumanizing language:

The Orcs are definitely stated to be corruptions of the "human" form seen in Elves and Men. They are (or were) squat, broad, flat-nosed, sallow-skinned, with wide mouths and slant eyes: in fact degraded and repulsive versions of the (to Europeans) least lovely Mongol-types. (Tolkien *Letters* 274)

In Tolkien's works, languages evolve over time, and so do beings. Orcs *were* "squat, broad, flat-nosed, sallow-skinned, with wide mouths and slant eyes," but now some are not. The mechanism for this obviously racist presentation of Orcs is the Victorian "representative type" so important to 19th-century notions of race (and phrenology). Tolkien shows awareness that what looks unlovely depends on the gaze, in this case a European's.

Orcs are a corruption or perversion of Elves and humans. They were made by the fallen figures of Morgoth, Sauron, and Saruman, who being evil, cannot create but only corrupt. The versions of the language that Orcs speak is also a corruption: Tolkien says that Orcs "perverted" other languages to make their own (*Lord* 1130). As Tom Shippey argues in *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, this idea of Orcish is consistent with the idea of the nature of evil we find in Tolkien's work, which Shippey traces through Milton back to Boethius. In Tolkien's theology, evil is "an absence of good" that ultimately serves the divine plan (130-1). As Shippey points out, Frodo reiterates this belief in "The Tower of Cirith Ungol" when he states that evil cannot make "real new things on its own" (Tolkien *Lord* 912). Tolkien links, then, race, language and morality.

In the Boethian conception of good and evil, evil does not create, it corrupts what was created. However, Tolkien does not present Orcs as only and entirely evil. In his discussion of evil in Tolkien's work, Shippey looks at a couple of the passages we have from the Orcish point of view. As Shippey explains in *Author of the Century*, in the last chapter of *The Two Towers*, when the Orcs find Frodo's body wrapped in Shelob's webbing, which was left by Sam when he flees as the Orcs approach, the Minas Morgul Orc leader Gorbag and the Cirith Ungol Orc leader Shagrat discuss what they find. Gorbag expresses disdain at the idea that a fallen comrade would be left behind: "The big fellow with the sharp sword [Sam] doesn't seem to have thought him [Frodo] worth much anyhow – just left him lying:

regular elvish trick” (131-2). As Shippey argues, Gorbag has contempt for the idea of abandoning a fallen companion, a feeling we would see as evidence of good .

While Tolkien shows us Gorbag and others of Sauron’s minions in what we might call shades of evil, *orkish* means “harm” and Orc-work is destructive, harming the land, as in the Fangorn and the Shire. In keeping with the Boethian understanding of evil as the human consequence of abandoning the good, in a 25 May 1944 letter to his son Christopher, Tolkien explains that real wars are not conflicts between good and evil people, but that both sides have “a motley alliance” of good and evil people serving their nation:

Yes, I think the orcs as real a creation as anything in “realistic” fiction: your vigorous words well describe the tribe; only in real life they are on both sides, of course. For “romance” has grown out of “allegory,” and its wars are still derived from the “inner war” of allegory in which good is on one side and various modes of badness on the other. In real (exterior) life men are on both sides: which means a motley alliance of orcs, beasts, demons, plain naturally honest men, and angels. (Tolkien *Letters* 82)

In the greater discussion of the Orc Gorbag, Shippey argues that in Gorbag we see Tolkien presenting evil as not some all-or-nothing caricature but as a way of being that can include values like honor and respect for one’s companions. And as Shippey notes, Tolkien himself was conflicted over the “theological status” of orcs (*Road* 158, 370, n. 14). (It is consistent with Tolkien’s Victorian heritage that he would represent good and evil as visible on the bodies of his characters.)

Summarizing C.S. Lewis’s argument in *Mere Christianity*, Shippey explains that evil often does not see itself as evil but, instead, as good: “even evil-doers are liable to excuse themselves in terms of what is good: breakers of promises insist that they do so because circumstances have changed, murderers claim that they were provoked, atrocities are excused as retaliation for earlier atrocities, and so on” (131). In his role in *The Lord of the Rings* and our understanding of evil as Tolkien presents it, Gorbag “quite clearly and deliberately dramatize[s]” the “Boethian view: evil is just an absence, the shadow of the good” (Shippey 133).

As with evil, Tolkien addresses race outside his fiction as well. In a letter dated 18 April 1944, Tolkien tells his son Christopher, who was stationed at this time in South Africa, about racial prejudice and “colour” in the “local conditions” there. Tolkien writes,

As for what you say or hint of “local” conditions: I knew of them. I don’t think they have much changed (even for the worse). I used to hear them

discussed by my mother; and have ever since taken a special interest in that part of the world. The treatment of colour nearly always horrifies anyone going out from Britain, & not only in South Africa. Unfort. not many retain that generous sentiment for long. (Tolkien *Letters* 73)

In this letter we see classic mid-20th-century liberal ideas about the treatment of people. Tolkien is aware of the devastating impact of racism in South Africa and other nonwhite places in the empire and he's aware that people who get outside of Britain see that horror at first and then become inured to it. His ideas about race show that he sees the personal but not the systemic: he suggests Britons were not racist because they were "nearly always horrifi[ed]" when they left the U.K. for places in the empire. This liberal focus on the individual and psychological is typical of the thinking of his time and is still quite common in ours.

