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### Tolkien's Monsters: Concept and Function in *The Lord of the Rings* (Part 1) The Balrog of Khazad-dûm

#### Abstract

Three-part examination of "how Tolkien's theory of the centrality of the monsters in *Beowulf* influenced his own concept of 'monster' and what function that concept should fulfill within" *The Lord of the Rings*. Part I analyzes the literary function of Gandalf's battle with the Balrog in Khazad-dûm.

#### Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Balrog—Sources; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Gandalf; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Monsters; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*

# Tolkien's Monsters:

## Concept and Function in *The Lord of the Rings*

### (Part 1) The Balrog of Khazad-dûm

Joe Abbott

#### Introduction

A large part of J. R. R. Tolkien's appreciation of the *Beowulf* stemmed from his fascination with its monsters. In his "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," he proposed that

Correct and sober taste may refuse to admit that there can be an interest for us – the proud we that includes all intelligent living people – in ogres and dragons; we then perceive ... puzzlement in face of the odd fact that [this correct and sober taste] has derived great pleasure from a poem that is actually about these unfashionable creatures. Even though it attributes 'genius' ... to the author, it cannot admit that the monsters are anything but a sad mistake. (16)

He then went on to argue convincingly that "the monsters ... are essential, fundamentally allied to the underlying ideas of the poem" (19).

First delivered as the Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecture to the British Academy on 25 November 1936, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" was Tolkien's reply to earlier critics, principally W. P. Ker and R. W. Chambers, who felt that the poem "puts the irrelevances in the centre and the serious things on the outer edges" (11). Tolkien argues that such claims were largely due to erroneous perceptions of the poem "as an historical document" (6) instead of "as a poem, with an inherent poetic significance" (9). Ker and Chambers, then, represented a school of critics who condemned the poem as a poor example of something it in fact did not exemplify at all. Tolkien claimed such criticism to be completely invalid, its arguments grounded in a crucial misconception. Granted, the value of a historical document must depend on the accuracy with which that document recounts fact, but the value of a work of art lies elsewhere: specifically in its capacity to effect a response within the human spirit. Where then did Tolkien believe the "inherent poetic significance" of *Beowulf* lies?

Higher praise than is found in the learned critics, whose scholarship enables them to appreciate these things, could hardly be given to the detail, the tone, the style, and indeed to the total effect of *Beowulf*. Yet this poetic talent, we are to understand, has all been squandered on an unprofitable theme: as if Milton had recounted the story of Jack and the Beanstalk in noble verse.... The high tone, the sense of dignity, alone is evidence in *Beowulf* of the presence of a mind lofty and thoughtful. It is ... improbable that such a man would write more than three thousand lines (wrought to a high finish) on matter that is really not worth serious attention. (M&C 13-14)

Thus by looking beyond the art to the artist, Tolkien conceived an image of the poet, an image that disallowed the criticism of Ker and Chambers basically because such criticism was simply illogical. The content of the poem provided for Tolkien sufficient evidence of a mind that he felt he could identify closely with: a kinsman and forefather, a creative artist, like himself, who offered not a clumsy handling of "an unprofitable theme" but an imaginative approach to the ageless and honorable subject of man and human conflict. Far from finding discrepancy in tone, style, and theme, Tolkien proposed that "... the special virtue of *Beowulf* ... resides ... in the theme, and the spirit this has infused into the whole" (14).

The value of Tolkien's insights into this ancient work of English literature is unquestioned today, but apart from its relevance to the study and appreciation of *Beowulf*, "Monsters and Critics" provides for the student of Tolkien's fiction a valuable indication of Tolkien's own ideas regarding the concept of "monster" in heroic literature. Tolkien's theory of the centrality of the monsters in *Beowulf* – a concept he considered crucial to an understanding of the poem – has its practical outlet in *The Lord of the Rings* both structurally and thematically. Of the numerous monsters in *The Lord of the Rings*, we find three that appear at strategic points in the story to fulfill specific functions. These monsters – the Balrog of Khazad-dûm, Shelob the Great, and Sauron – are uniquely individual in a world otherwise populated by various monster races. The sequence of hero/adversary encounters closely parallels the sequence in *Beowulf*, and although in each encounter the appearance of the monster is brief, in each case a major plot function is achieved. I will examine these three monsters and the specific episodes in which they appear in an effort to show how Tolkien's theory of the centrality of the monsters in *Beowulf* influenced his own concept of "monster" and what function that concept should fulfill within *The Lord of the Rings*.

#### PART I: Evolution of the Concept

[T]he evil spirits entered into the monsters and took visible shape in the hideous bodies of the byrsas and sigelhearuan. (M&C 22)

*Balrog* is a Sindarin – the spoken language of the Sindar or "Western Elves" – term, a compound derived from *balan* and *torg*. *Balan* is the Sindarin equivalent of the High-elven or Quenya – the archaic "Elven latin" of lore – term *Vala*; thus, in Jim Allan's *An Introduction to Elvish*, we find *balan* defined as "one of a race of powerful spiritual

beings" (73). *Torog* is the Sindarin term for "troll" (90); thus, we have the original concept of the Balrogs – or in the Quenya tongue, the *Valaraukar* – as "powerful spirit-trolls." Interestingly, this etymology gives no indication of a fiery nature, the quality perhaps most associated with the Balrog of Khazad-dûm; yet the characteristic "whips of flame" seem to have been an attribute of the Balrogs from their inception. It is tempting, therefore, to look for other etymologies, etymologies founded on the "real" languages from which Tolkien is known to have drawn creative inspiration. William Howard Green, for example, proposes that *Balrog* is a compound derived from the Old Norse terms *bal* (fire) and *rok* (wonder) (180). The Balrogs were certainly "fire-wonders," and they do exhibit characteristics common in Northern mythology, specifically of Surt, the guardian giant of Muspellsheim. Muspellsheim, one of the nine worlds of Norse mythology, was the world of fire and the home of the fire-dwellers. Stanza 52 of the *Voluspá* describes Surt:

Surt ferr sunnan	með sviga laevi,
skinn af sverði	sol valtiva;
grjotbjörg gnata,	en gífr rata,
tröð halir helvig,	en himinn klofnar.

