Sméagol and Déagol: Secrecy, History, and Ethical Subjectivity in Tolkien's World

E. J. Christie
Georgia State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore

Part of the Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol31/iss3/7

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to: http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm
Abstract
Uses the characters Sméagol and Déagol as jumping-off points to explore issues of secrecy, surveillance, propaganda, and censorship that were increasingly coming to the fore during World War I and the inter-war years. Although significant issues in their own right, these trends also point to a growing individual privileging of self-concealment and discretion over openness and intimacy, a process that dehumanized and eroded the social fabric. The Ring crystallizes these concerns into a single object, and Gollum’s relationship to it especially creates a tangle of themes of revealing and concealing. Also discusses Tolkien’s peculiar talent for “creation from philology” building on déagan and smēagan, Old English word-elements invoking hiding, concealing, investigation, secrecy, interrogation, and private thought.

Additional Keywords
Espionage; Privacy; Secrecy; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Déagol; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Gollum; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Knowledge—Old English; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings; World War I in J.R.R. Tolkien; World War I—Social effects

This article is available in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol31/iss3/7
SMEAGOL AND DéAGOL: Secrecy, History, and Ethical Subjectivity in Tolkien’s World

E. J. Christie

In 1911, under a rising fear of war and a growing espionage hysteria caused by the movement of a German gunboat off the coast of Morocco, the British Government hurriedly passed a sweeping revision of the Official Secrets Act (see Hooper, Aitken, and Thomas). In that same year, nineteen year old John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, an Oxford-bound student at King Edward’s School in Birmingham, formed a “secret society” with fellow students. The “Tea Club and Barrovian Society” (T.C.B.S.) was mostly dedicated to the covert appreciation of tea (Carpenter, Tolkien 45-7). By 1918, war had claimed three members of the T.C.B.S. and as Tolkien himself records, “all but one of my close friends were dead” (The Lord of the Rings [LotR] Foreword xxiv). Although Tolkien disavowed the notion that his fantasy was an allegorical representation of the wars that defined his age, it is nevertheless accepted that the central thematic concern of The Lord of the Rings with power and moral responsibility reflects the devastation of those wars, both to Tolkien personally and to Britain (see Garth and Croft).

While Tolkien’s mythopoeic literature obviously alludes to ethical ramifications of concealment allegorized by mythical rings, the specific historical conditions of secrecy and contemporary ideas about secrecy during Tolkien’s life have rarely been considered as keys to his fantasy. The “modern” world into which Tolkien was born, in which he formed his own intimate fellowships and indulged in his own “secret vice” of imaginary language creation, was a world with pressing political and moral questions about both the necessity and the abuse of secrecy. This essay examines both the modern culture of secrecy and the seccrecies that pervade The Lord of the Rings and its mythical past. It shows how Tolkien draws on Old English semantics to channel the social and theological theme of revealing and concealing through the characters of Sméagol and Déagol.

Prior to World War I, a growing sense of the need for state secrecy had been on the rise throughout the late-nineteenth century. The Official Secrets Act,
originally penned in 1889, was expanded and reinforced not only in 1911 but again in 1920 and yet again 1939. The legislation, ostensibly designed to guard against espionage, was one of the most all-encompassing laws in English history. It is, for example, one of the only laws in western jurisprudence to lay the burden of proof on the defense. It was used repeatedly in the decades that followed to prosecute, or at least threaten, citizens who passed information deemed prejudicial to state security as well as authors whose memoirs revealed knowledge gained while they held positions in the civil service. The Act thus appears to have been used more as a vehicle of state censorship, as a way to protect government ministers from embarrassment (Aitken 2; Hooper 7-10).

The Official Secrets Acts, moreover, is only one refined expression of a rising culture of secrecy. During the late-nineteenth century, an emerging consciousness of public life and family privacy “exposed the deep vein of class discrimination which informed the concept of legitimate secrecy” (Vincent 23). In 1872, the Ballot Act had also been passed amid concern from many privileged corners of the political class who believed that secrecy might place the political desires of increasingly enfranchised lower classes “beyond the supervision and influence” of their betters (93). Despite a mistrust of the “public” to cast informed votes, the intention of the act to “[protect] the individual voter from the scrutiny of his peers and betters” by ensuring a secret ballot was eventually accepted as a necessary evil (92). At the same time, however, charitable visits to working class homes with the intention of individualized moral education, increasingly involved long-term surveillance. Middle-class volunteers of the Charity Organization Society took and filed notes on the poor families they visited. “Over time,” this kind of intrusive charity “raised acute and eventually insoluble difficulties about the rights to secrecy of the subjects of the visitations” (96). The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, then, saw an increasing formalization of relations between the secrecy intended to secure the state and the moral imperative to protect the privacy of individuals even as surveillance and documentation of citizens was increasingly institutionalized.

Next to civic debate about secrecy, academic work on the prominent role of secrecy in society also rose during Tolkien’s early career. Georg Simmel’s influential essay on the “Sociology of Secrecy,” published in 1906, proclaims the necessity of concealment to the management of social relations. Georg Lukács described Simmel as “the most significant and interesting transitional figure in the whole of modern philosophy” (98-102). Simmel’s reflections on the sociology of secrecy are often impressionistic, yet his observation of both the necessity and dangers of secrecy, as well as the association of secrecy with the sacred, remain touchstones in sociological studies of secrecy. They reach back to Plato’s reflections on the intimate relationship between secrecy and subjectivity, freedom and moral choice, and are reinforced by later philosophers like Sisella.
Bok, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida. Levinas, for example, also presents secrecy as the grounds for the singularity of the self, but also therefore as the “basis for sociality with others in general” (Boothroyd 48). This individuation, both Derrida and Bok remind us, is intimated in the etymology of Latin secretum, which means separate or apart (Derrida 15; Bok 6).

