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On the Rings of Power: Thoughts Inspired by Larry Burriss's "Sentience and Sapience in the One Ring"

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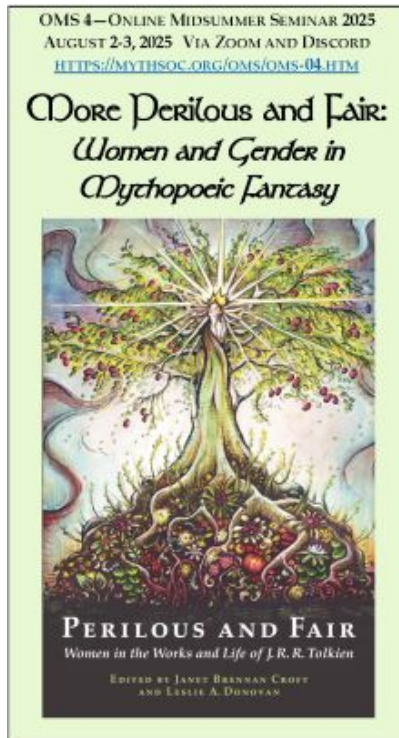
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On the Rings of Power: Thoughts Inspired by Larry Burriss's "Sentience and Sapience in the One Ring"

Abstract

A response to Larry Burriss's "Sentience and Sapience in the One Ring," *Mythlore* 41.2, #142.

Additional Keywords

Ring; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Objects—The One Ring

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ON THE RINGS OF POWER: THOUGHTS INSPIRED BY LARRY BURRISS'S "SENTIENCE AND SAPIENCE IN THE ONE RING"

NANCY MARTSCH

I READ WITH INTEREST LARRY BURRISS'S ESSAY on "Sentience and Sapience in the One Ring" in *Mythlore* #142. I agree that the Ring is at least semi-sentient. Tom Shippey characterized the Ring as an "addiction." Now we can add the idea of the Ring as a parasite, for parasites can modify the behavior of their hosts.

But there's more to be said about the One Ring. It was used more than twelve times (Burris 193, Table 2). In addition to escaping from Gollum, Bilbo used the Ring to rescue the Dwarves from the spiders; while hiding in the Elvenking's halls (and rescuing the Dwarves again); for the "interview" with Smaug; to sneak out with the Arkenstone; and during the Battle of the Five Armies. However, when *The Hobbit* was written, the Ring was "just" a magic ring which conferred invisibility. The idea that it was the One Ring of Sauron, imbued with

his evil will, and thus perilous in itself, was developed during the writing of *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien retrofitted this back into *The Hobbit* with his revision of Chapter V, “Riddles in the Dark,” but he did not change any other references to the ring. So these other uses of the ring can be ignored, and only the revised “Riddles” chapter need be considered canonical. Nor should the Dwarves of *The Hobbit* be blamed for failing to connect Bilbo’s ring with the Rings of Power (Burriss 188), as at the time of writing these rings had yet to be conceived.

But there was at least one another canonical use of the Ring in *The Lord of the Rings*. Bilbo put it on to avoid meeting the Sackville-Bagginses on a road in the Shire, and Merry saw him; thus inspiring Merry to spy on Bilbo, read his journal, and learn about the One Ring (*LotR* I.5.104). Was the Ring trying to reveal itself here? Burriss is to be applauded for including the Elves at Rivendell, who hung the Ring on a chain (so often ignored). But there is another intriguing possibility: at the Gladden Fields Isildur was carrying the still-hot Ring in a “wallet”/ “small case of gold” (*Unfinished Tales* 274, 277). Unless Isildur was a metalsmith, someone, likely an Elf, fashioned this heat-proof container. And would have needed to measure the Ring.