(Surt fares from the south with [a] switch-bane. The sun of the god of the slain shines from his sword; rocks clash, and witches collapse; men tread [the] way-to-Hell, and heaven is cloven.)

This Surt is a demon, a "god of the slain," who carries a sword and a "sviga laevi." We know that the Balrog of Khazad-dûm carries a similarly blazing sword, "a blade like a stabbing tongue of fire" (1: 344); but what exactly is a "sviga laevi"? Richard Cleasby defines *sviga lae* as "switch-bane," poet. 'the fire'; *laevi* is the dative case of *lae* so that if we take "bane" in its medieval sense of "death, destruction," we have in *sviga laevi* a "switch for death (or destruction)." Cleasby notes that in Norse poetry this "switch-bane" serves as a kenning for "the fire"; this is an image that Tolkien would certainly have familiar with, and it is a short step from "a switch (of fire) for death" to the "whips of flame" characteristic of the Balrogs.

In volume 4 of his *The History of Middle-earth* series Christopher Tolkien records a list compiled by his father, c. 1930, consisting of selected Elvish words accompanied by their Old English equivalents. *Balrog* appears on that list: "Balrog: Bealwearg, Bealubroga" (209). During this period Tolkien had created a persona, a "mariner who came to Tol Eressea and there translated various Elvish words into his own language: ... he is 'Eriol of Leithien, that is Ælfwine of the Angelcynn'" (HME 4: 206). The oddity here is that Tolkien's fictional scribe, when translating the Elvish into Anglo-Saxon, did not translate *Balrog* as "Bealwearg" or "Bealubroga"; rather he left it in the original Sindarin form. Thus, an example from a Sindarin text rendered into Anglo-Saxon appears in "The Earliest Annals of Beleriand" in the following way:

[Morgoth] of searucraefte gescop þa balrogas ond þa orcas; ... Ðær Feanor gewæld wælstowe ond adraefde

þa orcas, ac weaðð self forwundod þearle of Góþmoge Balroga heretoga, Morgoþes þegne. (HME 4: 338)  
(By treachery [Morgoth] shaped the Balrogs and the orcs; ... There Feanor obtained possession of the battlefield and drove away the orcs, but became himself wounded severely by Gothmog chieftain of Balrogs, Morgoth's thane.)

This would seem to indicate that for Eriol, at least, *Bealwearg* (evil-outlaw) and *Bealubroga* (evil-terror) were not suitable (or accurate?) translations of the Sindarin *Balrog* (although of the two terms, one suspects *Bealubroga* to be the closer to Tolkien's own concept as the word *Balrog* is actually contained within it).

Such etymological sleuthing must ultimately admit to conjecture, but it does offer strong evidence that Tolkien's knowledge of various "real" languages did, in fact, contribute to the formation of his monsters. That contribution, however, must have been an indirect one; that is, it must have come through the development of Tolkien's fictional languages, for how else can we account for his own claim:

I remain puzzled ... by many of the guesses at the 'sources' of the nomenclature, and theories of fancies concerning hidden meanings. ... [T]hey are, I think, valueless for the elucidation or interpretation of my fiction. ... [L]inguistic invention ... is a private enterprise undertaken to give pleasure to myself by giving expression to my personal linguistic "aesthetic" or taste.... It was largely antecedent to the composing of legends ... in which these languages could be 'realized'; and the bulk of the nomenclature is constructed from these pre-existing languages, and when the resulting names have analysable meanings (as is usual) these are relevant solely to the fiction with which they are integrated. ... It is therefore idle to compare chance-similarities between names made from 'Elvish tongues' and words in exterior 'real' languages, especially if this is supposed to have any bearing on the meaning or ideas in my story. (Let. 380, emphasis mine)

This is not to say that Tolkien's knowledge of historical developments within various real languages did not contribute significantly to the complex development of his own Elven tongues – and, as a result, indirectly to his monsters – but it does underscore, as Christopher Tolkien points out, that "an already extremely sophisticated and phonetically intricate historical structure lies behind the languages at this stage [i.e. 1917]" (HME 1: 247). By the time of the first appearance of the Balrogs in Middle-earth's mythology, then, the Sindarin tongue "must have reached a fairly high degree of organization" (Let. 380), having become completely capable of forming its own compounds.

I believe Tolkien purposely christened these monsters with the ambiguously general term to be translated "powerful spirit troll" partly because he found similar descriptions of Grendel and the Water-witch to be appealing as a means of enhancing the imagination and effective as a means of characterization. Early in *Beowulf*, for example, the poet describes Grendel as a "deorc deaðscua"

(dark death-shadow) (160a), and later we read that "Com on wanne niht / scriða sceadugenga" (the shadow-walker came gliding in [the] dark night) (702b-3a); but this same "shadow" is held fast in Beowulf's "mundgripe" (hand-grip) (753a), and a few lines further on we read that

Licsar gebad  
him on eaxle wearð  
atol aglaeca;      seonowe onsprungen  
syndolh sweetol      (815b-18a)  
burston banlocan.

(The) horrid monster experienced bodily pain; a very great wound became manifest on his shoulder; sinews sprang asunder [and] bone-joints burst.)

Such description prompted Tolkien to state that Grendel was "physical enough in form and power, but vaguely felt as belonging to a different order of being, one allied to the malevolent 'ghosts' of the dead" (*M&C* 35). We get a similar sense of vagueness in the description of Tolkien's Moria Balrog: "What it was could not be seen: it was like a great shadow, in the middle of which was a dark form, of man-shape maybe, yet greater; and a power and terror seemed to be in it and to go before it" (1:344). And Aragorn later describes the monster as "... both a shadow and a flame, strong and terrible" (1:371).