According to Simmel, “reciprocal knowledge, which is the positive condition of social relationships [...] actually presuppose[s] also a certain nescience, a ratio, that is immeasurably variable to be sure, of reciprocal concealment” (448). The extent to which men reciprocally “know” each other is thus managed on a scale of revealing and concealing. The interior life of human beings is, in Simmel’s estimation, a kind of “spiritual private property” (454). The indiscretion of “psychological observation and reflection” on this property “may be quite as violent, and morally quite as unjustifiable, as listening at keyholes and prying into the letters of strangers” (455-56).

Simmel’s essay is pervaded by a rather subjective certainty that the modern world has, through its increasing complexity and “objectivity” rendered impossible the kind of complete intimacy once attained in classical society. Such a “complete intimacy of confidence,” he writes, “probably becomes, with the changing differentiation of men, more and more difficult. Perhaps the modern man has too much to conceal to make a friendship in the ancient sense possible” (Simmel 458). The modern world, then, has produced a new condition of subjectivity in which the balance of self-revelation and self-concealment have shifted to privilege discretion, to place concealment at the heart of the self. Carl Jung drew similar conclusions about the pressure of mass culture and the modern state on individual will. In Modern Man in Search of a Soul (1933), Jung expounds at length on the link between secrets in psychotherapy and in the rituals of ancient societies and thereby on the psycho-social effects of maintaining or sharing secrets. In his late work, The Undiscovered Self (1957), Jung pursued these themes with particular concern for the modern state’s oppressive and dehumanizing effect on individual psychology. Nevertheless, Simmel insists, the “differentiated” relationship may still lead to the same depth of feeling and the same “capacity to sacrifice” as previous epochs and as friendships that evolve in cultures where the extent of shared outlook creates more total intimacy (459).

Tolkien’s mythology represents the complex alignments of human history with the “secrecy” of interiority, and of moral choice with the pre-occupation with death. The philosopher’s serene mastery of life is produced by turning beyond the material to focus on what is beyond. In this way, Plato claims, philosophy is nothing more than “practicing death.” In the close reading of Jan Patočka that constitutes The Gift of Death, Derrida summarizes the history of contemplation that follows from this Platonic declaration: the anticipation of
death awakens both self-consciousness and conscience, instigating both the interiority and responsibility that distinguishes men from beasts. This sense of responsibility likewise separates Platonic philosophy, and Christian history following it, from the orgiastic indulgence of preceding religions. As Derrida also points out, however, this “vigil” of the self against death does not eliminate, but merely incorporates, the “the orgiastic secret that it subordinates” (17). This secret is never more potent and poignant than in the experience of war, where the encounter with the enemy as a readiness both to kill and to die involves not only “identification of the enemy” but also “identification with the enemy” (19). The grieving survivor enjoys life as a “surfeit,” and his affirmation of life in the wake of war constitutes also an obsessive denial of mortality (20). Derrida writes with the benefit of hindsight. In 1906, Simmel could not have foreseen the way in which the approaching war would test his assertions about the quality of friendship and the capacity for sacrifice, but the dynamic of secrecy he describes resonates in The Lord of the Rings, which represents a similar cogitation on interiority and society.

The moral power of secrecy was never more visible than during the great wars of the early twentieth century. War propaganda posters from throughout Europe and the United States emphatically express the theme that for non-combatants the most important duty in war was to maintain secrecy (Paret et al., Stanley, Rickards). Posters with pithy epigrams like “loose lips sink ships” are still familiar today, but many others reinforce the moral duty of secrecy: “He’s in the silent service—are you?” asks one, depicting a grim submarine commander with a determined face and a partially raised pair of binoculars. One American poster, issued in 1942, depicts the German foe as a looming disembodied shadow whose bright white eyes peer out from beneath the silhouetted rim of the iconic German stahlhelm (Paret, et al. 159). This imagery was almost universal in propaganda posters of the time. Both Russian and German anti-Bolshevik posters similarly depicted their enemy as monstrous beings or dark, disembodied faces and claws looming over towns and pastoral communities and often, as in Britain, depicted the heroic response with iconic warriors of the nation’s ancient or medieval past, in chainmail and on horseback (Paret, et al.). While other posters imply the universal responsibility of secrecy as a duty to remain silent, to avoid talk, this one notably invokes a panoptical paranoia, reinforcing the symbolic message of those eyes with the assurance that “[he’s] watching you.” Though Tolkien despised propaganda, his fiction evokes the same opposition: the enemy is looming, dark, disembodied, and he’s always watching, while the hero is conceived an embodiment of national character and

---

1 See 107, 111, 124, and 172 for images of the disembodied threat; see 13, 51, and 161 for images of the ancient warrior.
symbolized by the warrior of the past. Tolkien, like Simmel, is skeptical about the emerging surveillance society of the twentieth-century and seems to oppose a vision of ancient fellowship to the invasion of the self by a probing, disembodied Other.

As both his letters and his imagined history indicate, Tolkien recognized the relationships between intimacy and mass society, responsibility and the contemplation of death. As a man for whom “fellowship” played such a prominent role in life as in fiction, and one nostalgic for the pre-industrial life he depicted in *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien had his own experience of the pressure that pits intimacy against publicity. Tolkien sought and achieved deep intimacy on many fronts—his devoted marriage to his first love, for example, and his celebrated friendship with C.S. Lewis. In his inclination towards societies like the T.C.B.S and the Inklings, he was, as Lewis writes, “a man of cronies” (Carpenter, *Tolkien* 236). As his biographer notes, Tolkien was essentially optimistic and affable, but plagued by “bouts of profound despair” (31, 129, and 236). Modern war formed one prominent source of his despair: Tolkien identified modernity’s machinery and mass-culture with propaganda and the destruction of war.

