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Abstract

Considers named weapons, noms de plume and other personal name changes, place name changes. Un-naming is seen as both a political strategy and a key tactic of in Sauron's arsenal.

Additional Keywords

Onomastics; Tolkien; J.R.R.—Depiction of war; Tolkien; J.R.R.—Objects—Weapons; War in J.R.R. Tolkien

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NOMS DE GUERRE: THE POWER OF NAMING IN WAR AND CONFLICT IN MIDDLE-EARTH

JANET BRENNAN CROFT

J.R.R. Tolkien skillfully deploys a deep understanding of the mythic and psychological power of names and naming throughout his legendarium. Among other aspects of naming, his stories highlight many ways in which names, naming, re-naming, and un-naming can be used as strategies in war and conflict.

Names are, in one sense, the outward indication of a power negotiation. The namer, the one who bestows a new name or uses an already-given name, reveals, through the choice of name they use, their relationship to that which they name. It may be a more or less equal relationship; it may be one of exerting power over someone or something by imposing a name on it or by using a name that will influence those who hear it; or it may be one of subordination, using a name to flatter or placate someone or something more powerful. A name may be used in a magical sense, as a form of *logizomai*—that is, naming something as that which you desire it to be or become—or to give something greater power by distinguishing it from others of its kind. A person may rename him- or herself—out of a desire for anonymity, to indicate an alliance with someone or something else, or out of pride or hubris.¹

Here I wish to examine several examples of how names and naming are used in these ways in war and conflict in Tolkien's legendarium: weapons that are named, *noms de guerre* that are chosen by or given to individuals, new names adopted for a variety of reasons, and names that are taken away. The use of naming as a magical power in war ultimately leads us to Sauron's great and magical act of naming.

NAMED WEAPONS

Why might a weapon be named? Not all cultures have a tradition of naming weapons. *The Iliad* describes the appearance, weight, symbolism, and lineage of Achilles's shield and spear at obsessive length without naming

¹ See my "Naming the Evil One" for a further exploration of these concepts.

them; neither is Odysseus's bow, the one that proves his identity, named in *The Odyssey* (Grindley 151-53). But in the Northern and medieval literature with which Tolkien was personally and professionally engaged, named swords abound: Sigurd's Gram,² Beowulf's Naegling and Hrunting, Arthur's Excalibur, Roland's Durendal, Charlemagne's Joieuse, and so on.³ With a name, a weapon gains its own identity, even a personality of sorts (Poudrier 35); a name also marks a weapon as an heirloom tying generations together and legitimizing the heir who holds it. A named weapon may be further distinguished by runes and inscriptions of power "enhancing the abilities of the warrior who bears it" (Burdge and Burke 703), ensuring victory or protection and further ennobling its bearer (Brisois 94), or bringing "luck in battle" (Davidson 67); the name itself may "endow [the bearer] with [...] special powers" (Bliss 77). In story, the hero's particular weapon provides "a concentrated symbolic functionality" (Grindley 151), even more so if named, and the hero and his weapon are "inextricably linked" (Flieger 147). Literary sword names often "emphasiz[e] their power to do harm [and] to test the opponent [...]. [T]hey show imaginative personification of the weapon" (Davidson 102).⁴

Of the named weapons in Tolkien's writings, the vast majority are swords; the sword, as Ewart Oakeshott argues, possesses "a potent mystique which sets it above any other man-made object" (qtd. in Whetter and McDonald 5).⁵ There are only a few singular examples of other types of named weapons. *Aeglos*⁶ was the spear of Gil-galad, broken when he fell in combat against Sauron. *Belthronding*, borne by Beleg, is the only named bow, and *Dailir* its particular special arrow. (Bard did use his *Black Arrow* in combat against Smaug, and the *Red Arrow* was a token of the agreement of Rohan to aid Gondor in war if needed, but those are not names on the same level; they fall somewhere between names and simple descriptors.) *Dramborleg* was the great axe favored by Tuor in battle; *Durin's Axe* is a special heirloom weapon, but as

² Which makes an appearance in "On Fairy-stories": "By the forging of Gram cold iron was revealed" (68).

