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Time and J.R.R. Tolkien's "Riddles in the Dark"

Abstract

Close reading of the two riddle games in *The Hobbit*—the first between Bilbo and Gollum, and the second a three-sided game where both Smaug and the reader try to decode Bilbo's riddling self-references. Discusses "priming" in riddling, how riddles work as a speech act, and the sources of riddles used in these games. Includes a translation of Bilbo's riddles to Smaug into Old English.

Additional Keywords

Riddle games; Riddles in *The Hobbit*; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Bilbo; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Translations—Old English; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*. "Inside Information"; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*. "Riddles in the Dark"; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*—Riddles



TIME AND J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S "RIDDLES IN THE DARK"

MARIE NELSON

THOMAS D. HILL NOTED in a *Review of English Studies* essay titled "Saturn's Time Riddle: An Insular Latin Analogue for *Solomon and Saturn* Lines 282-91" that the riddle Bilbo was able to "answer" only by a stroke of luck was likely to be familiar to *Hobbit* readers (282). I am sure it is, and other "Riddles in the Dark" riddles may be familiar as well. As Douglas A. Anderson noted, Tolkien himself wrote in a 1938 letter published in the *London Observer* that he "would not be at all surprised to learn that both the hobbit and Gollum [would] find their claim to have invented any of [their riddles] disallowed" (*Annotated Hobbit* 120).¹

Anderson makes the following connections between riddles Bilbo and Gollum pose in Chapter Five of *The Hobbit* and their possible sources. Bilbo's "teeth" riddle, he writes, is a "touched up" version of a riddle that appears as Riddle 229 in Iona and Peter Opie's *Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* (121-22). Citing a connection made by Taum Santoski, he notes a "dark" riddle connection to an analogue from Jón Árnason's *Ízlenskar Gátur*, a collection of Icelandic riddles (123). He quotes Letter No. 110 in Humphrey Carpenter's edition of *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, in which Tolkien called Bilbo's "egg" riddle "a reduction to a couplet [...] of a longer literary riddle," provides a text for the *Hobbit* egg riddle source, and presents Tolkien's Old English version of the "longer literary riddle" (123-24). Anderson sees Gollum's "fish" riddle as a "slight analogue to [a] riddle [that appears] in the Old Norse *Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*" (125-26), and he also notes a connection between Bilbo's "leg" riddle and "a very common riddle" included in *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* (126-27).

These connections, then, along with the time riddle to which Hill drew attention, can be read as support for Tolkien's denial of originality to Bilbo and Gollum. But John D. Rateliff, quoting from a September 1947 *Letters* entry, cites

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, citations to Anderson are to the 2nd edition (2002) of *The Annotated Hobbit*.

this response Tolkien made to a request to reprint the “Riddles in the Dark” riddles without permission:

“As for the Riddles: they are ‘all my own work’ except for ‘Thirty White Horses’ which is traditional, and ‘No-Legs’. The remainder, though their style and method is that of old literary (but not ‘folk-lore’) riddles, have *no models* as far as I am aware, save only the egg-riddle which is a reduction to a couplet (my own) of a longer literary riddle which appears in some ‘Nursery Rhyme’ books, notably American ones.” (*The History of the Hobbit*, 169)

As for the *context* in which Tolkien chose to place the riddles of “Riddles in the Dark,” Rateliff, like Anderson, notes that Tolkien was not unaware of earlier verbal duels, but, having cited examples from the *Elder Edda*, Snorri Sturluson’s *Prose Edda*, the Finnish *Kalevala*, the Old English “Second Dialogue of Solomon and Saturn,” and “The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise,” he asserts that “It should be stressed however that, whatever Tolkien’s sources and inspiration, this striking scene and the riddles it is built around are almost entirely of Tolkien’s own creation” (169).

My primary concern here will not be with the sources of the riddles Tolkien assigns to Bilbo and Gollum or with possible parallels to earlier riddle games. This paper will focus on the riddles themselves, on the riddle game, and on features of the narrative context that seem to enable the two contestants to answer the questions posed in Chapter Five of *The Hobbit*. This will involve giving attention to some of the ways that Tolkien “primes,” or prepares, his riddle-solvers to answer the questions they confront each other with.