For Tolkien, propaganda is the signal mode of communication of an impersonal, mass-produced world. It pits a sociolinguistic illusion aligned with horrifying violence against the more personal experiences of war related, for example, in letters to his son. In a letter to Christopher Tolkien in 1944, he writes of the “tragedy and despair of all machinery laid bare. Unlike art,” he argues, which is content to imagine, “[machinery] attempts to actualize desire, and so create power in this World” (Letters 87). There is, in Tolkien’s estimation, a direct link between the legendary fall of Daedalus and Icarus, the “Giant Bomber,” and other such “Mordor-gadgets.” The failure to recognize this connection is “a world-wide mental disease” (Letters 88; cf. 111 on Tolkien’s equation of machinery and war). In another letter later in that same year he wonders, “when it is all over, will ordinary people have any freedom left [...] or will they have to fight for it, or will they be too tired to resist?” (Letters 89). In the face of “mass-produced notions and emotions,” and especially of imperialist propaganda, he hopes that “at least in our beloved land of England, propaganda defeats itself” (*Letters* 89; cf. 115-116 on imperialism and patriotism). He laments in a third letter from the same year that “the future is impenetrable especially to the wise; for what is really important is always hid from contemporaries, and the seeds of what is to be are quietly germinating in the dark in some forgotten corner” (*Letters* 79). Tolkien thus shares with the thinkers of secrecy like Simmel and Jung a sense of the alienation of the “spiritual private property” of the individual in the industrial world. Mass production leads to machinery of war as inexorably as mass culture leads to propaganda. Wrestling against the unknowable future, he
possesses a grim sense of history-as-secrecy and produces a fable that evokes, in his own words, a "heart-racking sense of the vanished past" (Letters 110).

Further indications of Tolkien’s contemplation of secrecy and interiority are revealed in his non-fiction essays, where secrecy is firmly connected with imagined languages and with the sense of both community and of isolation associated with their invention. In his belated “Valedictory Address to the University of Oxford,” Tolkien admits to a certain solipsism in his profession: he teaches philology because he likes it, with no special sense that it should be “thrust down the throats of the young” as if it were “necessary to salvation” (225). He explains, nonetheless, that curiosity about language is always a trait of those who achieve great success as scholars. All forms of knowledge demand sacrifice, he argues, for “their roots are in the desire for knowledge, and their life is maintained by those who pursue some love or curiosity for its own sake [...]. If this individual love and curiosity fails, their tradition becomes sclerotic” (226). As a champion of the inseparable study of language and literature, Tolkien is also a champion of curiosity. In this essay, he uses the imagery of roots and mountains positively to represent the achievement of knowledge loved for its own sake and out of personal enjoyment rather than for the good of humanity. It seems to this degree that Tolkien felt a kinship between his own nosing in language and the curiosity of the creature he created in Sméagol. Later in the same essay, Tolkien recounts how he once refused to explain how he found philology “profitable or enjoyable” when asked “as if I were some curious wizard with arcane knowledge, with a secret recipe that I was unwilling to divulge” (237; my emphasis).

In another essay, Tolkien describes the invention of languages as a “secret vice,” though also as a “delicate pleasure” (“Secret Vice” 200). On his way to discussing the invention of entirely new languages, Tolkien considers the partial or code-languages of childhood and their function in confirming close community among friends who imagine themselves members of a “secret and persecuted society” (201). Tolkien begins the essay deflecting and deferring until finally reaching an anecdote through which to confess his own pleasure in imaginary linguistics: he describes a man he sat next to during a military training lecture who suddenly but quietly blurted out “I shall express the accusative case by a prefix!” Tolkien further characterizes this man as “a queer creature—ever afterwards a little bashful after inadvertently revealing his secret—[who] cheered and comforted himself in the tedium and squalors of ‘training under canvas’ by composing a language, a personal system and symphony that no else [sic] was to study or hear” (199-200). Tolkien’s explanation of this soldier depicts a certain self-referential solace to inventing a language that will never be used to communicate or reinforce a community. He imagines a secrecy so great that it will never perform one crucial social function of secrecy: to reinforce
membership in a society. This soldier, as a “queer creature,” suggests a model for Gollum, who also occupies an interior world in which he escapes from the tedium of his surroundings by talking to himself.

Such secrecies, establishing a relationship between language, society and isolation, pervade The Lord of the Rings. In particular, secrecy manifests itself along racial lines according to which the histories, languages, and moral fates of the races are reflected in their reaction to the rings of power. The secrecy effected by cultural divisions is evident even in The Hobbit, where Thór’s Map—the map to the secret door in the side of the Lonely Mountain—is encrypted in dwarvish runes and by the cultural knowledge that a dwarvish map is drawn with East at the top. This secret door prefigures the door to the Mines of Moria, hidden and doubly encrypted by a riddle written in runes. But this secrecy becomes deeper still in historical perspective. The dwarves, as Tolkien explains, used “the languages of men” in their transactions across Middle-earth. “Yet,” he writes, “in secret (a secret which unlike the Elves, they did not willingly unlock, even to their friends) they used their own strange tongue [...] and they tended it and guarded it as a treasure of the past” (LotR App.F.1132). Despite the excessive greed caused by their possession of rings of power, these dwarves could not be brought under Sauron’s control because “the thoughts of their hearts are hard to fathom” ([S] 188). Tolkien thus posits intrinsic psycho-social characters for dwarves, elves, hobbits, and men. Dwarves are possessed not only of particular stubborn toughness, but also with thoughts encrypted and obscure even if one can magically penetrate their minds. Their language is a “treasure” that both expresses and conceals their identity.