³ Davidson, writing in 1962, knows of approximately 200 sword names in literary sources of the period (102). On the other hand, as is mentioned in the TV Tropes entry on "Named Weapons" in myth and legend, the Norse poets had a habit of naming practically everything, down to each of the rocks to which the chains binding Fenris were attached and the thread that laced Loki's lips together.

⁴ Though many literary names were also simply inspired by the "appearance or characteristics of the blade"; see Davidson 167, 177.

⁵ Brisois points out that "[t]heir effectiveness as a weapon and their high cost of manufacture have made them the most elite of arms in most cultures" (97).

⁶ Or in the earlier spelling, *Aiglos*.

with the Black and Red Arrows, the name is not a true name like Dramborleg. *Grond* was the battering ram used against the gates of Minas Tirith in the Battle of the Pelennor Fields, named in its turn after Morgoth's mace *Grond*, the Hammer of the Underworld. *Angrist* bridges the gap between swords and other weapons—it is the knife used by Beren to pry two of the Silmarils from Morgoth's crown.

But otherwise, all the named weapons in Tolkien's legendarium are swords; thirteen names are given, though of these, two are new names for previously named weapons.

In the First Age, *Anguirel* and *Anglachel* were forged by the dark elf Eöl from a meteorite; the latter was given to King Thingol of Doriath, but he preferred a sword called *Aranrúth*. *Ringil*, carried by Fingolfin, was powerful enough to wound Morgoth. *Dagmor* was the sword that Beren carried in addition to his knife Angrist.

In the Third Age in Rohan, Éomer carried *Gúthwinë* and King Théoden used *Herugrim*. It's not unexpected that in this culture, with its echoes of Beowulf's world, named swords would be common. We know *Glamdring*, the Foe-hammer, called Beater by the Goblins, as the sword carried by Gandalf; and *Orcrist*, the Goblin-cleaver, called Biter, was carried by Thorin Oakenshield. Both were originally associated with King Turgon of Gondolin. The polyonymy—the multiple names—of these swords is an interesting point: a rhetorical trick Tolkien plays elsewhere in his works, translating a high-sounding name into the common tongue and thence into the vulgar.⁷

As noted above, two of the swords in the legendarium were reforged and renamed and are especially interesting. Aragorn's Narsil/Andúril is the most familiar, but the First Age hero Túrin similarly bears a renamed sword: Anglachel/Gurthang. These swords are practically "living personalities" (Whetter and McDonald 7); indeed, Gurthang speaks in answer to Túrin at the very end of his story.

For both of these heroes, their swords are emblematic of their life paths. As Flieger points out, in the story of Sigmund and other medieval romances, "[t]he fates of sword and man are linked, and the destruction of one signals the end of the other" (147). Thingol, as mentioned above, refused to carry Anglachel, sensing its underlying malice, but Beleg Strongbow took it when he went to rescue Túrin from captivity. Túrin, however, mistaking him for an Orc in the dark, took the sword and slew his friend. After that Túrin had it reforged and renamed it *Gurthang*, Iron of Death. Yet trouble still followed; Túrin later slew another friend, and then asked Gurthang to take his own life.

⁷ Outside of the legendarium we have Farmer Giles of Ham and his sword *Caudimordax*, translated into the vulgar *Tailbiter*; note that his blunderbuss is *not* named.