First, however, I think it will be useful to prepare the way by relating the contest of “Riddles in the Dark” (which begins, as readers may recall, when Bilbo, having lost contact with Gandalf and the dwarves after an encounter with goblins, encounters Gollum in a long dark tunnel) to contexts for riddle performance as Elaine Tuttle Hansen and Michael Elias spell them out. As Hansen explains the roles played by riddle contestants,

Riddling involves a speaker and an addressee, a riddler and a solver. Using various surface locutions, the former always asks the latter to answer a question: who or what is it? In posing this question, the riddle reverses the roles of speaker and addressee in a genuine or normal question. In the genuine question, the speaker does not know the answer and hopes—usually with some good reasons for doing so—that the addressee does. The speaker of a question is thus in the inferior position, dependent on the addressee’s co-operation and knowledge in an exchange that primarily benefits the speaker [...]. In a riddle, on the contrary, the

speaker knows the answer and depends on the fact that the addressee does not. (*The Solomon Complex* 131)

In Tolkien's "Riddles in the Dark" Bilbo and Gollum agree to take turns posing questions. Gollum begins the exchange when Bilbo, who hasn't had time to think of a riddle yet,² tells him to go first. And this is the riddle with which the sequence begins:

What has roots as nobody sees,
Is taller than trees
Up, up it goes,
And yet never grows? (*Hobbit* V:81)

The words are simple everyday words, but the riddle description presents a certain complexity. Its subject has roots, which, with the suggestion of a relationship to the trees it is said to be taller than, would seem to place it in an animate, rather than an inanimate group of possible subjects. This classification having been suggested, the riddle subject is said to rise upward—which is what trees do as they grow. But now, with the assertion that the subject "never grows," comes what Elli König's Maranda, to call upon one of the terms she uses to lay out "The Logic of Riddles," might call the "paradox," a contradiction to what seems to be implied by the first three lines of the riddle.³ Bilbo, however, is able to respond quickly to Gollum's riddle question. "Easy!" he says, "Mountain, I suppose."

And Gollum takes offense. If Bilbo finds it so easy to answer his riddle question, then he must have a competition with him. Referring to himself as "precious" and to Bilbo as "it," Gollum lays down these rules for continuing the game: "If precious asks, and it doesn't answer, we eats it, my preciousss. If it asks us, and we doesn't answer, then we does what it wants, eh? We shows it the way out, yes" (81). And thus the context for the proposed question-and-answer exchange becomes more sharply defined. Every riddle Bilbo must now answer will be a "neck riddle," for which Michael Elias provides the following definition in "Neck Riddles and Mimetic Theory":

The neck-riddle: The English terms "capital riddle" and "neck-riddle" are translations of the German *Halslösungsrätsel*. In the examples from the royal contest the terms are employed in the broad sense to mean a wager

² "Time," to cite the first definition provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, at this point has the simple meaning of "a space or extent of time."

³ Maranda's "paradox" example, which she develops in detail, is "What grows without roots?—Human being" (200).

with the loser's head at stake. [...] While "normal" riddles are embedded in a speech event (someone tries to give an answer to an enigmatic question), in the neck-riddle corpus the speech event itself is typically embedded in a narrative frame consisting of two parts: one tells about a condemned person who is able to save his or her neck by propounding a riddle the judge is unable to answer; the other contains the solution. (193)

The contest Bilbo and Gollum have begun is not a royal contest, and Gollum is not Bilbo's judge, but he must answer Bilbo's first riddle or forfeit his right to eat his opponent. And this is the first "question" Gollum is required to answer:

Thirty white horses on a red hill,
First they champ,
Then they stamp,
Then they stand still. (*Hobbit* V:81)

Bilbo's first riddle, like Gollum's "mountain" riddle, relies on details that can be immediately associated with a living subject. Horses are animate creatures. This is what gives them the ability to perform a three-part series of actions that "teeth" are also able to perform. They "champ," and if we have something like "crush and chew by vigorous and noisy action of the jaws" attached to the word in our mental dictionaries (or turn to the *Oxford English Dictionary* for help) this would seem to be an automatic give-away. But they also "stamp," and "bring their feet down heavily," and *this*, if the subject is really horses, would seem to be the word-meaning connection here. But "stamp" can also mean simply "crush or press," and Gollum quickly solves Bilbo's riddle with the words "Teeth! teeth! my preciouss; but we has only six!" (81).