Yet this shadow wields with *hands* a very real "whip of many things" (1:344) as well as a physical "red sword" that "flew up in molten fragments" (1:345) on contact with Gandalf's blade, Glamdring. This Balrog also has *feet*: "... at the Balrog's feet [the bridge] broke" (1:345). We know Tolkien is not speaking metaphorically here because Gandalf himself later recounts that "I pursued him clutching at his heel" (2:105, emphasis mine). This ambiguously "dark figure streaming with fire" is both "fiery shadow" (1:344) and (when its fire is quenched) "a thing of slime, stronger than a strangling snake" (2:105). It does not hover in a "ghostly" sense; rather Tolkien says that "it leaped across the fissure" (1:344) and that when Gandalf smote the bridge, the Balrog "fell forward, and ... plunged down" (1:345, emphasis mine). It is interesting that this monster that "falls" and "plunges" into the abyss here was last seen "flying from Thangorodrim" (3:353, emphasis mine) at the end of the First Age, for the action here would indicate that Tolkien is speaking figuratively when he says "the shadow about it reached out like two vast wings" (1:344). The subsequent reference to the monster's wings, in view of the context in which it appears, extends the simile, functioning primarily to emphasize the legendary stature of the Balrogs and the comparable smallness of Gandalf:

[S]uddenly it drew itself up to a great height, and its wings [of shadow?] were spread from wall to wall; but still Gandalf could be seen, glimmering in the gloom; he seemed small, and altogether alone: grey and bent, like a wizened tree before the onset of a storm. (1:45).

Whether we accept the "wings" here as shadow or substance, inconsistency must be admitted: if the wings are figurative, how did the Balrog "fly" from Thangorodrim; and if, on the other hand, they are substance, why does the

monster "fall" and "plunge" in the Moria episode?

But such description suggests another reason for the ambiguous nature of these monsters. The Balrogs were among Tolkien's earliest creations, making their first appearance in "The Fall of Gondolin" (1916-17), yet they continued to play a vital role as the history of Middle-earth evolved so that as the tales of Middle-earth grew and expanded, so, of necessity, did the concept of the Balrogs. In his commentary on "The Fall of Gondolin," for example, Christopher Tolkien makes the following observation:

The early conception of the Balrogs makes them less terrible, and certainly more destructible, than they afterwards became: they existed in 'hundreds' ... and were slain by Tuor and the Gondothlim in large numbers: thus five fell before Tuor's great axe Dramborleg, three before Ecthelion's sword, and two score were slain by the warriors of the king's house. (212-13)

These early Balrogs appear only slightly more terrible than the Orcs, yet from the beginning Tolkien conceived the Balrogs to be "the most dire of all those monsters which Melko [i.e., Morgoth] devised" (*HME* 2:170). This was to become their trademark, their principal and unchanging characteristic; they were the Dark Lord's highest order of demonic servants, and any foe whom he wished to torture was subjected to the "torment of the Balrogs" (*HME* 2:169). The various references to the Balrogs from "The Fall of Gondolin" thus depict the Balrogs as demons of substantial "materiality," demons that evidently wear armor as Glorfindel cleaves the "iron helm" on one of them before thrusting a knife into "the Balrog's belly" (*HME* 2:194). These monsters can yell, shriek, and leap; they exist in large numbers and lead Orc-hoists; and, prior to the sacking of Gondolin, "never had any of the Balrogs been slain by the hand of Elves or Men" (*HME* 2:179). The early Balrogs are "demons with whips of flame and claws of steel"; they "might ride upon the dragons of flame" and are "in stature very great" (*HME* 2:179-80). The whips of flame and greatness of stature characterize the Balrogs throughout the Middle-earth chronicles, but as a whole, this initial image undergoes significant changes before culminating in Gandalf's Bane at Khazad-dûm.

The claws of steel and the riding of dragons do not appear in the later episode. Neither is there, at the time of "The Fall of Gondolin," any indication that Balrogs carry swords as we are told the Moria Balrog does. Curiously, however, these early Balrogs do carry "bows and slings" with which they "shoot darts of fire and flaming arrows like small snakes into the sky, and these fell upon the roofs and gardens of Gondolin"; thus, the Balrogs "set a fire ... with their shooting" (*HME* 2:178-79). This image of "arrows like small snakes" no doubt has its roots in the *hildenaedre* kenning of Old English poetry:

On baet faege folc	flana scuras,
garas ofr geolorand	on gramra gemang
hetend heorugrimme,	hildenaedran
bourh fingra gewæld	forð onsendan.
	(Elene 117-20)

(On that fated folk [the] savage enemy sent forth showers of arrows, battle-adders, spears over yellow-shield, by the might of fingers, against [the] hostile multitude.)

Hie ða fromlice

leton forð fleogan	flana curas,
hildenaedran,	of hornbogan,
straelas stedehearde.	(Judith 220b-223a)

(They then boldly let fly forth showers of arrows, battle-adders, strong missiles from horn-bows.)

