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PROVERBS AND PHRASEOLOGY IN TOLKIEN'S
LORD OF THE RINGS COMPLEX

by George W. Boswell

Since initial publication of The Hobbit in 1937, J. R. R. Tolkien's four-volume work\(^1\) has achieved enormous popular success and some status in the world of scholarship. Its recognition may be ascribed to numerous elements, such as its story, theme, allegory, creativity, accuracy, characterization, geography, description, courage, comradeship, suspense, and theology; but not least in this mighty company is its language, its resonant syntax. After all, Professor Tolkien did contend that The Lord of the Rings was "primarily linguistic in inspiration" (I, viii), so this article will be devoted to an analysis of the contribution of its phraseology to its success.

So far as sentence structure is concerned, most notable is the faint archaism achieved by inversion. Of dozens of examples we will cite two: "Stone-hard are the Dwarves in labour or journey... 'Nothing can we see to guide us here,' said Gimli" (II, 37-38). Occasionally, says Professor Tolkien, he has endeavored to suggest familiar speech "by an inconsistent use of thou" (III, 514, footnote); but he has better luck by levels of pronunciation. William the troll says, "You've et a village and a half between yer" (The Hobbit, p. 46), Sam Gamgee "We aren't eten yet" (I, 389), and Gollum "Tall Men with long swords, and terrible Elves, and Orcses shrieking" (II, 297) and "It must give us three guessesses, my preciuoss, three guessesses" (The Hobbit, p. 85). Observe further the set phrases, such as "a tidy way" (I, 105), "time out of mind" (The Hobbit, p. 15), "Bilbo had heard tell and sing of dragon-hoards before" (ibid., p. 206), "From the first my heart misgave me" (I, 329), and "It is said

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\(^1\) The volumes are conveniently available in the Ballantine Books paperback reprints: The Hobbit, or There and Back Again, Revised Edition, 1966; The Fellowship of the Ring (I), 1965; The Two Towers (II), 1965; and The Return of the King (III), 1965. Subsequent references in this paper will be made to these reprints.
in old lore: *The hands of the king are the hands of a healer*” (III, 166).

To the representative list formulated by Irwin, “riddles, talismanic battle-cries, charms and incantations, efficacious names for weapons and horses, courtly address, parleys, defiances, curses, magical songs, exhortations to valor, the slimy speech of treachery” we will add ejaculations. “‘Lawks!’ said Merry, looking in” and viewing the floor inundated with bath water.3 “Great Elephants!” burst out Gandalf (*The Hobbit*, p. 40). “Elves and Dragons!” was articulated by Sam’s Gaffer (I, 47). And “O Elbereth! Gilthoniel!” served more than once to nerve the hobbits to the performance of heroic deeds (as in I, 263). The most useful employment of ironic epithets was by Bilbo to Smaug the dragon to flatter him and gain time: “O Smaug the Tremendous! . . . O Smaug the Chiefest and Greatest of Calamities. . . . O Smaug the unassessably wealthy. . . . Lord Smaug the Impenetrable. . . . Your Magnificence. . . . I am Ringwinner and Luckwearer; and I am Barrel-rider.” “This of course is the way to talk to dragons, if you don’t want to reveal your proper name (which is wise), and don’t want to infuriate them by a flat refusal (which is also very wise). No dragon can resist the fascination of riddling talk and of wasting time trying to understand it” (*The Hobbit*, pp. 212-216). Other insults, this time undisguised, applied to the spiders of Mirkwood to distract their attention from Bilbo’s friends the dwarves, included “Lazy Lob and Crazy Cob,” Attercop, and Tomnoddy. “No spider has ever liked being called Attercop, and Tomnoddy of course is insulting to anybody.”4

On the other hand, phraseology of courtesy and benison can soar above its context. Frodo says bowing to Faramir, “May the light shine on your swords!” (II,338) After accepting Merry’s service, King Théoden of Rohan says to him, “Take your sword and bear it unto good fortune!” (III, 59) Perhaps no more