What enables Gollum to solve the riddle so easily? The word "teeth," the plural of "tooth," is of course included in what linguist Jean Aitchison might call the "lexical storehouse" of his mind. But sorting through his mental lexicon and through rules related to things like pluralization could hardly have led Gollum so quickly to a solution. It would seem that other factors must have been involved. Aitchison, whose focus is on the practice of experimental psychologists, defines "priming" with reference to "preactivating a listener's attention" (*Words in the Mind* 24-25). Extending her definition of "primer" to our "Riddles in the Dark" context can yield "a clue, a nudge in the right direction toward a solution" as an additional meaning. As for Gollum's answer to the "teeth" riddle, Tolkien establishes an essential feature of Gollum's physical condition the moment he introduces Bilbo's adversary: Gollum is hungry. When he first appears on the scene he is looking for fish to eat, and would be happy to eat meat too, if he could find it. And thus we see, as the first exchange of riddles

ends with two successful solutions, that the contest here is not just a speech situation in which two riddlers and addressees agree to alternate roles, and not just a contest in which the neck of one of the contestants is at stake. It is a contest in which awareness of features of the setting for the contest and the physical condition of the contestants is established from the beginning. The tunnel in which the contestants meet lies beneath a mountain that towers high above it and Gollum is hungry.

But, to continue, Gollum now presents his second riddle:

Voiceless it cries,
Wingless flutters,
Toothless bites,
Mouthless mutters (*Hobbit* V:81),

which consists of a parallel series of what would seem to be denials of the capability to perform particular physical acts followed by present tense verbs asserting that the "it," the riddle subject, *performs* those acts.

I hesitate, as Rateliff hesitated in *The History of the Hobbit* (191), to make a strong connection between Gollum's "wind riddle" and the Exeter Book storm riddles or *riddle* (Craig Williamson presented the first three riddles of Exeter Book series as a single riddle that he solved as "Wind"). A shared subject is hardly enough to make a case for derivation. The memory that saves Bilbo here does not come from a connection to the Old English Exeter Book, and it does not come from a line by line sorting out of apparent denials of capability accompanied by first person present tense assertions of acts performed. His answer, the correct answer, "Wind, wind of course," comes from his memory of having heard this riddle before (and Anderson notes that, though he cannot cite an analogue for this riddle, "traditional wind riddles often contain variations [...] of 'flying without wings' and 'speaking without a mouth'" [122]). All the details are in Bilbo's mind, and the word that names the subject, which can be connected to those details, is in his mind as well. He "[gets] his wits back," Tolkien writes, and is so pleased with his success that he makes up his next riddle on the spot.

This is Bilbo's second riddle:

An eye in a blue face
Saw an eye in a green face.
"That eye is like to this eye"
Said the first eye,
"But in low place,
Not in high place." (*Hobbit* V:82)

Similarity followed by defining difference. Simplicity itself, if we accept the fact that personification is often a feature of riddles. We know that eyes are not animate, and we do not ordinarily endow them with a capability to utter words. But the “eye” of Bilbo’s riddle is enabled to speak and point to ways it differs from the “eye” that is the riddle subject.

It is a little difficult for this reader to believe that Bilbo could have made his second riddle up on the spot. He may have his “wits” back again, but the “prime” or hint we need to solve this riddle seems more likely to be related to information his creator, a scholar who remembered 1919 and 1920, the years he worked as an editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as the space of time during which he learned more than he learned from any other period in his life (Carpenter 101), had in the back of *his* mind. The *OED* cites these lines from Chaucer’s Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*, “Thanne love I most these floures white and rede, Suche as men called daysyes,” and “Wele by reson men it calle The dayeseye, or ellis the eye of day,” thus providing not just a clue that could lead to a solution to the riddle, but a reason for the daisy to have been given its name as well. But this is Gollum’s riddle to solve, and he solves it by reaching into his own store of words and their connections to experience from years before when he lived with his grandmother “in a hole in a bank by a river” to answer “Sun on the daisies it means, it does” (82).