Many similar examples could be proffered: The elves, as guardians of mystical knowledge and as immortals who have witnessed events now also lost to the view of men, represent an especially intensified form of secrecy: the hidden past of ancient wisdom and forgotten worlds. Again, even at their most simple, in The Hobbit, elves seclude themselves in forests, so much so that Hobbits are not sure they exist. The Council of Elrond meet in the “secret valley” of Rivendell (Hobbit 90). Aragorn as “Strider” has a dual identity as the last of an ancient line of Kings who, being almost forgotten to history, represents a concealed lineage. As the action of the story builds in The Lord of the Rings, the competition over using or destroying the ring becomes a central ethical question. Gandalf refuses the Ring and adjures Frodo to “keep it safe, and keep it secret” (LotR I.1.40, emphasis added). As a “servant of the Secret Fire” (LotR II.5.330; a cosmogonic fire that, as we learn in the Silmarillion, Tolkien’s Creator-God Ilúvatar “sent to burn at the heart of the World” [25]) he fears the consequences of attempting to control the Ring himself.

The imagery of revealing and concealing and the connection of subjectivity with concealment is powerfully symbolized in the invisibility-
visibility bestowed by the Ring, which allows its wearer to hide from literal eyes while simultaneously exposing his “subjective entirety” (Simmel 449) to the gaze of Sauron, whose oppressive image is frequently some variation of a ceaselessly watching eye. This eye does not merely seek Frodo physically, but invades his person with a “horrible growing sense of a hostile will that strove with great power to pierce all shadows of cloud, and earth, and flesh, and to see you: to pin you under its deadly gaze, naked, immovable (LotR IV.2.630). Sauron’s most horrifying violence is psychological—the penetration of Frodo’s “spiritual private property” with his own gaze and his own, far more powerful, consciousness. The Ring which makes Frodo physically invisible nevertheless reveals him to the consciousness of the Dark Lord, under whose gaze he his individual will is threatened. Over time, under the burden to remain visible rather than slip into the safe invisibility provided by the ring, and the concomitant effort to resist the will of the Dark Lord, the ring bearer “fades” and will eventually become a twilight being like the Nazgûl, who were “kings, sorcerers, and warriors of old” (S 289).

Such effects on “modern” ring-bearers like Frodo and Sméagol-Gollum are prefigured in the history of the Ring. Secrecy has a theological depth that brings moral force to almost every action. Tolkien’s history thus weaves together mythical themes connecting secrecy with power and death. After the defeat of Morgoth, Sauron “dissembled in his mind and concealed the dark designs that he shaped in his heart” (S 287). In disguise as the “Lord of Gifts” he tries to sway both elves and men by offering them the knowledge and skill “which those have who are beyond the Sea” (287). While they forge rings of power under his guidance, Sauron “secretly […] made One Ring to rule all the others […] and while he wore the One Ring he could perceive all things that were done by means of the lesser rings, and he could see and govern the very thoughts of those that wore them” (287-8). Sauron does not foresee that this magical awareness will be reciprocal. The elves immediately become aware of his consciousness and his deception upon wearing their own rings; they remove them and successfully hide three, giving them to “the Wise, who concealed them and never again used them openly while Sauron kept the ruling Ring” (288). This foundational moment in the pre-history of The Lord of the Rings is essentially a story of deception and espionage. Whatever the various powers of the rings, including the One Ring, it is their transmission of consciousness, their penetration of intention and interiority that constitutes their greatest danger.

Sauron’s special desire for the three elven rings is their particular power to “ward off the decays of time and postpone the weariness of the world” (288). In the Second Age, Sauron persuades the proud Númenórean King Ar-Pharazôn, who “felt the waning of his days and was besotted by the fear of Death” to attack the Valar and “wrest everlasting life from the Lords of the West”
The effect of nine rings possessed by men also evokes a paradox of eternal life, since the affected ring-bearers "had, as it seemed, unending life, yet life became unendurable to them." As they become invisible to men, they can also "see things invisible to mortal men" (S 289). In this the Ringwraiths suffer a similar fate to the Elves. As the Silmarillion recounts, the elves, though superior to men in strength, wisdom, and power, are tied to the fate of the world: "[T]he elves remain until the end of days, and their love of the Earth and all the world is more single and more poignant therefore, and as the years lengthen ever more sorrowful. For the Elves die not until the world dies, unless they are slain or waste in grief." By contrast, "Men die indeed, and leave the world; wherefore they are called the Guests, or the Strangers. Death is their fate, the gift of Ilúvatar, which as Time wears even the Powers shall envy" (42). Death is a consequence of their detachment from fate, which allows men "to shape their life [...] beyond the Music of the Ainur, which is as fate to all things else" (41). In Tolkien's imagination, the greatest sorrow is history: the sorrow of endurance suffered alike by elves whose lives are woven into the fabric of the world and who can therefore remember things long since lost others. A similar fate is suffered by those whose will is surrendered to the power of the One Ring. The freedom of men from this pattern of fate, their ability to choose, is intimately linked to Ilúvatar's "gift" of death. Against such a backdrop, in which the mythic history of Middle-earth evolves through the hidden cultures of its many races and Sauron's deceptive secrecy, the local history of less glamorous characters takes on more profound meaning. The imagery of revealing and concealing especially surrounds the character of Sméagol-Gollum.