"The Fall of Gondolin" is also the only tale in which a Balrog is reputed – in what seems an off-hand remark – to be the offspring of the Dark Lord. "Gothmog" appears in various of the tales and accounts of Middle-earth as "a Balrog chief" (HME 4: 22), as "Gothmog Lord of Balrogs" (HME 4: 173), as Gothmog captain of Balrogs" (HME 4: 295), and, in the summarized version of the fall of Gondolin recorded in *The Silmarillion*, as "Gothmog, Lord of Balrogs" (107). Eriol's account of the battle confers the title of "Balroga heretoga, Morgoth's pegne" to Gothmog; *heretoga* is the Anglo-Saxon term used for each of these titles, but *pegne* – "military attendant, retainer" – carries no familial connotations. Only in "The Fall of Gondolin" is this monster called "Gothmog lord of Balrogs, son of Melko" (HME 2: 183). He is, however, to be seen as an especially dangerous "pegne" as he is one of only two Balrogs ever to be given a name, and he is the only one to be mentioned more than once ("Lungorthin Lord of Balrogs" appears in line 96 of *Turin Son of Hurin & Glorund the Dragon* [See HME 3: 98]). Also unique is the fact that Gothmog carries an axe. Balrogs are reputed to have carried whips, bows, and swords; but of Gothmog alone is it said that he carried a "black axe" (Sil. 193). Perhaps strangest of all is that a "Gothmog" appears in the final battle of the Third Age, the Battle of the Pelennor Fields, in what is once more to be "the sack of the City and the rape of Gondor" (3: 121). This time he is "Gothmog the lieutenant of Morgul" who commands "Easterlings with axes, and Variags of Khand, Southrons in scarlet, and out of far Harad black men like half-trolls with white eyes and red tongues" (3: 121). Whether or not this Gothmog is any relation to the Balrog of the First Age is not made clear, but unless these fallen Maiar have the power to return from the dead (as Gandalf does), he must be viewed as a different character. It is interesting, though, that Tolkien would use the same name for a demon in essentially the same office in two such similar situations.

The next significant development in the early concept occurs in the alliterative poem *Turin Son of Hurin & Glorund the Dragon*, the tale that Tolkien would later reproduce in a prose version and include in *The Silmarillion* as the tragedy "Of Turin Turambar." Tolkien began the poem c. 1918 and abandoned it in the summer of 1925 when he began *The Lay of Leithian*. The following excerpt is a revision of lines 822-23 of the original text of *Turin* and was composed sometime before 1923: "and the Balrogs about him brazen-handed / with flails of flame and forged iron ..." (HME 3: 99). Here we have the first reference to

the carrying of swords ("forged iron") by the Balrogs along with their "flails of flame."

It is also during this period that the Balrogs are first depicted as "black" demons, the conceptual prelude to the "great shadow" of Khazad-dum. In line 207 of the poem, Tolkien refers to "ye Balrogs and Orcs" as "black legions" (HME 3: 100), and another poem begun about this same time but abandoned at an early stage recounts the battle of Glorfindel and the Balrog first told in "The Fall of Gondolin":

Glorfindel the golden  
battled with the Balrog  
one like flash of fire  
one like bolted thunder  
to the dreadful deep

in the gap of the Eagles  
and both were slain:  
from fanged rock,  
black was smitten  
dugged by Thornsir.  
(HME 3: 142)

This battle, evidently one of Tolkien's favorites, appears in various forms throughout the tales of Middle-earth, but this is the first account to ascribe color to the monster slain by Glorfindel. The "flash of fire" here is figurative, referring to the "golden" hair and/or armor of the Elf while the "black" Balrog "was smitten to the dreadful deep." Also notable in this battle (though described in greater detail in the prose renderings) is the both-fell-into-the-abyss motif seen in the Khazad-dum episode. The account of Glorfindel's battle as recorded in "The Fall of Gondolin" is most like the Khazad-dum passage in both tone and diction:

...[the Balrog] shrieked, and fell backwards ... and falling clutched Glorfindel's yellow locks beneath his cap, and those twain fell into the abyss. (HME 2: 194)

#### Compare:

With a terrible cry the Balrog fell forward.... But even as it fell it swung its whip, and the thongs lashed and curled about the wizard's knees, dragging him to the brink. He staggered and fell, grasped vainly at the stone, and slid into the abyss. (1: 345)

In both accounts we see the combatants engage on an elevated battle plain, and in both accounts the Balrog is in the act of falling when he grasps the hero, dragging him to his death. It should be noted here that this motif was conceived during the early stage of the Balrogs' development, long before the episode ascribing "wings" to Gandalf's adversary. This fact, along with the constant retelling of this battle in various forms and tales, poses an interesting question: Was Tolkien so familiar with and yet so enthralled by this image of elevated combat that he failed to recognize the discrepancy caused by giving the Balrog of Khazad-dum wings? Or did he take for granted that his readers would understand him to be speaking figuratively in the later episode? Again, the simile in the Moria passage suggests the latter to be the case.

By 1925, then, the Balrogs had discarded their bows and slings in favor of "forged iron" and had become "black" demons. The literature composed between 1926 and 1930 evidences no significant change in these monsters except

that the "claws of steel" become conspicuously absent, not occurring even once in the "Sketch" of *The Silmarillion*, in the *Quenta*, or in the *Annals*; but when Tolkien returned to work on *The Lay of Leithian* in 1931, he brought with him some new ideas, ideas that seem to have been inspired by an Old English word study which he had undertaken and which we will examine shortly.

It is remarkable that these demons that carry "flails of flame / and forged iron" are until 1931 not themselves fiery in nature. Although the Balrogs are, from the first, associated with fire – they carry "whips of flame," they shoot "flaming arrows," and they ride "creatures of pure flame" – they are not given anatomical fire until *The Lay of Leithian*. This poem is important because Tolkien himself placed dates beside certain lines to indicate what progress was made when; thus, specific passages can be dated fairly accurately. The following lines were composed on 16 September 1931:

About him sat his awful thanes,  
the Balrog-lords with fiery manes,  
redhanded, mouthed with fangs of steel;  
devouring wolves were crouched at heel. (*HME* 3: 296)

This passage is interesting for several reasons. It is the first passage in which the Balrogs are said to have "fiery manes"; the demons are described as "redhanded," indicating that the "claws of steel" have been abandoned altogether; the curious "mouthed with fangs of steel" appears for the only time in the literature of Middle-earth. The location of the phrase and the fact that the attribute is not supported anywhere else is sufficient to arouse suspicion here. Punctuation indicates that Balrogs are the monsters here with "fangs of steel," but the sense and context of the line suggest that the semicolon may have been meant to follow *redhanded*, thus ascribing "fangs of steel" to the "devouring wolves" of the following line.