The daisy riddle did not seem to be a hard one, and Rateliff’s description of the English daisy as “very small (usually about a half-inch in diameter), with white petals and a yellow center, the blossom lying flat on the grass” (191) makes it easier for this American reader to see what Gollum saw. In any case, it is Gollum’s turn again, and Tolkien prepares Bilbo (and readers of “Riddles in the Dark”) for his next riddle by giving attention to his mental state. The memory of a happier time that enabled him to answer Bilbo’s riddle has intensified Gollum’s exasperation with his current loneliness and hunger, and this leads to his third riddle, the “dark” riddle:

It cannot be seen, cannot be felt,
Cannot be heard, cannot be smelt.
It lies behind stars and under hills,
And empty holes it fills.
It comes first and follows after,
Ends life, kills laughter. (*Hobbit* V:82)

This riddle, with its denial of the senses of sight, touch, hearing, and smell that human beings typically use to identify aspects of the environment in which they live; its suggestions of unfathomable expansion and containment (how can a hole be both empty and filled?); the impossibility of its placement within a time sequence (how can something both precede and follow an un-named other?);

and its ability to extinguish life and laughter, seems to present an unanswerable question. But Bilbo knows the answer. He has heard the riddle before, and the darkness all around him ("The answer was all around him any way," the helpful narrator says) triggers his solution: "Dark!" And thus the environment provided by the master who created the physical place in which the drama of the "Riddles in the Dark" contest plays itself out provides another gentle nudge toward a solution.

And now once again, using "time" in a conventional sense (the eighth in the *OED*'s 58-item list of definitions reads "the length of time sufficient, necessary, or desired for some purpose"), Bilbo proceeds to ask what he considers to be just a simple riddle in order to "gain time, until he could think of a really hard one." And this is the riddle he comes up with:

A box without hinges, key, or lid,
Yet golden treasure within is hid. (*Hobbit* V:83)

This does not seem to me to be an easy riddle.⁴ Bilbo may have been wishing himself back in his own kitchen frying bacon and eggs and I have often cracked eggs to make an omelet, but the word "box," as it is stored in my mental dictionary, refers to a container of square or rectangular shape with a flat bottom, and, given this preconception, the details concerning the absence of hinges, key, or lid are of little help. And at first Gollum is not able to come up with an answer either. But suddenly a memory of his past experience of stealing eggs and teaching his grandmother to suck their "golden treasure" (a remarkable metaphor, it would seem, but Anderson, in the first edition of his *Annotated Hobbit*, cites "'go teach your granny to suck eggs'" as a phrase commonly used in response to unwanted instruction [86]⁵) comes back to him and he solves Bilbo's riddle. "Eggses!" he hisses. "Eggses it is!" and goes on to his next riddle:

Alive without breath,
As cold as death;
Never thirsty, ever drinking,
All in mail never clinking. (*Hobbit* V:83)

Here the apparent contradiction of the riddle's first line ("alive and breathing" is a common phrase that comes to mind) is underscored by its second

⁴ And I expect that if I did not already know the answer I would find the 10-line Old English version of the egg riddle that Tolkien published in 1923 under the title "Enigmata Saxonica Nuper Inventa Duo" ("Two Anglo-Saxon Riddles Recently Discovered"), which Anderson includes in his *Annotated Hobbit* (124), more difficult still.

⁵ Anderson's source here is Francis Grose's *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1785).

line, "As cold as death." The contradiction of the third line relates to an apparent lack of a reason to perform an act associated with living creatures motivated by thirst, and the fourth presents yet another denial of expectation as the riddle subject is said to be clothed in "mail," or armored with a metal coat of linked rings which might be expected to, but never clink.

Addressing the reader directly at this point (and it is not the first time he has done this), Tolkien writes "I imagine you know the answer, of course, or can guess it as easy as winking, since you are sitting comfortably at home and have not the danger of being eaten to disturb your thinking" (83). Bilbo, however, *is* in danger and Gollum takes pleasure in seeing his uneasiness increase. Taunting him, he asks "Is it nice, my preciousss? Is it juicy? Is it scrumptiously crunchable?" (83-84), which can hardly be considered questions at all, riddle questions or otherwise. But now—a *deus ex machina* solution! Straight from the hand of the sympathetic story-teller. A fish jumps out of the water and lands on Bilbo's toes and he has the answer to Gollum's riddle. "Fish! Fish! [...] It is fish!" (84).

