Tolkien and Spiders

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Abstract
Considers both spiders and spider-imagery applied to other characters in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Published prior to Carpenter's biography, it makes no reference to Tolkien's childhood encounter with a spider.

Additional Keywords
Spiders in J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Spiders

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Professor Tolkien dislikes spiders. When asked by Richard Lupoff whether Shelob derives from the "apts" of Edgar Rice Burroughs, Tolkien replied, I did read many of Edgar Rice Burroughs' earlier works, but I developed a dislike for his Tarzan even greater than my distaste for spiders. Spiders I had met long before Burroughs began to write, and I do not think he is in any way responsible for Shelob.

Readers of The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings have already found evidence aplenty for Tolkien's arachnophobia, and should hardly be surprised by this admission. Spiders are easily the least-loved animals of Middle Earth. Consider the elves of Mirkwood, who were reasonably well-behaved even to their worst enemies, when they captured them. The giant spiders were the only living things they had no mercy upon.

The arch-arachnid Shelob even makes an orc uncomfortable. When Gorbag complains of life in Lugburz, Shagrat retorts, "You should try being up here [Cirith Ungol] with Shelob for company." And with what curious lust Bilbo dispatches the spiders of Mirkwood! His little sword was something new in the way of stings for them. How it darted to and fro! It shone with delight as he stabbed at them.

It would, of course, be foolish to claim that the unpopularity of Shelob and her children is merely a reflection of Tolkien's prejudice against spiders. In the story as told, they deserve all the antipathy they inspire. Shelob, for instance, fairly radiates evil. In Torech Ungol, Sam and Frodo find an opening in the rock far wider than any they had yet passed; and out of it came a reek so foul, and a sense of lurking malice so intense, that Frodo reeled.

Less sensitive visitors to her Lair get the same general impression from her eyes:

Monstrous and abominable eyes they were, bestial and yet filled with purport and with hideous delight, glistening over their prey trapped all hope of escape.

She is, to put it mildly, self-centered. Her guiding ambition is death for all others, mind and body, and for herself a glut of life, alone, swollen till the mountains can no longer hold her up and the darkness can not contain her.

The spiders of Mirkwood are somewhat less malevolent. Their motive in capturing the dwarves, as the following exchange demonstrates, is hunger:

"It was a sharp struggle, but worth it," said one. "What nasty thick skins they have to be sure, but I'll wager there is good juice inside." "Aye, they'll make fine eating, when they've hung a bit," said another.

Their willingness to eat sentient creatures is not to their credit, of course. They are, like their mother, uncompromisingly bad. Something of their creator's taste is revealed in this aspect of their characters. The feelings about spiders inspired by the characterizations of Shelob and the Mirkwood colony are reinforced by Tolkien's effective use of spider imagery. There is, for example, the character-typing of individuals as spiders, by which neither the referents nor their representations rise in our esteem. Gollum suffers worst in this regard. "Look at him! Like a nasty crawling spider on a wall," says Sam as Gollum descends a cliff in the Emyn Muil. The climb ends with Gollum falling, and as he did so, he curled his legs and arms up around him, like a spider whose descending thread is snapped.

Gollum isn't alone in having spiderish qualities attributed to him. Denethor "sat in a grey gloom, like an old patient spider" when Pippin approached him to learn the duties of his service. Speaking of his imprisonment by Saruman, Gandalf tells of being "...caught like a fly in a spider's treacherous web! Yet even the most subtle spiders may leave a weak thread." Sauron abandons "its webs of fear and treachery" when Frodo claims the Ring at Orodruin. The Mouth of Sauron makes a pointed reference to Gandalf, Aragorn, and the other captains when, at the Black Gate, he warns of doom "...to him who sets his foolish webs before the feet of Sauron the Great." Even Galadriel is typed as a spider, when Wormtongue charges that "...webs of deceit were ever woven in Dol Amroth." Spiders are associated with unpleasantness in
other contexts as well. Troco slices at a ghostly wrist while trapped in the crypt of a barrow-wight, and as he leaves he thinks he sees "a seared hand wriggling still, like a wounded spider."19 In a poem in The Adventures of Tom Bombadil, the hobbit Murdoch is reached by passing through the spider-shadows...20 And spiders add to the flavor of slow decay in "The Sea Bell," another poem in that collection:

For a year and a day there must I stay,
Beetles were topping in the rotten trees,
Spiders were weaving, in the mold, heaving puffballs loomed about my knees.21

Tolkien's giant spiders and spider imagery are successful; their effect on his readers is strong and unanimous. Why? Why is Tolkien's distaste for spiders so readily comprehensible? Why are we so willing to put spiders down? Let's consider three possibilities.