Many critics identify Gollum as a central symbolic entity, for all his apparent insignificance as a being. Patricia Meyer Spacks, in one of the earliest essays to treat The Lord of the Rings with critical seriousness, writes that though "comparatively weak in evil, [Gollum] has become the symbolic representative of evil" (95). Gergely Nagy points out the central role of Gollum in figuring the constitution of subjects in language. For Nagy, Gollum's name provides an etymological equation with the Ring, linking him ineluctably with ideas of both treasure and monstrosity and thus making Gollum's name "just a variant for this central signifier" (60). Gollum's character is iconically identified by the characteristics of his speech: the repetitive hissing and solipsistic monologue in which he seems endlessly engaged is often dismissed as infantile or whining; but its key feature is the use of the first person plural. Though the narrator of The Hobbit remarks that the name "Gollum" derives from the swallowing noise he makes, "he always called himself 'my precious'" and "always spoke to himself, through never having anyone else to speak to" (120). Later it seems that

---

2 For example, see Flieger, Splintered Light, 7.
Gollum refers to the Ring as his precious, but Tolkien makes it clear here that Gollum is his own "precious." The moniker thus suggests Gollum’s attempt to maintain an identity in secrecy, splitting his consciousness to form an intimacy with himself. Referring to himself as "we" and addressing himself as "my precious," Gollum represents the psychological toll of his isolation and the symbolic burden as the erstwhile possessor of the ring. On one level, Gollum is a "philologist-figure" (Shippey, Road to Middle-Earth 274), reflecting Tolkien’s own philological self-consciousness about the invention of private languages. Behind the name is another name, moreover, and the character another character. In Sméagol, Tolkien portrays the deep symbolic role of secrecy in the constitution of moral subjectivity, and his own preoccupation with historical-linguistic encryption is cast within a secrecy both more profound and more sinister. As we'd expect from Tolkien, the names Sméagol and Déagol tell this story etymologically as these names reflect the theological symbolism of concealing (*deagan) and revealing (sméagan) in Old English wisdom literature.

We first meet Gollum when Bilbo Baggins does, in "Riddles in the Dark," the fifth chapter of The Hobbit. This meeting is crucial for the entire story of the closing of Tolkien’s Third Age, and Tolkien’s revisions for the second edition suggest he intended this meeting to foreshadow the story of the Ring evolving in The Lord of the Rings. That this meeting should take the form of a riddle competition appears prima facie to provide a point of folk-cultural contact between the two characters, but it also involves them in a ritualized probing of each other’s intentions that reflects profounder subjects: fear, loneliness, suspicion, the ability of two “differentiated” hobbits to trust each other, and ultimately the intrusion of the will of the Ring’s creator. The ritualized concealing and revealing of the riddle game cedes to a more hostile mutual interrogation when Bilbo breaks the rules of the confrontation and simply asks Gollum to guess what is in his pocket. As Gollum begins to guess Bilbo’s secret the two are a deadlocked: Bilbo asks what Gollum has lost, and Gollum insistently responds with his own question about what Bilbo has in “its pocketses” (Hobbit V.126). The legitimate secrecy of the ritual becomes deceit, both characters retreat into interior preparations for violence, and the scene concludes with Bilbo inadvertently escaping by means of invisibility conferred by the ring.

The association of Gollum with secrecy becomes even more plain in The Lord of the Rings. In The Fellowship of the Ring, Gandalf explains Gollum’s identity, telling Frodo a newly reconstructed story of the rediscovery of the One Ring by two hobbit-like creatures called Sméagol and Déagol. The differences in their character are slight but significant. Both are “clever-handed and quiet-footed,” but Sméagol is “the most inquisitive and curious-minded” of his family who, “interested in roots and beginnings,” sought out the deep and dark places where
he might find them (LotR I.2.52-3). As Tolkien himself explains, Sméagol is “meaner and greedier” (Letters 292). When Sméagol and Déagol take a boat trip to the Gladden Fields, Sméagol is driven to investigate the natural recesses of the pond, “nosing about the banks,” while Déagol fishes serenely from a boat (LotR I.2.53). Throughout Gandalf’s short reconstruction, Sméagol is characterized repeatedly as a furtive being whose curiosity compulsively and inevitably carries him into ethically dangerous territory. After he murdered Déagol for the ring, he hid the body “cunningly.” When he discovered that the ring granted him invisibility, he “concealed it” and “used it to find out secrets, and he put his knowledge to crooked and malicious uses.” Gandalf observes that the ring “had given him power according to his stature” (I.2.53), endowing him with the kind of petty maliciousness that fitted his already clever-handed and quiet-footed curiosity. It is no coincidence that, ejected from his society as the power of the ring allows him ever more bankrupt behavior, Sméagol-Gollum sets out for the Misty Mountains, where since “[t]he roots of those mountains must be roots indeed,” he imagines “there must be great secrets buried there which have not been discovered since the beginning” (I.2.54). It is only later, as Gandalf moralizes towards the end of this vignette, that Sméagol will discover “[a]ll the ‘great secrets’ under the mountains had turned out to be just empty night” (I.2.55).