But perhaps the most interesting aspect of this passage is the time at which it was composed. Tolkien would have been researching (perhaps even writing) the first part of "*Sigeltwara Land*" – a two-part article published in *Medium Ævum* in December of 1932 and June of 1934 – about this time. The article is an in-depth etymological study of the Old English word *sigeltwara* as it appears in various forms in a number of OE manuscripts. In light of Tolkien's claim that his fiction "was primarily linguistic in inspiration" (1: 5), "*Sigeltwara Land*" offers some interesting insights into the creative processes influencing the evolution of the Balrogs.

Tolkien proposes that the term *sigeltwara* arose as an alteration of the earlier *sigelhearrwa*, both words being used throughout Old English literature to refer to the Ethiopian peoples. In his opening paragraph Tolkien says that

The Ethiopians began their career in letters as ... "without reproach". They were visited by the gods of Olympus. ... But they changed sadly, and they appear in Old English in a most unpleasant light. Their country was too like

hell to escape the comparison, and the blackness of the inhabitants became more than skin-deep. A diabolic folk ...  
(*Med. Æv.* 1: 183)

As Tolkien proceeds to cite extant occurrences, it becomes increasingly evident that *sigelhearrwa* had communicated to ancient audiences a much more fantastic concept than simply a race of evil, black-skinned people. Citations range from general references, as when *Fates of the Apostles* records that St. Matthew's preaching was "ðæt mid Sigelwarum soð yppe wearð" (*Med. Æv.* 1: 184) (so that among the Ethiopians truth became known), to the truly fantastic, as in this account from the *Old English Martyrology*:

... him [Bartholomew] aetywde micelne Sigelhearrwan þaem waes seo onsyn sweartre þonne hrum, and se beard and þæt feax him waeron oð þa fet side, and þa eagan waeron swylce fyren iren, and sprungen spearan of þam muðe, and ful rec him eode of þaem naesyrlum, and he hafde fiftu swylce þyrnen besma, and þa handa waeron gebundun to somne mid fyrenum racentum, and he hrymde mid grimlicre stefne and ladicre, and fleah aweg and nahwaer siððan aetywde. (*Med. Æv.* 1: 189)

(... to him [Bartholomew] appeared a great Ethiopian whose face was blacker than soot, and the beard and the hair on him were to the feet [on both] sides, and the eyes were like fiery iron, and sparks sprang from the mouth, and foul smoke went from his nostrils, and he had wings like a rod of thorns, and his hands were bound together with fiery chains, and he cried out loudly with a terrible sound and flew away and never afterward appeared.)

That the "Balrog-lords with fiery manes / redhanded" description appears at this particular time suggests more than coincidence – these Balrogs and the description of the Ethiopian encountered by Bartholomew are too similar. It is very possible that this – or one of any number of similar passages cited by Tolkien in his article – inspired the "wings" characterizing the Khazad-dum Balrog. It is also notable that the Khazad-dum monster is the only Balrog of which it is said that "Fire came from its nostrils" (1: 344), recalling the "ful rec him eode of þaem naesyrlum" description in the *Martyrology* excerpt. "*Sigeltwara Land*," then, offers some potent ideas relevant to various aspects of Tolkien's mythology, many of which lie outside the scope of the present study, but one other passage from the article deserves comment here. Tolkien says of the writers of homiletic literature from the late OE period that "... the learned placed dragons and marvellous gems in Ethiopia, and credited the people with strange habits, and strange foods, not to mention contiguity with the Anthropophagi" (*Med. Æv.* 1: 192). The Balrog of Khazad-dum dwells in a region inhabited by two anthropophagous races – trolls and orcs – in a land once famous for its "marvellous gems" and the most precious of precious metals: mithril. "Its worth was ten times that of gold, and now it is beyond price" (1: 331). At the conclusion of his study, Tolkien says that "we perceive ... the ancestors of the Silhearrwan with red-hot eyes that emitted sparks, with faces black as soot" (*Med. Æv.* 3: 110) – a strikingly similar monster to the Balrogs of Middle-earth.

There are no Balrogs in *The Hobbit*, undoubtedly Tolkien's most successful product of the early 1930s and the work that apparently occupied most of his creative attention during that time. After its initial success, however, amid cries for a "hobbit" sequel, Tolkien was able to write to his publisher, Allen and Unwin, on 19 December 1937 that he had "... written the first chapter of a new story about Hobbits - 'A long expected party'" (Let. 27). *The Lord of the Rings* was underway. Two years later to the day, on 19 December 1939, Tolkien wrote that "It [LotR] has reached Chapter XVI" (Let. 44), the chapter which immediately precedes "The Bridge of Khazad-dum." (Chapters were originally numbered continuously; later the tales were divided into books so that "The Bridge of Khazad-dum" became chapter 4 in Book II.) We can, therefore, date the composition of Gandalf's battle with the Balrog as sometime - probably early - in 1940. It was not until 24 February 1950 that Tolkien wrote in a letter to Sir Stanley Unwin that "It [LotR] is finished" (Let. 136).

