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Miscellaneous Remarks On Gimli and On Rhythmic Prose

Abstract

Suggests an etymology for Gimli's name that makes him the son of Gloin. Identifies two passages in Lord of the Rings (in addition to those dealing with Bombadil) in which the prose is sufficiently rhythmic to read as poetry.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Gimli; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Technique

Miscellaneous Remarks

On Gimli and On Rhythmic Prose

Manfred Zimmerman

'Gimli'

It is by now common knowledge that the dwarves of The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings and even old Gandalf got their names from the dwarf list of the Eddic Hávamál. Only Gimli, participant of the ring-quest and thus the most important of his race during the last days of the Third Age, is conspicuously absent from this list. This fact has made life difficult for students of Tolkien's sources in our primary world (for instance J.S. Ryan: German Mythology Applied - The Extension of the Literary Folk Memory. Folklore LXXVII (Spring 1966), pp. 45-59, reprinted as ch. VIII in J.S. Ryan: Tolkien - Cult or Culture. Armidale, New South Wales, 1969, pp. 129-140; William Howard Green: 'The Hobbit' and other Fiction by J.R.R. Tolkien. Their Roots in Medieval Heroic Literature and Language. Dissertation Louisiana State University 1969; Gloria Ann St. Clair: Studies in the Sources of J.R.R. Tolkien's 'The Lord of the Rings'. Dissertation University of Oklahoma 1970), who have tentatively connected him with 'gimlet' (Ryan p. 51; St. Clair p. 73) or with Old Norse gim 'jewel' (Green p. 51). This last interpretation seemed to make good sense, since dwarvish love of precious stones was notorious.

But all along I couldn't help suspecting that for the correct etymology of "Gimli" Old Norse gim 'fire' would be a much better choice and that there was a philological joke behind this name-giving. Who was Gimli's father? Of course, Gloin of Thorin & Co., whose name might be translated as 'the Glowing One' (Old Norse gloinn). Now if we treat Gimli as the diminutive form of gim 'fire', we would get a highly appropriate name for the son of the 'Glowing One': 'Little Fire' or 'Spark'.

I feel encouraged to come out with my little idea since it seems to be supported by Humphrey Carpenter's recent edition of Tolkien's letters (see letter No. 297, p. 382). There is, however, a good deal of justification in the jewel-interpretation, even if the author was not conscious of it. Quite apart from the fact that Gimli later became lord of the glittering caves of Aglarond, 'spark' is also a term for small bright lights in crystals or diamonds. This ambiguity would incorporate into his name the fiery side of our member of the Fellowship and his sire, as well as the racial characteristic of covetousness of this noble and important folk.

Rhythmic Prose

It is also widely known that Tom Bombadil usually speaks in verse, even if his words are printed as prose. The meter of 'Old Bombadil is a merry fellow, bright blue his jacket is, and his boots are yellow' seems to be his normal mode of expression. There is, however, an example of prose turning into poetic meter with great effect, which, as far as I am aware, has not been pointed out before.

The situation (I,417 in the Allen & Unwin hardcover edition): Frodo having escaped Boromir's

attempt to snatch the Ring is sitting on the ancient stone chair on the summit of Amon Hen, the Hill of Seeing. His vision and all his powers of perception are immensely sharpened by the Ring on his finger. Everywhere in the lands around him he sees the signs of the approaching final battle which will decide the doom of the world. This forcefully reminds me -- as it reminded Ryan (p. 55) -- of the Ragnarok prophecy in the Eddic Völuspá, which enumerates the signs of the coming fall of the Gods. It is here that the narrative prose suddenly takes on the rhythm of Germanic alliterative poetry; there are even some perfectly regular alliterative lines or half-lines:

"Horsemen were galloping	on the grass of Rohan;
	wolves poured from Isengard; ¹
From the havens of Harad	ships of war put out to sea;
and out of the East	Men were moving endlessly;
swordsmen, spearmen,	bowmen upon horses,
chariots of chieftains	and laden wains. ²

Furthermore, the second-last line strongly echoes stanza 40, line 6 of the Völuspá:

sceggold, scálmold,	scildir ro klofnir
('axe-age, sword-age,	shields will be cloven').

It is not so much the actual word-by-word meaning; tone, syntax, and atmosphere (and of course the rhythm) combine to produce the echo.

Tolkien was very much aware of the rhythm of language and its narrative possibilities. In Mythlore No. 28, pp. 18-19, I had occasion to mention how the onslaught of the Rohirric cavalry attack on the Pelennor Fields and the heedless flight of the orcs are reflected in the language. Another instance of a similar case that comes to my mind, occurs just after the Precious has gone down -- finger, Gollum, and all -- into the chasm of the Sammath Naur (III, 224). The destruction of the Ring means the end of Barad-dur. The once impregnable fortress is gradually reduced to rubble by something like an earthquake, until "vast spires of smoke and spouting steams went billowing up, until they toppled like an overwhelming wave, and its wild crest curled and came foaming down upon the land." If this sentence is read in context, syntax and rhythm evoke an impressive picture: The debris of the Black Tower is rocketed high into the sky by a series of explosions and secondary explosions, until for one moment it seems to hang motionless in the air as upward directed thrust and gravitational force cancel each other out, and then everything thunders down to the ground again.

¹ This sentence shows the Old Norse 'LioBaháttir' meter.

² I use the edition by Gustav Neckel: Edda. Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern. 4th revised edition by Hans Kuhn. Heidelberg 1962.