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4 *The Hobbit*, pp. 157-158. According to Wright, *op. cit.*, pp. 37 and 178, “attercop” is dialect from Old English *ætor*, poison, and *coppe*, and Tomnoddy “big heed and little body, a street-boy’s gibe at a person of dwarfish stature.”
polite or appropriate phrase could be spoken of a hobbit than “May the hair on his toes never fall out!” (The Hobbit, Thorin to Bilbo, p. 29) or of a dwarf than “May his beard grow ever longer” or “May your beards never grow thin!” (The Hobbit, pp. 254, 276) Eagles are notably formal. “Farewell!” they cried, “Wherever you fare, till your eyries receive you at the journey’s end!” That is the polite thing to say among eagles. ‘May the wind under your wings bear you where the sun sails and the moon walks,’ answered Gandalf, who knew the correct reply” (The Hobbit, p. 116).

The remainder of our discussion will deal with proverbs in complete sentences—old and new, platitudinous and figurative, hackneyed and fresh, but all appropriate and functional to the context in which they are introduced. As a form, the smallest form, of folk literature, they must be passed orally among the people; and as Brunvand says, “The majority of true proverbs are metaphorical descriptions of an act or event applied as a general truth; examples are numerous—‘A burnt child dreads the fire,’ ‘A new broom sweeps clean,’ ‘A rolling stone gathers no moss.’” Of the twenty-nine proverbs in The Lord of the Rings complex, sixteen (over half) are in some way metaphorical. Their significance is thus emphasized by Robert Sklar’s description of the hobbits as “a vast metaphor for coming of age,” Thomson’s insistence that the works are “archetypes of human consciousness,” and Blissett’s phrases for them: a “parable of power for the atomic age” and “the last literary masterpiece of the Middle Ages” comparable with Richard Wagner. “The true foundation of myth,” says Francis Hope, “is not philosophy but pedantry.”

Of peoples, Gildor the Elf quotes, “It is said: ‘Do not meddle in the affairs of wizards, for they are subtle and quick to

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anger.' . . . And it is also said,” answered Frodo: “‘Go not to the Elves for counsel, for they will say both no and yes’” (I, 123). “Hobbits are not quite like ordinary people. . . . They have a fund of wisdom and wise sayings that men have mostly never heard or have forgotten long ago” (The Hobbit, pp. 77-78). This last finds substantiation in the fact that hobbits speak close to half of the proverbs in The Lord tetralogy, and no proverbs are employed by orcs, wargs, Ents, trolls, or birds; but who would expect them to be? Of the twenty-nine, eight are Wellerisms or quotations cited in context, an example of which is as follows: “‘Where there’s life there’s hope,’ as my Gaffer used to say; ‘and need of vittles,’ as he mostways used to add,” said Sam (II, 392). Some are repeated; one, “Third time pays for all,” is used three times. Seven are maxims without figures of speech; rhetorical content of the remainder is as follows: balance and antithesis, 9; alliteration, 8; metaphor, 7, personification, 4; hyperbole, 3; synecdoche, 2; assonance, simile, metonymy, litotes, and onomatopoeia, 1 each. It might be interesting to compare with the above list the order of dominance of figures in the songs and other verses:

Personification  22  
Exclamation  21  
Alliteration  18  
Onomatopoeia  17  
Metaphor  16  
Simile  16  
Rhetorical Question  10  
Synecdoche  3  
Irony  2  
Apostrophe  1

Personification, alliteration, and metaphor are prominent in both verses and proverbs; but antithesis and hyperbole dominate in proverbs and exclamation, onomatopoeia, and rhetorical questions occur freely in songs.

In seeking to evaluate the originality of Tolkien’s proverbs, eighteen or twenty volumes on the proverb, mostly analytical collections, have been scanned. Approximately thirteen (fewer than half) of his twenty-nine proverbs are more or less standard, the remainder seeming to be original creations. Two are platitu-
dinous adages, eight are old standard proverbs, four are sharpened-up versions of old standards, four are original but of local application only, and ten are original creations of which about half seem viable contributions to the world's stock of proverbs. The twenty-nine are as follows:

I. Platitudes.
   1. All's well as ends well (I, 139); All's well as ends Better! (III, 373)\(^\text{10}\)
   2. Handsome is as handsome does (I, 232; II, 366)\(^\text{11}\)