This is a tightly organized story in which diction continually reinforces the thematic links between an obsession with origins, secrecy, and the sinister kind of solipsism that marks Gollum’s final wretchedness. The relationship between Sméagol’s secret murder of Déagol, his desire to conceal and to be concealed while he compulsively searches out “secrets,” are concretized in the names Sméagol and Déagol and the drama of their discovery of the ring. The meaningfulness of these names has been noted before, but their centrality to the theme of secrecy in the The Lord of the Rings is worth much deeper explication. Douglass Parker’s early review of The Lord of the Rings includes a long footnote giving examples of how names in the trilogy reflect a philologist’s imagination (605; note 4). J.S. Ryan also noticed, in 1966, the association between the names Déagol and Smeagol and the OE verbs *deagan and smēagan. Ryan’s observation forms part of a catalog of examples of Tolkien’s “considerable awareness of the residuum of association in words and names from the Germanic world” (45). These critics take the resonance of such names with Old English vocabulary as a curiosity associated with a philologist’s outlook, one that adds to the characterization of beings like Sméagol and Déagol or that contributes linguistically to the much celebrated depth of Tolkien’s imagined world. As Tom Shippey points out, however, Tolkien’s words are not embellishments of his story, but part of a “philological method” of story-telling through which words encrypt entire tales (Road to Middle-earth 338-9). Considering Tolkien’s choice of
these words as a function of a “philologists heart” risks reducing them to the idle fascinations of a sequestered scholar, and thereby missing the important connections between the secrecy of the philologists heart—a secrecy that Tolkien himself seems to have anxiously guarded—and the broad social and philosophical ramifications of secrecy in the formation of group and individual responsibility.

The names Sméagol and Déagol associate these characters with Old English verbs meaning “to peer into” or “investigate” on the one hand and “to hide” or “secrete” on the other (Ryan 53). Tolkien himself indicates that he has used modernized versions of “ancient English” words to represent the way that “Hobbit words of northern origin” were related to the language of the humans of Rohan. As Tolkien explains them, the names Sméagol and Déagol are thus equivalents whose archaic Englishness represents archaic Northern words of Middle-earth: *Trahald* meaning “burrowing, worming in” and *Nahald* “secret” (*LotR* Appendix F.1136). At the most obvious level Sméagol-Gollum can be taken as a figure of dangerous curiosity. Déagol fights Sméagol for the ring and his motive does not seem simply to throw it away or hide it again. He is equally self-interested in his struggle, but wishes to keep the ring for a different reason to “bury” it or hoard it for himself. The struggle between the two characters can thus be read as an allegory about the appropriate response to secrets—to dig them up, or let them lie. The depth of their meanings for Tolkien can, of course, be found in etymology, but also in Old English literature, where the revealing and concealing play a predictable role in the expression of sacred and social meaning. In religious prose, wisdom literature and heroic verse, the verbs smeagan and *deagan* evoke the many sociological and sacred functions of secrecy. Both words taken together indicate the necessary proximity of wisdom and secrecy, as well as astuteness and suspicion.

Sméagol, derived from these Old English words as Tolkien confirms, is thus a reflex of the Indo-European root *meug-. A brief list of other reflexes shows how powerfully the semantic field of this root suggests Gollum’s character: in addition to Old English words smeagan (v. to seek, investigate), sméag (adj. shrewd, cunning) and smeag ol (adj. narrow) we may add a different Old English verb, smügan (to sneak, or crawl) and the noun smygel (which glosses Latin cuniculos: a burrow, rabbit hole, excavation, or secret device). Then there are Present Day English reflexes like meek, moist, and smuggle, as well as Latin mucus (slime, including of course, nose slime) (*Indo-European Documentation Center*).

*Smeagan* is a very common verb, used particularly in Christian discourse. *Smeagan* glosses *investigare* in a Kentish glossary (Zupitza), and as it means to meditate, consider, or deliberate, is also a verb associated with wisdom. Ælfric’s of Eynsham’s late-tenth century Glossary, indeed, offers several direct
indications of what he took this verb to mean. Ælfric posits “ic smeage” as a gloss of *scrutor* (search, probe), *meditor* (consider, meditate), and *rimor* (search, explore, rummage). The heavy duty performed by this word reflects its constant use in describing Christian contemplation.

Old English translations of the Gospel demonstrate the potential implications of this word. In the Gospel of Mark, when Christ is questioned by Scribes and Pharisees, the concepts of interrogation and meditation themselves become subjects of scrutiny. When “the Pharisees came forth and began to question with him [...] tempting him” (Mark 8:11), *sméagan* is the verb for their interrogation as it is when Jesus asks “what do you question about among yourselves” (Mark 9:16 [Skeat]). At Mark 12:28, *sméagan* renders “reasoning together” (*interrogavit*). As well as between people, however, *sméagan* can represent the interior process of meditation, as it does in the Gospel according to Luke (2:19), when Mary “ponders the words” of shepherds in her heart (“geheold ealle ^as word on hyre heortan smeagende” [Skeat]). In this instance, *sméagende* glosses the Latin partiticipal *conferens*, “bringing together,” “matching against each other,” “comparing,” or as the Douay-Rheims Bible renders it “pondering.” In King Alfred’s Old English version of Boethius, Wisdom similarly asks whoever hears her lessons “mid innewearde mode hi ongiton and smeagean” (Sedgefield 50). Later in Luke, *sméagan* represents interior thought again, when a Pharisee “thinking within himself” (“on him smeagan”), questions Jesus’s cleanliness (11:38 [Skeat]). This question provides an opportunity to consider the hypocrisy of the Pharisees who “wash the outside of the cup, and of the platter” but whose “inside is full of rapine and iniquity” (Luke 11:39). In this biblical context, such investigation leads to a lesson about inner and outer purity. *Sméagan* thus suggests interrogation, hostile and cynical in the case of Pharisees testing Christ, whose interrogations we might compare to the riddle contest of Frodo and Gollum, or worse, the gaze of Sauron searching out Frodo: an inquiry intended to penetrate a veil and to expose the true interior of the other. The hostility of this form of penetration is captured in the meanings of related adjectives. *Sméah* is pejorative, for example, extending the striving and investigating of *sméagan* to a crafty form of penetration or “sneaking in,” while *gesméah* means “intrigue” (Bosworth and Toller; s.v.v. “smeah;” “gesmeah”).