Bilbo's next riddle is directly related to the riddle he has just solved—as we can see if we know that cats like to eat fish. But unlike the "fish" riddle, it is presented in prose format: "No-legs lay on one-leg, two-legs sat near on three-legs, four-legs got some" (*Hobbit* V:84). Maranda's discussion of metaphor "reversal" in riddles—she points out that we talk about the "leg" of the table, but not about the "table leg" of a human being (194)—might suggest a possible obfuscation, but "fish," the solution to Gollum's riddle, is close to the surface of the consciousness of the two contestants, and "no-legs" can be related to "fish." A man ("two-legs") sits at a table ("one-leg") on a stool ("three-legs"), and a cat ("four-legs") eats the leftover bones. Gollum has no trouble answering Bilbo's riddle.

And now it is time for Gollum's "truly hard and horrible" riddle:

This thing all things devours:
Birds, beasts, trees, flowers;
Gnaws iron, bites steel;
Grinds hard stones to meal;
Slays king, ruins town,
And beats high mountains down. (*Hobbit* V:84)

This is the descendant of the Latin riddle to which Hill gave attention in "Saturn's Time Riddle" and of the "time" riddle posed in the second Old English "Solomon and Saturn" poem. As T.A. Shippey translates Saturn's "Solomon and Saturn II" question in *Old English Poems of Wisdom and Learning* it reads:

"But what is that strange thing that travels through this world, goes on inexorably, beats at foundations, causes tears of sorrow, and often comes here? Neither star nor stone nor eye-catching jewel, neither water nor wild beast can deceive it at all, but into its hand go hard and soft, small and great. Every year there must go to feed it three times thirteen thousand of all that live on ground or fly in the air or swim in the sea." (91)

And Solomon's "answer,"⁶ as Shippey's translation shows, provides more defining features for the riddle subject than Saturn included in his question:

"Old age has power over everything on earth. She reaches far and wide with her ravaging slave-chain, her fetters are broad, her rope is long, she subdues everything that she wants to. She smashes trees and breaks their branches, in her progress she uproots the standing trunk and fells it to the ground. After that she eats the wild bird. She fights better than a wolf, she waits longer than stone, she proves stronger than steel, she bites iron with rust; she does the same to us." (91, 93)

The fifth riddle Tolkien assigns to Gollum, which includes details from Solomon's answer, is clearly more than a "paraphrase" of Saturn's riddle. Its subject's power to destroy are as broad ranging as the power of Saturn's "wundor" (strange thing) to feed on "all" [emphasis mine] that live on the ground or fly in the air or swim in the sea, but the more specific targets of its destructive force, the "tree" (beam), "wild bird" (wildne fugol), and "iron" (iren) are from Solomon's answer. Gollum's riddle is a carefully structured poem in which a single, un-named subject that "devours," "gnaws," "bites," "grinds," "slays," "ruins," and "beats" is endowed with its inclusive power to destroy by the riddler's use of present tense verbs; and the objects of its destructive action include "birds, beasts, trees, flowers," "iron," "steel," "stones," "king," "town," and "high mountains," a rather longer list than we find in "Solomon and Saturn II."

Bilbo's "answer," "Time! Time!", while he intends it not as an answer to Gollum's riddle but as a request for time to *think* of an answer, might well have been a better answer, or at least a better answer as far as our present understanding of the multiple meanings of the word "time" is concerned, than Solomon's "Yldo" (old age). "Old age," with its association with "Father Time," is a less inclusive signifier that applies more narrowly to the life span of human beings, while "time," as its 58 *OED* definitions show, can readily be seen to have

⁶ As Shippey observes in *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, the Old English poem is "more precisely [a] wisdom-testing exchange between Solomon and Saturn" than a riddle game, so "answer" may not be a completely appropriate label for Solomon's reply (24).

a far broader meaning. Time can bring the existence of birds and human beings and their habitations, along with the physical presence of iron, steel, stone and high mountains, to an end. But the important question here is not which word, "old age" or "time," will be the more appropriate answer to Gollum's riddle question.