After 1950 Tolkien turned his attention once again to *The Silmarillion*, working on it until his death in 1973 but never completing it. During the four years following his death, it was put into publishable form by his son Christopher and published in 1977. Most references to the Balrogs found in this work are, thus, retellings of tales written over the course of Tolkien's life; for as Christopher Tolkien says in the foreword, "... the same legends came to be retold in longer and shorter forms, and in different styles" (*Silm.* 7). As a result we do not expect, nor do we find, new developments in the Balrogs evidenced in this last (and what Tolkien himself considered grandest) of his works. And although "A complete consistency ... is not to be looked for" (*Silm.* 8), one detects a conscious attempt on the part of both Tolkiens to present a unity of concept in the final versions of these tales. *The Silmarillion* account of "The Fall of Gondolin," for example, says nothing of dragon-riding Balrogs who shoot flaming arrows from bows and slings carried in claws of steel, but it speaks consistently of "Balrogs with whips of flame." The pre-LotR account of the Last Battle of the First Age in which "All the Balrogs were destroyed" (*HME* 4: 157) was revised to read "The Balrogs were destroyed, *save some few that fled and hid themselves* in caverns inaccessible at the roots of the earth" (*Silm.* 251, emphasis mine), reflecting the author's conscious attempt to achieve the coherence and plausibility that he considered so important to the inner-consistency of his total fiction.

Finally then, we see in the Balrog of Khazad-dum the culmination of a variety of concepts firmly rooted in the traditional literature that Tolkien knew and loved. It is not coincidence that the monster Gandalf confronts in the mines of Moria differs from the demons that besieged and sacked Gondolin as drastically as the Silhearnaw of OE literature differ from the fire-dwellers of Muspellsheim. Twenty-three-plus years of Tolkien's literary and linguistic study and inspiration generated a multiplicity of conceptual alterations that may be summarized as follows:

Early Concept  
claws of steel  
bow (or slin)  
iron helm  
dragon riders  
large numbers  
no mention of wings  
no mention of color  
associated with fire  
no fiery breath

Balrog of Khazad-dum  
hands  
sword  
fiery mane  
no dragons  
nearly extinct  
"wings"  
black > shadow  
anatomical fire  
fire from nostrils

## Part 2: Function of the Episode

"Strider sitting in the corner at the inn was a shock, and I had no more idea who he was than had Frodo." (Let. 216)

The encounter with the Balrog on the bridge of Khazad-dum accomplishes two crucial functions. It provides a necessary and appropriate exit for the established hero of Gandalf while opening the way for development of the new hero in Strider / Aragorn. We know Gandalf to be one of the Istari, a wizard of great power and wisdom, feared by Sauron himself. Tolkien relates in *The Silmarillion* some of the history of the Istari:

... they were messengers sent by the Lords of the West to contest the power of Sauron, if he should arise again, and to move Elves and Men and all living things of good will to valiant deeds. In the likeness of men they appeared, old but vigorous, and they changed little with the years, and aged but slowly, though great cares lay on them; great wisdom they had, and many powers of mind and hand. Long they journeyed far and wide among Elves and Men, and held converse also with beasts and with birds.... Chief among them were ... Gandalf and Saruman. (372)

The "Lords of the West" are the Valar, those members of the Ainur - the "rational spirits or minds without incarnation created *before* the physical world" (Let. 284) - who "put on the raiment of Earth [i.e. took on physical shapes] ... and dwelt therein" (*Silm.* 17). They are reminiscent of the gods of traditional mythologies, yet they also resemble angels; indeed, Tolkien refers to them as beings "who take the imaginative but not the theological place of 'gods'" (Let. 284) and also as the "angelical First-created" (Let. 345). They are most often called simply "Powers" and are second only to Illuvatar (Eru, the One) in Tolkien's cosmography. Their messengers are "of the same order as the Valar but of less degree. These are the Maiar..." (*Silm.* 23), and Gandalf is one of these. Faramir provides the only textual evidence for this when he relates to Frodo Gandalf's words: "Many are my names in many countries," he said. "... Olorin I was in my youth in the West that is forgotten..." (2:353). *The Silmarillion* records that in the First Age Olorin was "Wise of the Maiar" (24). Gandalf, then, is an elite of the Elite, a chief among wizards, and a power that even Sauron himself must contend with, indeed, has (at least once) already contended with; for *The Silmarillion* also records that Gandalf "went to Dol Guldur, and the Sorcerer [Sauron] fled from him and there was watchful peace for a long while" (373).



How then is Tolkien to construct a convincing episode in which such a powerful and heretofore unconquerable persona is convincingly destroyed? We find a hint in "M&C":

It would really have been preposterous, if the poet had recounted Beowulf's rise to fame in a 'typical' or 'commonplace' war in Frisia, and then ended him with a dragon. Or if he had told of his cleansing of Heorot, and then brought him to defeat and death in a 'wild' or 'trivial' Swedish invasion! (M&C 31-2)

Likewise, "It would really have been preposterous" for Tolkien to have created in Gandalf Greyhame a super-human character only to have this character meet a most ignoble – or worse, mundane – death at the hands of an orc-host. Criticism then, claiming that the Balrog fails "in conception . . . when the orcs were foe enough" (Gasque 157) misses the point, for the orcs were definitely *not* foe enough. We have seen Gandalf escape from similar situations too many times; a "wilderness" of orcs could not have provided for him a convincing final conflict. If Gandalf must die – and it is crucial to Aragorn's development that he do just that – then the greatness of his life demands a great adversary and a glorious death.

The Balrog functions as just such an adversary and provides for just such a death. Tolkien realized that the unique and individual inevitably achieves greater potency than the collectively defined. He felt that the Beowulf poet, at least, provided support for such a position. Why else would the poet dedicate the bulk of his poem to the hero's one-on-one encounters rather than to those encounters involving multitudes of adversaries? After all, couldn't much more have been made of Beowulf's encounter with those sea monsters (559-69a)? And why is there no mention of any fight whatsoever when Beowulf dives into the midst of all those "sellic saedracan" slithering around Grendel's mere (1425-30a)? Obviously the poet felt that to simply have his hero overrun by a "vast number" of monsters would have been dramatically ineffective and artistically impotent. But ah! a dragon!