From Sméagol to Gollum, then, we witness a degeneration from curiosity to furtive, isolated seeking. Rather than an interior dialogue like that of Mary in the Gospels, or like that encouraged by Boethius’ Wisdom, Sméagol ends in a tortured conversation with himself as he literally seeks in the dark for his “precious.” The concepts of concealing and revealing, furthermore, confront and define each other in these names: Dégol might have been an appropriate name for Sméagol in his later manifestation as Gollum, since it extends to include “stealthy” and “surreptitious” (Dictionary of Old English; I.b, I.c). If the Old
English verb *smēagan* has suggested the potential harm of “investigating,” *deagan* tells us even more about the value of secrecy.

As a verb, *deagan* is reconstructed on the basis of a single, past tense occurrence in *Beowulf* (line 850). The same root nevertheless derives many adjectival forms, including a widely attested *dígol* or *déogol*. This adjective means secret or hidden from sight. In *Beowulf*, early rumors of Grendel that reach the Geats describe him as a *déagol dædhata*, an “hidden evildoer” (l. 275) and his isolated home is also known as a *dygel lond* (l. 1357) (Fulk et. al. 11, 47). It is used figuratively especially to refer to those things that are hidden from men, though not from God—since *déagol* refers to sacred things, arcane knowledge, divine mystery (*Dictionary of Old English*, 3.a-d).

The importance of secrecy as a mystical concept in Anglo-Saxon literature—and as a source of imagery in *The Lord of the Rings*—can be perceived in the use of *déagol* in Riddle 40 of the Exeter Book:

> Hyrre ic eom heofone, hatep mec heahcyning  
> his deagol þing  dyre bihealdan;  
> eac ic under eorpan eal sceawige  
> wom wraðscrafu  wraþra gaesta. (Krapp and Dobbie, III.201)

[I am higher than heaven, the high-king commands me carefully to watch over his secret things; I also examine everything under the earth and the blighted caverns of evil spirits]

This riddle is a “translation” of Aldhelm’s one-hundredth Latin enigma, *Creatura* (“Nature”). It expresses the medieval mystical idea of creation itself as a text, as a surface encrypting divine reason, but which here also contrasts the “secret things” belonging to God with the evil spirits that are hidden in the earth. Old English literature recognizes, then, that the secrecy of deep and sacred knowledge is also fraught with dangers.

Furthermore, the words for secrecy and value overlap in meaning, so that the alliterating adjectives *déogol* and *dyrne* often appear together. *Christ II*, for example, summarizes a poem recited by Job (28:7) that describes Christ as a bird. The Old English version, found in the Exeter Book alongside the famous riddle collection, depicts the flight of that bird as hidden from enemies on earth (Waes þæs fugles flyht feondum on eorþan / *dyrne ond degol*, þam þe deorc gewit / hæfdon on hreþre, heortan stænne) (Krapp and Dobbie, III.20-21). A similar collocation occurs again in Riddle 83, whose solution may be “ore,” “money,” or perhaps combine both in “gold.”

96 Θ Θ *Mythlore* 121/122, Spring/Summer 2013
Hæbbe ic wundra fela, 
middangeardes mægen unlytel, 
ac ic miþan sceal monna gehwylcum 
degolfulne dom dyran craeftes, 
siðfa e t minne. (Krapp and Dobbie, III.236).

[I have many wonders, not least among miracles of middle-earth, 
but I must conceal my journey from each man 
a hidden craft’s mysterious law]

The riddle emphasizes a contrast between money, a social circulation of gold, 
and its origin as a hidden seam, tapped only by means of special knowledge. 
These Anglo-Saxon images echo in Tolkien’s story of the secret creation of the 
rings of power, as well as Gollum’s coveting of his ring in darkness under the 
mountain.

In some examples, words of particular note as sources of Tolkien’s 
stories and characters appear together, as for example in Maxims I, 
where secrecy is a defining concept in the characterization of wisdom (frōd), 
which can dwell in the recesses of the heart, but which should be exchanged 
openly among the wise.

Fringe mec frōdum wordum! Ne læt þinne ferð onhælne, 
degol þæt þu deopost cunne! Nelle ic þe min dyrne gesecgan, 
gif þu me þinne hygecraeft hylest ond þine heortan gepohtas. 
(Krapp and Dobbie, III, 156-7)

[Share with me your wise words. Do not let your mind be hidden, 
a secret of the things you most deeply understand. I will not say my 
secret knowledge, 
if you hide your wisdom from me, and the thoughts of your heart.]

Despite its loose organization, sometimes appearing to be a list of non sequiturs, 
Maxims I is nevertheless thematically consistent. It focuses on the contrasts 
between men as part of society and the doleful exposure of the friendless ones to 
the ravages of fate and nature, symbolized by the ravenous wolf. Secrets play 
their role in the functioning of a harmonious society: Counsel should be spoken, 
but secrets written (line 13). A wife must “keep secrets” (line 86). But secrets are 
also associated with the disintegration of society. The poem views the ocean 
grimly, as “the deep path of the dead” which “will be hidden longest” (“deop deada waeg, dyrne bið lengest” line 78). Ultimately, secret killing is opposed to 
the “fitting death” a man may earn in an age the poem recognizes as doomed to violence:
Maegen mon sceal mid mete fedan, morpor under eorpan befeolan
hinder under hrusan, þe hit forhelan þenceð;
ne bip þæt gedefe deap, þonne hit gedyrned weorþeð.
(Krapp and Dobbie, III.160)

[One must nourish strength with food, murder [must be] consigned
beneath the earth
Deep under ground, by he who thinks to conceal it,
That is not an honest death, when it comes to be in secret.]