Reading the riddle in its *Hobbit* context leads to this question: Was Bilbo's response to Gollum's "hard and horrible riddle" a triumph of resourceful sorting out and thinking through, or was it a matter of luck? And the answer, as far as the progress of the riddle game is concerned, is of little importance. What matters is the fact that Bilbo is now very close to saving his neck. If he can pose a question that his opponent cannot answer Gollum will be required to guide him to an exit from the tunnel under the mountain. And "time," understood as an element in the progression of the question-answer sequence, now assumes a decisive importance. It is Bilbo's turn to think of a riddle question and he can't think of one—and Gollum's hissing address to himself, "'It's got to ask us a question, my precious, yes, yess, yesss. Just one more question to guess, yes, yess'" (85), does not help.

But at this point the ring that will become a motivating force in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the ring that Bilbo plucked from the ground when he first found himself alone in the dark tunnel, takes on a role in the riddle game. Reaching into his pocket, the hobbit feels the ring in his hand and says to himself, "What have I got in my pocket?" (85). This is not what Hansen would call a "normal" question, a question for which the speaker hopes to receive an answer. And it is not a riddle question intended to challenge an addressee. It is another effort on the part of Bilbo to gain enough time to think of a riddle that Gollum cannot answer. But Gollum responds to "'What have I got in my pocket?'" as he would to a riddle question, and presents not just the three answers allowed by the rules of the game, but four answers—"handses," "knife," "string," and "nothing"—in quick succession (86). And they are all wrong.

At this point Gollum realizes that he has lost his ring of power and guesses that Bilbo has found it. But this of course is part of a larger context. The exchange between two speakers here has been a neck riddle game, a game in which one contestant's life was at stake, and fair game or not, at the end of this part of *The Hobbit* story Bilbo wins the right to emerge from a long dark tunnel.

This is hardly the last time Bilbo's survival will depend on his ability to use his wits, nor is it likely to be the last time a reader finds a connection to an earlier riddle or story. In fact, as Christopher L. Couch wrote in "From Under Mountains to Beyond Stars," from the beginning of his story the narrator of *The Hobbit* has encouraged us to become involved and brought us into the story. And this, it would seem, may obligate us to answer questions that seem to be directed

to us as readers, even if those questions are not precisely presented as riddles. This is what I propose to do in closing with a brief look at the exchange between Bilbo and Smaug Tolkien presents in "Inside Information," Chapter Twelve of *The Hobbit*.

T.A. Shippey found an earlier parallel to the Bilbo and the dragon dialogue in "Fáfnismál," a poem included in the *Elder Edda (The Road to Middle Earth 69)*. In the earlier text Sigurthr refuses to grant a dragon's request to identify himself by name, replying "riddlingly" instead, while in "Inside Information" Tolkien writes that Bilbo, completing his fourth noncommittal "answer," was "beginning to be pleased with his riddling" (XII:213). "Inside Information," of course, cannot be read in the way I have just read "Riddles in the Dark," as a riddle contest. Bilbo's "answers" may fit the *OED's* third riddle definition: "a person or being whose nature or conduct is enigmatical" well enough, and they may, in their own fashion, fulfill the requirements of the first definition: "a question or statement intentionally worded in a dark or puzzling manner, and propounded in order that it may be guessed or answered." But Bilbo does not really seem to want to test the dragon's ability to answer his "riddles." Here the testing context, it seems to me, is one in which the narrator, speaking through Bilbo, tests the *Hobbit* reader.

I have to remind myself now and then that Bilbo's responses to the dragon's demands are not really riddles, but, for this reader of the Old English *Exeter Book* riddles, they do have a very familiar sound. As I learned from a recent effort to turn them into Old English (the results of that effort appear at the end of this paper), Tolkien does make use of this sequence in ways that make it relatively easy to translate Bilbo's ambiguous answers. Each of my Modern-to-Old English versions of Bilbo's "answers," for example, includes at least one use of a formulaic "ic eom" (I am) sentence opener, and the fourth has three "ic eom" formulas! And there are other features of similarity.