Gurthang breaks in this slaying and is buried with him (*Children of Húrin* 257). “You cannot change things simply by changing their names” (Bliss 18), alas: this is true of both Túrin and his weapon. The renamed sword, still essentially malefic, represents the internal dilemma of this flawed hero, who cannot escape himself no matter how many times he changes his own name: it gives him “the power to make terrible mistakes” (Poudrier 36). For Túrin, it could be said that his “ability to maintain coherence is constantly tested by [his] flawed use of the sword” for thoughtless violence (Brisbois 95).⁸

Aragorn’s story often parallels Túrin’s in ways that show what Túrin could have been if his character had been different. *Narsil*, forged in the First Age by the dwarven smith Telchar, was broken in the Siege of Barad-dûr at the end of the Second Age, and the shards became heirlooms of the Kings of Arnor. The remaking and renaming of Narsil as *Andúril*, Flame of the West, is “a metaphor [for] Middle-earth’s millennial renewal,” paralleling Aragorn’s “transformation from ranger to returning king” (Brisbois 97); it can be read as perhaps the first formal act of the War of the Ring.⁹ The sword’s story is Aragorn’s own. “The broken sword establishes his identity [at Bree]. Its renewal returns him to his rightful place in the world. The sword, in effect, stands for the man” (Poudrier 37). When he displays the shards at the Council of Elrond, “Aragorn publicly puts off Strider, assuming his rightful identity [...]. The sword proclaims the emergence of the hero” (Flieger 148). While not as polyonymous as Aragorn himself, the renamed Andúril was also referred to as *The Sword That Was Broken* or *The Sword Reforged*, acknowledging its past incarnation in a way that was never done for Gurthang.¹⁰

All of these weapons simply *have* names; they appear to have been “born named,” and the name is part of what they are from the start, part of their forging and inherent power. Which brings us to the special instance of *Sting*. Sting is not “born” named, unlike the other swords in the legendarium; rather, Bilbo gives it a name. The moment when he names his weapon, after the first victory in his solitary battle with the Spiders of Mirkwood (VIII.208), points up the anachronistic nature of the Hobbits in the milieu of Middle-earth and demonstrates his “acceptance of adventure” (Whetter and McDonald 25). In the cozy, demotic, bourgeois world of the Shire, it is doubtful anyone would even think of naming a weapon. A pony or a pub or perhaps a smial, yes, but a

⁸ Though Brisbois is speaking here of a society that constantly uses swords as tool of violence, this observation resonates with Túrin’s flaws on an individual level.

⁹ At least in the book, when the sword is reforged in Rivendell before the Fellowship sets out; in the movies, the sword is not reforged and given to Aragorn until late in the third film, in time for him to take it on the Paths of the Dead.

¹⁰ See my “Túrin and Aragorn: Embracing and Evading Fate” for a further study of the contrasts between the characters’ fragmented and fractal natures.

named weapon would be as ridiculous as a walking tree on the North Moors. But this act of naming shows that Bilbo is now completely at home in the heroic world outside the Shire and comfortable adopting its native practices, and that he has sufficient confidence in himself to take on the symbolic power of naming. This is a formative event in his heroic development; here, “the sword does not make the hero, but the hero makes the sword” (Grindley 160).¹¹ While Sting starts out as a nickname,¹² it eventually becomes an “official” name. Like the named swords of Northern legend, Bilbo eventually passes it on to his heir—notably, his nephew, a motif common in medieval epic, though the tone of the sword-giving scene itself is “anything but epic,” an understated and domestic replaying of heroic sword-in-the-stone (-tree, -anvil, -lake) scenes from medieval literature (Flieger 151-2). But underplayed as it is, the previously anonymous blade has gained a history and lineage, and the sword “[serves] as a bridge between the hobbits and the heroic world” (Whetter and McDonald 24).

NAMES OF PEOPLE AND PLACES

The power to name and un-name strikes at the heart of identity and can be a powerful rhetorical tool for both defense and offense. What you call your enemy, what you call yourself, and what you call your battles and wars are all important weapons in conflict.

The layering of place-names in Tolkien’s legendarium is often viewed primarily as a method of creating a feeling of deep time; rivers, regions, mountains are renamed by their successive occupants and users, often peacefully. But renaming can also be a strategy of occupation: the Watch-towers of Morannon renamed *Carchost* and *Narchost*, the Teeth of Mordor, by the occupying forces of Sauron, for example, or Amon Lanc, the Bald Hill in Greenwood the Great, becoming *Dol Guldur*, the Hill of Sorcery in the now ominous *Mirkwood*.