By contrast, a good death is public. “A dead man’s property must be shared,” the poem declares, and “[d]om is best” (yrfe gedæled/deades monnes. Dom bip selast,” line 79b-80). Döm may mean “law” this context, but also more poetically “favorable judgment after death” (Dictionary of Old English; s.v. döm). While this view of death might be aligned with the folk-wisdom of heroic societies, Old English Christian literature expresses an even closer allegiance of secrecy and death. Ælfric’s Homily for the Common of a Confessor, for example, allegorically portrays Death as a threatening stranger. “The hidden thief who secretly comes,” Ælfric writes, “is the Death common to mankind, who by his secret arrival brings man’s body to death” (Seyrina þeof, þe ðísöllice cymð, / is se þemænelica deap, þe þæs mannnes lichaman / mid his ðíselan tocyme to deade ðebrinð) (Assmann 54). In this version, Death is the ultimate secret, common to all men (gemænicd) and his coming in secret suggests a sinister parallel with the unfitting death portrayed in Maxims I. The world portrayed by Maxims I, in other words, is a world that takes war and grief for granted. One in which society and the sacred are stitched together by a hidden fabric. A world like that Tolkien described, in which the future is hidden from the wise. The poem weighs responsibility through the structure of its gnomic imperatives (sceal) stating what men “must” do, but it also measures the interiority of wisdom and intimate promises against the social world of döm. It depicts, in other words, the situation described by Patocka and Derrida, in which the affirmation of life is expressed as an obsessive confrontation with death.

These examples demonstrate the complex interactions of secrecy, wisdom, and death in the words smægæn and *dægæn in the Old English word-hoard on which Tolkien drew. Smægæn appears frequently in homiletic prose and other learned literature. It suggests various activities of the mind, mostly directed outwards as a form of investigation or interrogation, though as we saw above it could also characterize “pondering” as a kind of interior dialogue involving comparing or weighing two sides. This verb, however, never occurs in Anglo-Saxon poetry. *dægæn, or rather the adjectival dægol, on the other hand, occurs frequently in wisdom literature like maxims and riddles, where it characterizes the mysterious wisdom hidden in dark places of the earth. It is
E.J. Christie

frequently associated with evil (as in Beowulf), gold (as in Riddle 83), and death (as in Maxims I). Sméagol and *dēgan are not merely opposites, however, as “seeking” and “hiding” seem to be. Rather, they intersect in meaning, as “investigating” can become penetrating and sneaking and as a smygel is a dark hole or secret device. The dēgol of hidden threats and demonic caverns is also the secrecy of men’s minds and of God’s mystery. It is also the secrecy of the future, which as Maxims II declares, is “digol and dyrne” (dark and hidden).3

The Lord of the Rings is celebrated for its effective evocation not of actual history, but of a sense of history. Tolkien succeeds in creating the “heart-racking sense of the vanished past” he aimed for, especially through imagining fictional languages that encrust glimpses of meaning in ancient words. Because of this pre-occupation with the past, however, the profound modernity of Tolkien’s work is less often examined. Though Tolkien’s use of names like Sméagol and Déagol resonates with meanings constructed in Old English verse, their purpose in his own fiction is not simply to recapture an idealized past, but rather to express the grief of modern survivors and the sense of the violation of interiority Tolkien perceived to result from mass culture and the resulting mass destruction. In the early-twentieth century, concern over the boundaries of individual privacy and the importance of secrecy in both social and political relations were newly pressing modern concerns. Like Simmel, Jung, and many other thinkers of his age, Tolkien perceives modern life, characterized by mass-production and mass culture, as the root cause of the horrors of the world wars. It is thus no coincidence that his characterization of evil in The Lord of the Rings revolves around the penetration of individual minds by the distant and oppressive consciousness of the “all-seeing eye” of Sauron. It is, similarly, not only Tolkien’s Ring, but also the characters of Sméagol, Déagol, and Frodo (whose names connote revealing, concealing, and wisdom respectively) through which the author’s theme emerges. From the meanings of such names and their resonances in Old English literature, Tolkien evokes a sense of secrecy and interiority at the root of life itself.

3 “Is seo forðgesceaf/ digol and dyrne” [“Destiny is dark and hidden”] (Krapp and Dobbie VI.57). Forðgesceaf is a compound of gesceaf, i.e. “creation,” and the adverbial forþ-, and therefore means literally something like “future state of things.”
Works Cited


Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy.


100 ☻ *Mythlore* 121/122, Spring/Summer 2013


---

**About the Author**

**E.J. Christie** is an Assistant Professor of English at Georgia State University, where he teaches medieval English language and literature. His previously published articles—for example, in *Modern Philology, postmedieval*, and *A Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Studies* (Wiley-Blackwell, 20102)—mainly focus on writing and the metaphors of inscription in Anglo-Saxon England. He is currently at work on a book about knowledge and secrecy in Old English literature.
The 44th Mythopoeic Conference
July 12-15, 2013
Kellogg Conference Center at Michigan State University, East Lansing

Scholars, Readers & Fans... Meet the Guests... Join the Conference!

Author Guest of Honor
Franny Billingsley

Scholar Guest of Honor
Douglas A. Anderson

http://www.mythcon.org
or mail to Mythcon 44
Box 71 Napoleon MI 49261-0071

Sponsored annually by The Mythopoeic Society
a non-profit international literary and educational organization for the study, discussion, and enjoyment of fantastic & mythic literature, especially the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Charles Williams. Membership in the Mythopoeic Society is open to all scholars, writers, readers and fans of these literatures. www.mythsoc.org