In the first person riddle descriptions of the *Exeter Book*, the speaker is often an inanimate object or at least a non-human subject to which the riddler, using a rhetorical device called "prosopopeia," has given the power of speech. Craig Williamson calls riddles of this type "projective riddles [...] first-person riddles of personification" (25). Bilbo, since he uses the first person singular nominative pronoun "I" to refer to *himself*, is of course not making use of this riddle form. His repeated use of "I am . . ." leads to a different time-related question from the question that surfaces at the end of "Riddles in the Dark"—a question that relates to Tolkien's use of narrative time to define the character of his self-describing hero. The dragon may not understand Bilbo's responses, but Tolkien inserts a direct address to the reader to say "I expect you do, since you know all about the adventures to which he was referring" (213), thereby prompting (priming?) the reader to make the connections.

So, having just re-read the story of Bilbo the burglar's journey to the Magic Mountain with the thirteen dwarves who are determined to recover the treasure the dragon has stolen from them, and having tried to translate Bilbo's "Inside Information" answers into Old English, I began to see how his responses not only make use of riddle style and syntax but relate directly to specific points in *The Hobbit* narrative timeline. Here, then, are Bilbo's answers to the dragon's questions, presented in a form parallel to that of the riddles of "Riddles in the Dark."

Answer 1, Bilbo's response to Smaug's question: "Who are you and where do you come from, may I ask?"

I come from under the hill,
And under the hills and over the hills
My paths led. And through the air.
I am he that walks unseen. (*Hobbit* XII:212-13)

The first line of this response, Anderson notes in *The Annotated Hobbit*, is readily relatable to "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit," the sentence with which *The Hobbit* begins, which "has become so widely known that in 1980 it was added to the fifteenth edition of Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations*" (29). The "under the hills and over the hills" and "through the air" references relate to the travels that led to the encounter with Gollum and to the rescue of Bilbo, Gandalf and the dwarves from goblins and wargs in Chapter 6. And line 4, which refers to a capability conferred upon Bilbo by the magic ring relates most directly to the problem of identification his present invisibility poses. He can be "smelt" (the dragon says he smells him), but he cannot be seen, and, since he is taking considerable care to stay out of the dragon's reach, he cannot be felt. So far, though the dragon has difficulty making sense of what Bilbo is saying, the reader, to whom Tolkien will say in passing, "There was a lot here which Smaug did not understand at all (though I expect you do, since you know all about Bilbo's adventures to which he was referring)" (213), would seem to have no problem at all.

Answer 2, a response to the dragon's "So I can well believe [...] but that is hardly your usual name":

I am the clue-finder,
The web-cutter, the stinging fly.
I was chosen for the lucky number. (XII:213)

"Clue-finder" and "web-cutter," the agent nouns Bilbo calls upon here, enable him to describe himself with reference to acts he has demonstrated his ability to perform. Bilbo is a hobbit who successfully searches, and the compound noun that results from his addition of "clue" to "finder" enables him to give himself credit for having found answers he and the group he has (reluctantly) joined need to find their way over and under hills and through a dark, seemingly endless forest to their destination. With "web-cutter," a second agent noun, Bilbo further defines himself with reference to his release of the dwarves from the woven bags in which spiders entrapped them in Chapter 8, "Flies and Spiders." The stinging fly? This too recalls a heroic act, Bilbo's slaying of a spider, especially since Bilbo names the dagger or sword with which he saves his friends "Sting." And repeated references to Bilbo as the fourteenth member of the group can be seen to point to his function as the "lucky number." He is the last one to join the group, and thus the hobbit enables the dwarves to avoid the bad luck often associated with the number thirteen.

Answer 3: Bilbo's response to the dragon's "Lovely titles [...] But lucky numbers don't always come off":

I am he that buries his friends alive and drowns them
And draws them alive again from the water.
I came from the end of a bag, but no bag went over me. (XII:213)

Bilbo begins his third answer with what would be called the same "formula" he used in his earlier answers, and this time he employs the apparent contradiction strategy of riddle description when he claims to have both buried his friends and brought them forth alive, and again when he juxtaposes his account of having come from the "end of a bag," which Anderson relates to Tolkien's once having written that "Bag End, the local name for Bilbo's house, was 'meant to be associated [...] with the end of a 'bag' or 'pudding bag' = cul-de-sac'" (46) and to an apparent reference to his having avoided the fate of his friends at the hands of the spiders, who tied them in woven bags and hung them from trees for future feasting.