¹¹ This is handled quite differently in *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* and *The Desolation of Smaug*. Upon first giving Bilbo the short sword he finds in the troll-cave, Gandalf tells Bilbo the blade will glow because it is of Elvish manufacture. The blade does not then have characters on it, just a decorative swirl. In a later scene where Bilbo and Balin talk about names, Balin disparages the weapon as “more of a letter opener.” In *Desolation* Bilbo takes the weapon’s name from something one of the spiders says, rather than coming up with it entirely on his own. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, when Bilbo gives Sting to Frodo, it is engraved in Sindarin “Sting is my name, I am the spider’s bane.” Presumably he had it engraved after his adventures.

¹² See the TV Tropes entry “I Call It Vera” for a discussion of the differences between official names and nicknames of weapons.

Place-naming can also reflect nationalism, reinforcing national identity and purpose: Minas Ithil, Tower of the Moon, was captured by the Nazgûl and renamed *Minas Morgul*, Tower of Dark Sorcery by the Gondorians, in opposition to their own Minas Anor, Tower of the Sun, which they renamed *Minas Tirith*, Tower of the Guard. In *The Silmarillion*, in the aftermath of the Battle of Sudden Flame, the region of Ard-galen is renamed *Anfauglith*—by whom, the text does not say, but the word elements are Elvish and the name serves as a reminder of their losses in battle (*Silmarillion* [S] 151). Even in the Shire, places renamed in the aftermath of war serve to cement Hobbit identity. Shire-historians learn the names of the fallen by heart, and locations are renamed: the *Battle Pit* where the occupying ruffians are buried (*The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] VI.8.1016), *New Row* for the restoration of old Bagshot Row “in sensible hobbit-fashion,” rather than *Battle Gardens* or *Better Smials*, but referred to in a local joke as “Sharkey’s End” (VI.9.1022), commemorating the fall of Saruman.

Next let us consider *noms de guerre*, pseudonyms under which characters fight. A *nom de guerre* might be taken to hide one’s identity for various purposes, including protecting one’s family; to disambiguate people with the same real name; or to break with the past, as with the French Foreign Legion. In medieval literature, a knight might joust, fight, or go on *aventures* under a *nom de guerre* in order to make a name for himself. At times, “[t]he greatest knights, in order to get more renown, must quest or tourney incognito so that lesser knights (knowing their prowess) will not refuse to fight with them” (Bliss 29).

Éowyn’s *nom de guerre*, *Dernhelm*, is a straightforward example. She disguises her true identity both as a woman and as the niece of the king, because she would not otherwise be able to ride to war. She chooses a name evocative of her situation—*Dernhelm* meaning ‘hidden protector’—but not so obviously a fake name as to arouse suspicion. *The Necromancer* is also a typical *nom de guerre*; in Sauron’s case, this was both an attempt to keep his identity hidden until he was ready to reveal it, and to frighten people away from investigating what he was doing in Dol Guldur.

Thorin Oakenshield is a special type of *nom de guerre*—a nickname given for performance on the battlefield, like The Red Baron. Thorin earned his name in the Battle of Azanulbizar when his shield was cloven and he caught up an oak branch to use instead (LotR App.A.1074).¹³ Merry Brandybuck is

¹³ We don’t know how Bullroarer Took got his name, but given his performance at the Battle of Greenfields and his juxtaposition with Thorin, this might also be a battlefield nickname (*Hobbit* I.48).

given a new name when he is made a knight of the Mark—Holdwine of the Shire—though the same does not happen for Pippin in Minas Tirith.