II. Standard Proverbs
   3. Third time pays for all (The Hobbit, pp. 203, 223; II, 332)\(^\text{12}\)
   4. While there’s life there’s hope (The Hobbit, p. 223; II, 392)\(^\text{13}\)
   5. It never rains but it pours (I, 210)\(^\text{14}\)
   6. Live and learn! (I, 449)\(^\text{15}\)
   7. One good turn deserves another (II, 281)\(^\text{16}\)
   8. Murder will out (II, 349)\(^\text{17}\)
   9. It is an ill wind . . . that blows no one any good (The Hobbit, p. 241); It’s an ill wind as blows nobody no good (III, 373)\(^\text{18}\)
  10. Where will wants not, a way opens (III, 93)\(^\text{19}\)
  11. The burned hand teaches best (II, 260)\(^\text{20}\)
  12. When ever you open your big mouth you put your foot in it (II, 366)\(^\text{21}\)

\(^{11}\) Smith, p. 129.
\(^{12}\) Apperson, p. 626.
\(^{13}\) Smith, p. 584, and Apperson, p. 364.
\(^{14}\) Smith, p. 242.
\(^{15}\) Ibid., p. 230.
\(^{16}\) Ibid., p. 342.
\(^{17}\) Ibid., p. 304.
\(^{18}\) Ibid., p. 230.
\(^{20}\) Smith, p. 421, reworded from "The burnt child dreads the fire."
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13. Need brooks no delay, yet late is better than never (III, 134)\(^\text{22}\)
14. Short cuts make long delays (I, 128)\(^\text{23}\)

III. Original, of Limited Application
15. “Escaping goblins to be caught by wolves!” [Bilbo] said, and it became a proverb, though we now say “out of the frying pan into the fire”\(^\text{24}\) in the same sort of uncomfortable situations (The Hobbit, p. 103)
16. Every worm (dragon) has his weak spot (The Hobbit p. 211)\(^\text{25}\)
17. “Never laugh at live dragons, Bilbo you fool!” he said to himself, and it became a favourite saying of his later, and passed into a proverb (The Hobbit, p. 217)\(^\text{26}\)
18. Strange as News from Bree was still a saying in the Eastfarthing (I, 207)
19. There’s no accounting for East and West, as we say in Bree (I, 214)\(^\text{27}\)

IV. Original, Unremarkable
20. The white page can be overwritten; and the white light can be broken (I, 339)
21. Faithless is he that says farewell when the road darkens (I, 367)
22. “Sworn word may strengthen quaking heart,” said Gimli. “Or break it,” said Elrond (I, 367)
23. There are some things that it is better to begin than to refuse, even though the end may be dark (II, 53)


\(^\text{23}\) Brilliantly reworded from something like Brewer, p. 827: “The short cut is often the longest way round.”

\(^\text{24}\) Smith, p. 350.

\(^\text{25}\) Reworded from ibid., p. 97, “Every man has his weak side.”

\(^\text{26}\) Perhaps reworded from something like Davidoff, p. 239: “Ill-timed laughter is a dangerous evil,” from the Greek.

\(^\text{27}\) Apparently devised from something like Smith, p. 478, “There’s no accounting for tastes,” with a touch of Kipling.
24. Night oft brings news to near kindred (II, 346)

V. Original, Best

25. He can see through a brick wall in time (as they say in Bree) (Gandalf, of Butterbur, I, 291)
26. Let him not vow to walk in the dark, who has not seen the nightfall (Elrond to Gimli, I, 367)
27. It’s the job that’s never started as takes longest to finish (Sam to Frodo, I, 467)
28. Twice blessed is help unlooked for (Éomer to Aragorn, III, 150)\(^{28}\)
29. Oft evil will shall evil mar (Théoden to Aragorn and Gandalf, II, 255).\(^{29}\)

We may conclude that phrase and sentence are not the least respects in which Tolkien’s style triumphantly meets its responsibilities. With his proverbs it is as with other elements of his work like trolls and elves, hobbits and Ents: he built high and originally on a stable foundation of tradition, the new and the old artistically interwoven.

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\(^{29}\) I can find nothing closer to this than Davidoff’s “By excess of evil, evil dies,” p. 123.