Answer 4: Bilbo's response to the dragon's "These don't seem so creditable":

I am the friend of bears and the guest of eagles.
I am Ringwinner and Luckwearer;
And I am Barrel-rider. (213)

With the first line of this speech Bilbo relates himself to Beorn, the man-bear shape-changer who befriended him and the dwarves in Chapter 7, “Queer Lodgings,” and to the eagles who, back in Chapter 6, rescued him from the goblins and the wargs and prepared a feast for them. With both assertions, it would seem that he may be making an indirect claim to respect. As T.A. Shippey points out in *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, Beowulf’s name has “bear” associations, and Böthvarr Bjarki (his nickname “Bjarki” means “little bear”), one of the champions of the Old Norse saga sometimes called “The Saga of King Hrolf and his Champions,” could turn into a bear in the heat of battle (31). And as Rateliff forcefully asserts, “bears really DO eat people” (256). It would seem, then, that it takes courage to meet with and accept the hospitality of a bear-man. And as for the honor of being feasted by majestic birds like eagles, a hobbit could take a certain pride in this.

Comments like Tolkien the narrator’s own “luck turned all right before too long” (IX:180) would seem to justify Bilbo’s identification of himself as “Luck-wearer,” and “barrel-rider,” the third agent noun of this answer, refers to what he had to become when there was no empty barrel left in which he could float to safety with the dwarves he was in the process of rescuing. And thus the exchange that began with Smaug’s challenge to Bilbo as a “thief and a liar” and a demand that he tell him his name ends, and the attentive reader—encouraged by Tolkien’s “of course you remember what you have read” (213)—is able to recall the paths that Bilbo has followed.

But, as Shippey points out, though the narrator’s “of course” and similar phrases may be reassuring, they “[m]ore often [...] create a sense that more information exists round the edges of the story” (*Road* 57). They leave questions to be answered. The “I” of the riddle-like sequences of “Inside Information” is not the “I” of *Exeter Book* riddle description, and the question-answer game Bilbo and the dragon play—though Bilbo’s neck is again at stake—is not the contest of “Riddles in the Dark.” But at the end of this game, having read his four responses to the dragon’s questions, we can retrace Bilbo’s progress from the time of his comfortable life as Mr. Baggins of Bag’s End to the danger he bravely faces in “Inside Information.” And close the book, at least for now.



Appendix: Old English Translations of Bilbo's Responses to Smaug

Answer 1

Ic cymð fram under þæm hylle,
Ond under þæm hyllum ond ofer þæm hyllum
Mīne pæðas lædon. Ond þurh þæm lyfte.
Ic eom hē hwā gā ungesewen.

Answer 2

Ic eom se bēacen-findere,
Se web-scearfere, sēo stingende flēoge.
Ic gecoren wæs for þæm gōd hæl tale.

Answer 3

Ic eom hē hwā bebyrgað his frēondas cwic
Drenceð him ond tȳhð him eft fram ðæm wætere.
Ic cymð fram fæteles ende,
Ond nā fætrel ēode ofer mē.

Answer 4

Ic eom beres frēond and earnes giest.
Ic eom Hring-winnere and Hælo-werere,
And ic eom Fætels-ridere.

"Fætrel," which appears in lines 3 and 4 of Answer 3 and in the third line of Answer 4 presented a problem, but Clark Hall and Meritt's *Concise Old English Dictionary* provides "vessel," "pouch," "bag" and "sack" as equivalents. "Bag" worked nicely for line 3 of Answer 3 as Bilbo represents himself as coming from the end of a bag, and for the "bag" that the spiders were not able to put over him as well. And since I was not able to find an Old English equivalent for "barrel," I used "fætrel" again for the the Fætels-ridere compound of Answer 4, intending it to carry the general meaning of "vessel" as container—not the more specific meaning of "sailing vessel."

The word "number," which appears in line 3 of Answer 2, presented a problem, but I found "tale," which seemed to me to be a reasonable equivalent, in Father Andrew Phillips's *The Rebirth of England and English: The Vision of William Barnes* (141).



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