The cases of Aragorn and Túrin are more complex, and again, like the name-stories of their swords, reflect their own characters. Túrin goes by a series of names, one after another—Neithan the Wronged, The Dread Helm, Agarwaen son of Úmarth, The Black Sword, Wildman of the Woods, and finally Turambar—and this list does not include a few names that others give him. But he does not incorporate all of these names into an integrated self-image, remaining fragmented and chaotic to the end. Aragorn's names, in contrast, are more likely to be given to him by others, are not strictly speaking *noms de guerre*, and are mostly variations on a certain group of attributes associated with him. *Strider* is a sort of *nom de guerre*, a nickname Aragorn has accepted as his own. Under this name he is "in medieval romance terms the 'fair unknown' [though of course he looks foul and feels fair, as he admits in Bree] who steps from the shadows into the limelight when his moment comes" (Flieger 143). The one unequivocal *nom de guerre* we know of, *Thorongil*, was one he used in youth as a sort of knight errant, learning the craft of war in the service of Rohan and Gondor—and it fits the pattern of his other names, meaning 'Eagle of the Star' and referencing the Elfstone that Galadriel keeps in trust for him.¹⁴

Renaming persons may serve as a form of propaganda. Wormtongue, for example, calls Gandalf *Stormcrow*, and gives him a new name, *Láthspell*, Ill-news, in an attempt to discredit him. Gandalf gives as good as he gets in this encounter, making a point of using Gríma's nickname *Wormtongue* instead of his actual name. But renaming can also be a form of *logizomai*, a sort of sympathetic magic that renames someone to give them a new role. Frodo does this when he calls Gollum *Sméagol*, complicating his whole question of self-worth and identity throughout the book.

Regnal names, or the names kings take upon assuming the throne or add to their name later in their reign, are a species of propaganda. Tolkien used naming patterns to underscore two instances of increasing hubris among rulers. First, in Númenor, the kings initially took names in High-elven, but as they began to grow in pride and chafe against the 'Ban of the Valar,' instead took names in the Adúnaic tongue. Tar-Palantir ('The Far-Sighted') went back to High-elven, but his nephew usurped the throne from his daughter and took the name *Ar-Pharazôn the Golden* (and changed his unwilling wife's name to Ar-Zimraphel)—and fell under the spell of Sauron, tried to break the Ban, and brought about the sinking of Númenor. Later we see a similar pattern

¹⁴ See my "Túrin and Aragorn: Embracing and Evading Fate" for more on these characters and their naming-patterns.

occurring in the names of the Kings of Gondor, as they spread their dominion through Middle-earth and take names incorporating the suffix *-dacil*, victor: *Rómendacil* or 'East-victor,' *Hyarmendacil* 'South-victor,' *Umbardacil*, 'Victor over Umbar.'¹⁵ This strain of hubris ended with Eärnur, who accepted a challenge to single combat with the Witch-king and was never seen again. In resuming the broken line of kings, Aragorn's polyonymous nature serves to reflect and integrate the many cultures of Middle-earth. Aragorn avoids hubris; he fights no "wars of aggression or expansion" (Brisbois 99n2) and takes the regnal names *Elessar* (Elf-Stone) and *Evinyatar* (Renewer), and the house name *Telcontar* (a translation of his nickname *Strider*).

Even more interesting however, is a theme Tolkien returns to a number of times: un-naming as a tactic of power. As Ragussis says, there are "those who rule by naming and those who are ruled by being named" (Ragussis 13)—and I would add, those who rule by taking a name away. Bliss points out, in her study of names in medieval romances, that "[t]he absent name has its own power" (Bliss 81). We see this in the real world as a standard technique of conquest; Native Americans, for example, were forced to adopt Western names and naming structures as part of U.S. government policies to "civilize" them. In Tolkien, we do not see this widely used on a societal or systematic level, but there are some key individual examples.

Túrin Turambar's sister, Niënor, forgets her name under the spell of the dragon Glaurung. Tolkien's descriptions of the effect of this spell are evocative and chilling: "she could remember nothing that had ever befallen her, nor her own name, nor the name of any other thing" (S 218) and suffered "a madness of fear" and a feeling that "darkness was overtaking her" (S 219). Her namelessness is the cause of her tragic end; happily wed to Túrin and expecting their child; she again encounters Glaurung, who cruelly returns the memory of her name to her and drives her to suicide.