The first is that no one likes a predator, and spiders are notoriously predatory. Worse yet, they prefer living food. Thus, when Bilbo is attacked by a spider, which tries "to poison him to keep him quiet, as small spiders do to flies."22 Sam abandons Frodo and becomes Kingearder because he doesn't realize, as Sgolrat does, that Shelob...doesn't eat dead meat, nor suck cold blood.23 Tolkien's spiders, and the spiders of our nightmares, hold ambivalences in the army of monsters bent on gobbling up the unwary. The danger in Torech Ungol and the webby darkness of Mirkwood is the danger of being eaten. But no one expects to be eaten by a real spider. And perhaps the most neutral reference to spiders in Tolkien's work takes their predatory nature for granted. I refer to the troopet lookout in Mirkwood, where Diblo "round spiders all right. But they were only small ones of ordinary size, and they were after the butterflies."24

A second reason for disliking spiders is their sinister armorment, the poison and the cunning snares with which they capture their prey. Even the giant spiders of Middle Earth are skilled at spinning. In their eagerness to trap Bilbo, the spiders of Mirkwood close off his retreat with a web, "but luckily not a proper web, only great strands of double thick spider-web rug hastily backwars and forwards from tray to trunk."25 By implication, they're usually better weavers. Shelob's art is in a vein at Torech Ungol, where "across the width and height of the tunnel a vast web was spun, orderly as the web of some huge spider."26 It should be noted that Sam was unimpressed by the display.

Sam laughed grimly. "Cobwebs!" he said. "Is that all?"27

Black spinning talents are suggested in epithets and metaphors in Tolkien's works as well, as noted in the discussion of character-tying effects above and in the following couplet from "The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun":

A witch there was, who webs could weave
To snare the heart and wits to reave.26

Yet Tolkien frequently refers to webs as things of beauty. On Frodo's first visit to Rivendell he "wove nets of gossamer tinkling on every bush,"29 and on his return there he "frosted the night,"30 and the cobwebs were like white nets.30 Leaving Crickhallow, the hobbits "saw the hedge looming suddenly ahead. It was tall and netted over with silver cobwebs,"32 and from Rohanwâl's window could be seen a "clipped hedge silver-netted."33

A third common complaint about spiders is that they are ugly. On this point Tolkien's feelings are apparently unmixed. In Shelob, Sam sees "the most loathly shape he had ever beheld, horrible beyond the horror of an evil dream."33 Her malefice is compounded because she is "an evil thing in spider-form."34 What is that form?

...Behind her short stalk like neck was her huge swollen body, a vast boggled bag, swaying and sagging between her legs.35

There is an interesting factual error in this description. If Shelob indeed exhibits "spider-form," spiders have no necks. The head and leg-bearing portion of a spider's body are constructed in one piece, with no visible evidence of separation. To the rear of this section (the cephalothorax) is attached the often bulbous structure containing stomach, silk glands, reproductive organs, etc. (the abdomen). The bulk of a spider's body hangs behind, not between, its legs.

Tolkien also speaks of Shelob's "two great clusters of many-windowed eyes"36 with their "thousand facets." Spiders do not have multi-taciated eyes; their eyes are simple, usually unclusterrated, and never more than eight in number. Tolkien seems to be describing, not the form or a spider, but the form or an insect, which would exhibit both the complex eye structure and the segmentation of the body he specifies. In support of this idea, Diblo is said to be "slashing...in the middle of the hunting and spinning insects,"37 while beginning another taunt in the battle with the Mirkwood spiders.

Why does Tolkien apparently confuse spiders with insects? One might argue, of course, that he doesn't, that he introduces the error deliberately to avoid contributing too obviously to the already bad press about spiders. This idea was easy to make up. Tolkien could claim that Sauron isn't depicted as being particularly repellant because snakes inspire enough fear already. But the earlier notion is supported: Tolkien seems bent on putting spiders down. Let's consider three possibilities.

Did Tolkien leave off his education in natural history before the lesson on spiders? A third, and much simpler explanation for his erroneous description of the form of spiders is that he is that sort of arachnophile who cannot tolerate the sight of a spider. Being afraid of their appearance, he has never looked at spiders closely. In agreement with this suggestion is the fact of his accuracy in describing spider behavior (poisoning to paralyze, folding limbs while falling). In all of this Tolkien is in sympathy with the arachnophbic majority of his readers. In the following passage he describes the sinister aspects of a spider's activities, but who are at a loss to draw one. (How many legs does a spider have?)

It's a curious truth that the spiders and spider metaphors that add so much to the richness of Tolkien's writings rely for their effect on a prejudice that is in no small measure dependent on authors like Tolkien for its perpetuation. I only hope a similarly self-sustaining cycle is operative for the gaudy virtues Tolkien also champions.

NOTES

ERRATA TO ORCRIST NO. 5

p. 2, col. 1, l. 5: "January, 1970" should read "Spring Summer, 1969"
p. 2, col. 1, l. 15: delete "plus twenty-five cents"
p. 8, col. 2, last line: "page 22" should read "page 23"
p. 10, col. 2, 1st paragraph, l. 17: add a comma so that it reads "Swift),"
p. 10, col. 2, last paragraph, 1. 2: change the period to a comma: "romance,"
p. 10, col. 2, last line: "page 14" should read "page 15"
p. 11, col. 2, 1. 3: "rejecting" should read "rejection"
p. 15, col. 1, center: "page 9" should read "page 10"
p. 17, col. 1, 2nd paragraph, l. 11: add "1st" so that the reading is "Apparently he would not have made it"
p. 18, col. 1, 1st paragraph, l. 17: the second pair of quotation marks for "calling" were omitted, and "Middle Earth" should be "Middle-earth"
p. 23, col. 1, center: "page 7" should read "page 8"
p. 24, col. 1, 1st item, l. 4: "Collision" should read "Collusion"
p. 24, col. 2, 7th item, last line: "Ballantine" should read "Ballantine"
p. 24, col. 2, 8th item, l. 3: "authors" should read "author"