Of the Ring, Gandalf said that Bilbo “gave it up [...] of his own accord” (*LotR* I.2.49), possibly the only possessor to do so. Yet possessors did not always keep the Ring with them. Gollum sometimes left his ring on his island—this is why, during the confrontation with Bilbo, he did not realize it was missing—though this derives from the pre-*LotR* part of *The Hobbit*. Isildur must have parked the Ring somewhere while it was still too hot to hold, until a container for it could be made. And there is another curious circumstance: Sauron left his Ring behind (perhaps in Barad-dûr), when he submitted to Ar-Pharazôn and was carried into Númenor. At some point after his return “he took up again his great Ring” (*Silmarillion* [*Silm.*] 280, 292). So Sauron used his Ring at two separate times, not noted in Burriss’s Table 2 (193). Was there a reason why the Ring could not be taken out of Middle-earth? When the Council of Elrond considered sending the Ring over the Sea, Elrond vetoed the idea, saying “And they who dwell beyond the Sea would not receive it: for good or ill it belongs to Middle-earth” (*LotR* II.2.266). Would the Ring lose its power away from Middle-earth? Attract unwonted attention from the Valar? Or was this just a narrative device by Tolkien to avoid the question of how Sauron, when disembodied, could transport his Ring back to Middle-earth? ‘Tis an interesting question.

The Elves made other rings, “essays in the craft,” before making the Great Rings (*LotR* I.2.47, II.2.242), and Saruman made a ring for himself (II.2.254); but we learn nothing of these, or what effects they had.

Burriss writes that Sauron apparently did not use the Ring to make himself invisible (193). Tolkien, in his famous letter to Milton Waldman (c 1951) wrote that “The chief power (of all the rings alike) was the prevention or slowing

of *decay* (i.e. 'change' viewed as a regrettable thing) [...]. But they also enhanced the natural powers of a possessor [...]. And finally they had other powers, more directly derived from Sauron [...] such as rendering invisible the material body, and making things of the invisible world visible." But the Three Rings "did not confer invisibility" (*Letters* 152, #131, emphasis in original). Elsewhere Tolkien is quite adamant that Dwarves could not be "turned to shadows" (become invisible), nor could their lives be extended (*Silm.* 288; *LotR.App.* A.1077). So it would seem only Mortals, Men and Hobbits, would become invisible. (Sauron, as a shape-changer, probably had no need to be unseen.)

The Three Elf Rings were invisible when worn by Elves or by Gandalf (a Maia), and became visible only after they had lost their power. Or perhaps if their wearers wanted them to be seen: Frodo saw Narya on Galadriel's finger, but Frodo had already worn the One Ring and suffered a Morgul-knife wound, so his senses were sharpened. Sam did not see Galadriel's Ring. One assumes that the Seven Dwarf Rings were also invisible when worn, because Dwarves cannot be "turned to shadows," and their Rings' possessors seem to have been unknown to other Dwarves (*LotR.App.A.1076*). Tom Bombadil, whom I consider to be a Maia, was not made invisible by the Ring, he could put the Ring on and it would remain seen, and he could make the Ring vanish. Sauron was a Maia: one assumes that the Ring was visible upon his finger, at least after his defeat, in order for Isildur to cut it off. But Mortal Men and Hobbits became invisible when they donned a Great Ring (*LotR* I.2.47).

Here is my explanation: Sauron made the One Ring to "perceive all the things that were done by means of the lesser rings, and he could see and govern the very thoughts of those that wore them" (*Silm.* 288). The world contains both the visible and the invisible, the physical world and its supernatural counterpart "the realm of shadows" (*Silm.* 289). When Mortals donned a Great Ring they left the physical world and entered the shadow world, becoming invisible in the physical world. Dwarves, who were made by Aulë to be "strong and unyielding," "stone-hard" (*Silm.* 43, 44), appear to be of the physical world only and cannot not enter the shadow world.¹ But the High Elves seem to have been able to exist to some degree in both worlds. Could it be that the Great Rings, being magical, operated within the shadow world and drew Men wholly into the shadow world when worn, making their wearers invisible in the physical world; but when worn by Elves, Maiar, and Dwarves, remained in the shadow world and were thus invisible in the physical world? The One Ring had no power over Bombadil. He (and Sauron) could probably command both worlds.