In the first chapter of *The Hobbit*, Gandalf reveals that Thráin, Thorin's father, forgot his own name as a prisoner in the dungeons of the Necromancer (I.57). This is not dwelt upon here except as a plot point to explain how Gandalf came by the key and map but did not give it to Thorin right away. The appendix to *The Lord of the Rings* adds that he was tormented and the Dwarven ring taken from him (App.A.1051); in "The Quest of Erebor" he dies raving,

¹⁵ In the primary world, models for this sort of victory title are plentiful—*Scipio Africanus*, for example, or *Charlemagne Dominator Saxonorum*, or *Alexander Nevsky* (for his victory at the Battle of Neva). Tolkien's lengthy string of rulers adopting *agnomina* mirrors the growing number of victory titles (some earned but many simply inherited) taken by Roman emperors after Caligula made his grandfather's title *Germanicus* part of his own name, an example of increasing military and personal pride of which Tolkien would have been well aware. Justinian had seven such titles attached to his name.

remembering only that he has a son to whom the map and key should be given (*Unfinished Tales* 324).

Un-naming is a tactic Sauron uses on his own subordinates as well, to bind them more closely to him but also to strike fear into his enemies. "The absence of name can be mysterious and frightening" (Bliss 81); the Men of Gondor often refer to Sauron himself as "The Nameless One" (*LotR* IV.5.653, 662; V.4.804). Of the Mouth of Sauron, a renegade Black Númenórean who served as Sauron's lieutenant, it was said the "his name is remembered in no tale, for he himself had forgotten it" (V.10.870). And he in his turn does not speak Aragorn's name in his parlay before the Black Gate. The Nazgûl, too, are nameless in *The Lord of the Rings* save for the Witch-king, who keeps his title Angmar (as in King of Angmar) but not his original name.¹⁶ The Ringwraiths are anonymous, collective; they are described as "shadows" of their former selves (I.2.50) who "fade," become "invisible, " and "[walk] in the twilight under the eye of the dark power" (46), and except for the Witch-king, they are indistinguishable from each other by name or appearance. They are, in Roger Sale's words, "cut off from other men, without lore or any vital relation between present and past" (212).

In these examples, we can see that "[t]o be bound is to have the part of oneself that is unique"—the name being a primal indicator of uniqueness—"destroyed" (Sale 209). As Sale points out, "An interest in names and the past they evoke is one major sign of the goodness of the 'good' characters, just as evil is the effort to alter or destroy the right relation of namer to named, present to past" (201). Thus expunging an earlier name, as in these examples, is evil and a tactic of aggression; it denies the past and the value of names as indicators of identity and connection within a social group. Remembering earlier names, as in, for example, the list of Tom Bombadil's names given at the Council of Elrond (*LotR* II.2.58), is a linguistic sign of goodness, community, and tolerance, of acceptance of all facets of an individual's character and past.

But Sauron can also name as well as un-name, using name-magic to his advantage:

*One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them.*

¹⁶ In "The Hunt for the Ring" in *Unfinished Tales*, one of the Black Riders is given the name *Khamûl* and the titles "Shadow of the East" and "The Black Easterling" (338, 352n1). The derivation of the name is not glossed; I speculate that it may be more along the lines of a title than a name on Jason Fisher's blog entry on Khamûl.

In effect, this is a spell of naming; it treats the words “One Ring” as a proper name, states the purpose for which the Ring was made, and names it the master of all the other rings told of earlier in the rhyme. “Out of the Black Years came the words that the Smiths of Eregion heard, and knew that they had been betrayed” (*LotR* II.2.248).

CONCLUSION

Tolkien, as a reader of folklore and medieval literature, developed a broad understanding of how names worked in this type of literature—how they could be used to reinforce themes, reveal character, and drive plot. In the case of war and conflict, techniques of naming and un-naming underscore themes of power imbalance, reveal characters to be fragmented or integrated, add power to or take it away from people and objects, and drive plot through their uses in propaganda and *logizomai*. If Tolkien considered every word he used with great care, he arguably thought even more carefully about names and how they work in story.



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