In fact, "the Battle of Bamber Bridge," an incident that took place the year before he wrote his letter, offers an example of why Tolkien thinks Britons are not racist until they leave. The battle refers to a series of racial conflicts between white and Black U.S. troops in the Lancashire village of Bamber Bridge. As Britain did not have *de jure* racial segregation at this time, American Black troops were admitted as Americans in the local pubs, a practice the U.S. commanders tried to stop. On 24-25 June 1943, the first attempt to stop this segregation failed when the arrest of Private Nunn was protested by locals, British servicewomen from the Auxiliary Territorial Service, and at least one British soldier (Mirante). Later that night, violence broke out a few times, resulting in the death of one Black American soldier, Private William Crossland of the 1511th, the shooting of several Black soldiers, and the beating of two MPs (Mirante).

Language and Conlangs

Technically Tolkien "constructed" (Tolkien "Secret" 216) fourteen conlangs, or parts of conlangs, for the peoples in his fiction (Noel 6). In Appendix F of *The Lord of the Rings*, speaking as the chronicler of the history of Middle-earth, Tolkien divides the "languages and peoples of the third age" by race and the languages they speak (*Lord* 1127). Among them are Elvish, Westron, Orkish, Khuzdul (or Dwarvish), Rohirric (for the people of Rohan), and Black Speech. Elves speak Sindarin and Quenya; the Elves of Mirkwood and Lórien spoke Sylvan Elvish. Both of the Elvishes are more fully developed than any of the other conlangs. Westron

is the name of a region but, by the time of the novels, it is also the name of the Common Speech, spoken by some humans and by Hobbits.

Orcs speak one of the many “barbarous dialects” of Orkish, of which Tolkien writes, “It is said that they had no language of their own, but took what they could of other tongues and perverted it to their own liking; yet they made only brutal jargons, scarcely sufficient for their own needs, unless it were for curses and abuse” (*Lord* 1130). Another conlang in Tolkien’s novels is “Black Speech,” a language created by Sauron that the Nazgûls and some Orcs can speak. (The *Black* is part of the symbol system in his works that associates darkness with evil and light with good.) Middle-earth is multilingual, with all kinds of creatures speaking and sometimes writing. Besides all these peoples, trees (we have part of one word in Entish) and some animals can speak, like the giant eagles, the thrush that Bilbo encounters on the Lonely Mountain, otters, and even spiders (if we count Shelob as a true spider instead of a supernatural being.)¹

Much has been said about these conlangs, and some of it in them. Fans have learned Quenya for decades, translating works into it, writing in it, and expanding the vocabulary (Neo-Quenya). It is not surprising that, because Orkish exists and thus Orcs have a conlang, there will be moments in which we see them as nuanced, having values and, like Gorbag, a subject position.

The fact that these are all fictional races, beings, and languages does not matter. The constructed languages, like symbol systems, are not neutral – racialization also controls the perception of the superiority and aesthetic pleasure (of, for example, Elvish) or inferiority and ugliness (of Orkish) of languages. This perception is brought to the works by creators, readers and viewers, and fans. We learn about how racialization of language works in the world when we focus on the effects of calling something “Black Speech” or “corrupted” or “perverted.”

That is, we must study the effect, because the cause – whether of ancient origins or rookie and fallacious assumptions about authorial intent – is unknowable and thus irrelevant.

Return to Adaptations

¹ The first conlang Tolkien learned — taught to him by his cousins — was “Animalic,” a “nursery language” “made up from names of animals, birds and fish” (Fimi and Higgins 13).

Besides the thousands of pages in *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion* and other material that Tolkien never published, we now have film and video adaptations with new stories based on his work – including *The Rings of Power* – as well as fifty years of games. Although racist fans complained about the changes these newer productions brought to the Tolkien universe, it is not clear that Tolkien himself would have found them objectionable. Until *The Rings of Power*, all of Tolkien's main characters in all of the adaptations have been white, which has reinforced assumptions that Tolkien's peoples are always white. For example, except for the way Orcs are represented, all the speaking characters in the cast of Peter Jackson's influential *Lord of the Rings* trilogy are white. (Gothmog, the albino Orc, might seem like an exception, but we recognize that he suffers from mutations.) Along with the three *Hobbit* films, Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* put Tolkien back in the mainstream of popular culture. Based as the Orcs are on Tolkien's own description of them in the letter to Ackerman, the charges against Jackson for the way Orcs are racialized seem just and fair to us.

But those are the Orcs and the adaptations. The descriptions of the varying skin colors among Hobbits that Tolkien writes are clear and unambiguous. In *The Rings of Power* Elves speak either Quenya or Sindarin, Dwarves speak Khuzdul, some humans speak Adûnaic, and Orcs speak Orkish as well as in their war chant use a word from Black Speech. Some fans reacted negatively to the Black Elves, and some reacted negatively to the subtitles, which they were required to read if they were not fluent in these conlangs, as almost nobody is. For some fans, hearing characters speak Elvish is exactly what they want, but for some, the decentering of their own language and identity is very challenging. The “Race of Man Avatar Update” for *The Lord of the Rings Online* game was met with these now-familiar complaints. Released in April 2023, this update explicitly added some diversity to the non-avatar characters as well as face, hair, and body options that are more inclusive for avatars, so that more players can feel that they are represented (“Update”).

What these furors reveal is how invested some fans are in the whiteness of their favorite characters in *The Rings of Power* and the Tolkien universe (and *The Last Jedi*). The complaints that met the update for the *Lord of the Rings Online* game reveal a generalized objection to diversity independent of the specific situation because a skin color option has been available for avatars from very early on. As with all of these, the furor that erupted over the diversifying of the cast of *The Rings of Power* reveals more about the racial ideologies of our times than the ideologies

in Tolkien's work, and it reveals even more about the fans who seem to have felt betrayed by it.

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