I think it not coincidence that throughout Tolkien's early writings we find the Balrogs consistently appearing in the company of dragons. Tolkien had a deep respect for these mythological serpents:

As for the dragon: as far as we know anything about these old poets, we know this: the prince of the heroes of the North . . . was a dragon-slayer. And his most renowned deed, from which in Norse he derived his title Fafnisbani, was the slaying of the prince of legendary worms. . . . [T]he story . . . had these two primary features: the dragon, and the slaying of him as the chief deed of the greatest of heroes. . . . [T]he dragon in legend is a potent creation of men's imagination, richer in significance than his barrow is in gold. (M&C 16)

The Balrog occupies a place of similar honor in Tolkien's mythology, for though "drakes and worms are the evillest creatures that Melko has made," they are "the most powerful *save it be the Balrogs only*" (HME 2: 85, italics mine). This superior power that characterizes the Balrogs results from

the fact that like the Istari, the Balrogs are of the Maiar; however, unlike the Istari, they "were drawn to [Morgoth's] splendour in the days of his greatness, and remained in that allegiance down into his darkness" (Silmar. 26). In their "fall," then, these monsters lost their position in the spiritual hierarchy of Illuvatar but retained their intrinsic power; therefore, we have in the Balrog of Khazad-dum a creature of equal (or certainly of *potentially* equal) strength to that of Gandalf and thus a foe of far greater magnitude than a "wilderness" of orcs.

For Gandalf, then, this is (apparently) to be his last, and therefore necessarily his greatest, battle; and appropriately, Tolkien injects much of the traditional heroic spirit found in Beowulf's last battle. The entire episode echoes the "Fate goes as it must" theme in *Beowulf*, that "... men with courage as their stay went forward to that battle with the hostile world and the offspring of the dark which ends for all, even the kings and champions, in defeat" (M&C 18). At Khazad-dum we have the image of the weary, aged figure pitted against the larger, ageless adversary just as we see in Beowulf's final battle. Just as Beowulf goes to fight the dragon believing it his duty because of his position in society – He is the people's king, guardian, protector – so Gandalf goes to fight the Balrog feeling it his duty because of his position in the Fellowship: "This is a foe beyond any of you. I must hold the narrow way. Fly!" (1: 344). The theme of battle to achieve great renown is absent in both episodes (Beowulf's and Gandalf's) because both are at a later stage of life; great renown has been achieved long ago, and now battle is joined simply out of loyalty to and love for their people.

It must be noted, however, that "defeat" is a different concept in *LotR* from what we see it to be in *Beowulf*. For the pagan hero of Beowulf's day, life and the human experience were limited to the temporal world, "and within Time the monsters would win" (M&C 22). Beowulf's theology is a perplexing mixture of ancient pagan tradition tempered by the Christian poet with a sense of spiritual awareness. But for Beowulf, Fate (Wyrd), an impersonal Idea potent with chance, still weaves men's destinies, and "we can observe that [Beowulf's] real trust was in *his own might*" (M&C 42). He "refers sparingly to God."

except as the arbiter of critical events, and then principally as *Metod*, in which the idea of God approaches nearest to the old Fate. We have in Beowulf's language little differentiation of God and Fate. (M&C 40)

To the pagan King Beowulf, then, there could be no "ultimate victory," for Death, the final adversary, was an undefeatable foe. Every victory a hero accomplished only postponed his ultimate, certain defeat; life was, therefore, in the greatest sense, hopeless. "The characters within the poem do not understand heaven, or have hope of it" (M&C 38). A man's only "salvation" was what remained of him in the songs and memories of his *heorðgeneatas* – a reward that Beowulf certainly achieved, but a finite one nonetheless. But if Beowulf's world was a world "still concerned

primarily with *man on earth*," where "each man and all men, and all their works, shall die" (M&C 23), Gandalf's world is essentially a Christian one, and Tolkien specifically states this theme of physical death to be "A theme no Christian need despise" (M&C 23). Gandalf's God is Eru (the One), a spiritual being and "person" of sorts: "The Eldar and the Numenoreans believed in The One, the true God, and held worship of any other *person* an abomination" (Let. 243, italics mine). Gandalf knows himself to be an agent of the One, sent to Middle-earth with a specific mission, a mission that he feels he has not yet fulfilled but which must now rest in the hands of his Creator. Consequently, we hear in Gandalf's only direct address to the Balrog the authoritative overtones of one invoking the power of "God, Eru Ilúvatar" (Let. 206n) when he says,

"You cannot pass.... I am a servant of the Secret Fire, wielder of the flame of Anor. You cannot pass. The dark fire will not avail you, flame of Udun. Go back to the Shadow! You cannot pass." (1: 344)

The Christian imagery becomes even more striking when we realize that Gandalf uses the word Anor, the Sindarin word for "sun" (Allan 72) – with its inevitable connotation here of "Son" – to address a "flame of Udun," Udun being glossed by Tolkien *only in this instance* as "hell" (3: 346).

The bridge of Khazad-dum, then, becomes, for Gandalf, a potent symbol; for it is, not only in the physical sense, a bridge, but in a spiritual sense as well. "Thus Gandalf faced and suffered death; and came back or was sent back, as he says, with enhanced power" (Let. 237). Gandalf knows he is facing a situation demanding his own total sacrifice:

For in his condition it was for him a *sacrifice* to perish on the Bridge in defense of his companions, less perhaps than for a mortal Man or Hobbit, since he had a far greater inner power than they; but also more, since it was a humbling and abnegation of himself in conformity to 'the Rules': for all he could know at that moment he was the *only* person who could direct the resistance to Sauron successfully, and *all* his mission was vain. He was handing over to the Authority that ordained the rules, and giving up personal hope of success. (Let. 202)

We see Gandalf willingly accept the call to sacrifice when "crying aloud he smote the bridge before him" (1: 345), rightly choosing to sunder his ties with the mortal world and sacrificing himself for the Cause; but this was, in fact, his purpose for coming (or being sent) to Middle-earth in the first place. He was to inspire Elves and Men to great deeds, and even as the bridge crumbles, we sense that Gandalf has succeeded in this his primary purpose when we hear the cry of Aragorn: "Come! I will lead you now!" (1: 345).