¹ Elves and Men were created by Eru, Dwarves by Aulë, so their physical and spiritual qualities differ. My thanks to Janet Brennan Croft for this observation. (Private correspondence.)

All of the Great Rings seem to have been created to circumvent the laws of Eru. In addition the Seven, Nine, and One were tainted by Evil, because they were created to dominate the wills of others. The Rings enhanced the desires or weaknesses of the peoples to whom they were given. And each failed of their promises and betrayed their owners in the end. Sauron dealt out his Rings to “all those that desired secret power beyond the measure of their kind” (*Silm.* 288). The Dwarves “used their Rings only for the getting of wealth” (288), which were the basis of the Dwarf hoards. But great wealth attracts dragons and thieves, and their possessors were destroyed. The Nine Rings for Men enabled their wearers to walk “unseen by all eyes in this world beneath the sun, and they could see things in worlds invisible to mortal men.” They did not die, but merely continued: and if they used their Rings often to become invisible, became invisible permanently, wraiths (*Silm.* 289, *LotR* I.2.47). Deathlessness seems to have been a side effect. Sauron wanted to rule them all, and he did rule many; yet he was overthrown three times, the last time for good. The Elven Rings, which were not touched by Sauron and hence less evil, “could ward off the decays of time” (*Silm.* 288) and did so in Lothlórien and Rivendell. But when they lost their power the Elves found that the world had moved on beyond them and they were left behind.

The One Ring was also able to enhance the desires of individuals. Gollum hunted small orcs and fish. Sam saw himself as overthrowing the Dark Lord and turning Mordor into a garden. Boromir wanted to save (and rule) Gondor. Gandalf, Elrond, and Galadriel all feared and rejected the Ring, because they knew what it could offer them: “the desire of strength to do good” (*LotR* I.2.61). What did the Ring offer Frodo?

And was the Ring fully in command of its operations? Gandalf said “that Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and *not* by its maker” (*LotR* I.2.56, emphasis in original). Burriss asks this same question: “Is the Ruling Ring supernatural? That is, did something outside the Ring itself [cause] it to fall from Isildur’s finger?” (195). The answer, I think is yes. Gandalf’s statement implies this. Tolkien elucidates the question further in a footnote to “Fate and Free Will” in *The Nature of Middle-earth*:

[O]ne of the Eldar would have said that for all Elves and Men the shape, condition, and therefore the past and future physical development and destiny of this “earth” was determined and beyond their power to change [...]. They would probably also have said that Bilbo was “fated” to find the Ring, but not necessarily to surrender it; and then if Bilbo surrendered it Frodo was fated to go on his mission, but not necessarily to destroy the Ring—which in fact he did not do. They would have added that *if* the downfall of Sauron and the destruction of the Ring was part of Fate (or Eru’s Plan) then if Bilbo had retained the Ring and refused to surrender

it, some other means would have arisen by which Sauron was frustrated: just as when Frodo's will proved in the end inadequate, a means for the Ring's destruction immediately appeared—being kept in reserve by Eru as it were. (228fn, emphasis in original)

Much more could be said about the Rings of Power, but I will stop here. These are just my thoughts; no doubt this has been discussed in much detail in fandom and in academia, but for that you can search the literature yourselves.

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NINE TOLKIEN SCHOLARS RESPOND TO CHARLES W. MILLS'S "THE WRETCHED OF MIDDLE-EARTH: AN ORKISH MANIFESTO"

INTRODUCTION

ROBIN ANNE REID

IN 2022, TOLKIEN SCHOLARS WORKING ON THE TOPICS of race, racism, and Tolkien's legendarium were amazed to discover Mills's essay in *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*. An accompanying introductory essay by Chike Jeffers, Mills's literary executor, and David Miguel Gray explains the significance of the posthumously-published essay for their discipline of philosophy. Mills was an Afro-Jamaican philosopher who was born in the United Kingdom, raised in Jamaica, and worked as a faculty member in the United States. Mills continually challenged liberalism as well as the extent to which the White-dominated academic field of philosophy "failed to directly confront the problem of racism inherent in modern liberalism," and how White philosophers failed to "engage