The Khazad-dum episode thus brings the character of Aragorn smoothly to the forefront – giving Tolkien the freedom to develop what he later called "my need to provide a great function for Strider-Aragorn" (Let. 347) – without the undesirable belittling of the character of Gandalf. From the point at which the remainder of the Company exits Moria, we see Aragorn begin to assume new

responsibility, for he, too, has crossed a symbolic bridge. Entering Moria as second-in-command to the older and wiser wizard, he now emerges as the authority figure – a figure that we (and the Fellowship) can accept easily and naturally since (as far as we and the Fellowship know) Gandalf has been permanently removed from the story. It should also be noted that Gandalf's later return in no way diminishes the heroic stature of Aragorn or our recognition of and respect for his leadership qualities. Even when he has been in the company of Gandalf, there has never been any doubt regarding Aragorn's high-mimetic character (other than the momentary mystery of his initial appearance at Bree); but this "heroic adventurer" role is only half of the total character. From the time that Gandalf exits the story at the bridge of Khazad-dum, to his return as "The White Rider," Tolkien develops Aragorn to such an extent that we have no doubts regarding the other – and equally important – side of Aragorn's character: the socio-political side essential to the "good king" role. Such characterization parallels exactly the heroic concept of Beowulf (though structurally, of course, it delves into much greater detail). The young Beowulf rises to fame as an adventurer and dies an aged king who is

...      wyruldcyning[al]  
             ond mon(ðw)aerust,  
             ond lofgeornost.  
             (Beo. 3180b-82)

(... of earthly kings [the] mildest of men and gentlest, kindest among peoples and most eager for fame)

We read similar praise of Aragorn at his death:

... the grace of his youth, and the valour of his manhood, and the wisdom and majesty of his age were blended together. And long there he lay, an image of the splendour of the Kings of Men in glory undimmed before the breaking of the world. (3: 344)

The Khazad-dum episode, then, is a pivotal episode in the overall saga of the Ring. By temporarily and – more importantly – *convincingly* removing the uncontested Leader of the Fellowship, it allows for the necessary development of the Future King by permitting him to face conflicts and make decisions which will influence those who follow him. It should also be noted here that the apparent *permanence* of Gandalf's exit is essential, hence, his death. Too many times we have seen the wizard "going off without warning" (1: 55) exhorting us to "Expect me when you see me!" and to "Look out for me, especially at unlikely times!" (1:49-50). Another of these typical departures (departures consistently accompanied by sudden, "unexpected" reappearances at moments of great need) would only overshadow Aragorn's development, never allowing him to break totally free of his second-in-command image to become the complete leader that his role demands. The successful development of the dual character of Aragorn – heroic adventurer and capable ruler – could hardly have been achieved apart from the sacrifice of Gandalf on the Bridge of Khazad-dum. ♣

(Works Cited, continued on page 33)

important revelation is that the song had been composed in a similar form many years before entitled "The Cat and the Fiddle: or A Nursery Rhyme Undone and its Scandalous Secret Unlocked" (see RS, pp. 141-147)

"The Cat and the Fiddle" had been published originally in 1923 in *Yorkshire Poetry* (Vol II no. 19) while Tolkien taught at Leeds; indeed, the holograph is written on Leeds University paper. The point is that the poem was originally a light-hearted commentary about all of the "nonsense" that had been written about the rhyme; this was accomplished in much the same vein as the learned asides on "Thames" versus "Tames" or the definition of "blunderbuss" in "Farmer Giles of Ham". The "Scandalous Secret" would easily have been understood initially as a reference to Elizabeth's court, but the poem throws all of that to the wind and creates an atmosphere (perhaps a mythical atmosphere in light of the Elvish legend of Tilion, the steersman of the island of the Moon (see S, pp. 99-100)) wherein a completely different interpretive tack is taken. The story of Tilion is myth; the "Cat and the Fiddle" would eventually be a Faerie-tale fit into the myth by sub-creation. The writing of the *Silmarillion* and of "The Cat and the Fiddle" is, of course, all prior to Tolkien's discovery of hobbits and of their literature. When Tolkien identifies Bilbo as the author of "The Cat and the Fiddle" in *The Lord of the Rings*, he is making the connecting link between the fairy-tale and the myth within the confines of the history of Middle-earth. The process does not stop there. When the *Adventures of Tom Bombadil* was published in 1962, the Preface contained a rather elaborate discussion about Hobbitish poetry as found in the Red Book of West March. It is a learned, fanciful treatise demonstrating that what began as "self-plagiarism", Tolkien "raiding his own larder" (as T.A. Shippey would say; see RME, p. 80), ended as a mythical embrace of as much material as was possible in the guise hobbit folk-lore. That had been made possible by Tolkien's realization that the affairs of the hobbits were inexorably connected with the affairs of Middle-earth.

### Conclusion

THIS has not been, as I have confessed so many times before, definitive. It has been, however (for me at least), a tramping of old roads, worn and rutted by the wagonloads of pontificators (such as myself) who have attempted to solve a literary jigsaw puzzle which is missing more than just a few pieces. The whole academic notion of myth and mythology is self-destructive beginning with its own terminology and ending with the great lie, that it is not believable nor true. Tolkien's essay may not settle the issue, but it does set the pattern which gives us insight into his own creations and the process by which they came to be. Frodo's song at the Prancing Pony is only one of many, perhaps hundreds or thousands, of instances where mythology, Faerie, and Tolkien's genius for story and language have joyously met together for a time. They are leaves in a literary museum, framed and hung on walls of academic prose, brilliant hints that there is a Tree, a Forest, and, in the distance, Mountains ringing with laughter.



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### Tolkien's Monsters (continued from page 26)

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