

Lying, Being Mistaken, and Not Knowing in Middle-Earth

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In most science fiction, though less so in fantasy, the author has a lot of background to explain about the world or universe in which he or she is operating and therefore has to recruit nearly all of the characters to explain how various things work. Since dialogue is the preferred method of exposition, readers have often become used to accepting whatever anyone says as being a message from the author and taking it in uncritically as true.

Many readers also approach the writings of J.R.R. Tolkien in this manner. For example, I am often criticized by email critics of my essay "Who is Tom Bombadil?" because some minor character said something or other that conflicts with some claim of mine. In this type of criticism, every remark is taken to be exposition by Tolkien that he has placed in the mouths of these otherwise unimportant characters to inform readers of basic truths. Every remark is taken to be of equal value, part of a web of true statements that must be fit into a puzzle perfectly and be reconciled before the information Tolkien is hinting at and teasing his readers with is fully revealed. These critics never stop to think that some of these characters may not know what (the hell) they are talking about, or that they may be confused or mistaken, or that some of them, no matter how good they are, may even be lying.

If it is actually the case that some minor and major characters in *The Lord of the Rings* are sometimes mistaken, confused, or lying, then reaching a conclusion about some matter becomes more complicated. Readers must then evaluate the credibility of the speaker and evaluate his or her motives. Does the speaker really know this or that? Is the speaker in a position to know? Could the speaker just think he or she knows and be mistaken? Could the speaker be lying in order to achieve some evil (or good) purpose?

The original "Star Wars" movie trilogy provides an example. Viewers of the films were shocked to gradually realize that Obi-Wan Kenobi and others lied to Luke Skywalker, telling him that Darth Vader killed his father, Anakin Skywalker, when actually Darth Vader was his father. When Luke confronts his friends, they tell him that they were just speaking metaphorically and that in this sense what they told him was true. Clearly, Obi-Wan and Yoda were lying, but they thought they were doing so for good reasons, to make it less likely that Luke would himself follow his father and turn to the Dark Side. They reasoned that he would be less likely to turn evil if he hated Vader for supposedly killing his father.

A similar event occurs in the *Lord of the Rings* in "Minas Tirith," where Gandalf instructs Pippin to lie to Denethor: "Do not tell him more than you need, and leave quiet the matter of Frodo's errand. . . . And say nothing about Aragorn either, unless you must." Pippin does lie, in the sense of withholding information from Denethor, and seeks approval afterward, getting it from Gandalf. "Are you angry with me?" asks Pippin. "I did the best I could," to which Gandalf replies, "Indeed you did!" Gandalf had two motives for asking Pippin to lie. First, he knew that Denethor would react badly to news that the One Ring was close at hand and not brought to him. Second, Denethor considered Aragorn a rival to the rulership of Gondor and would be distracted from the coming war by this threat to his rule: "It is scarcely wise when bringing news of the death of his heir to a mighty lord to speak over much of the coming of one who will, if he comes,

claim the kingship."

As in "Star Wars," this lying does not really have a very good effect. Since Denethor knows quite a bit about the Ring and about Aragorn, the evasiveness of Pippin and Gandalf feeds Denethor's paranoia, helping to produce the very effect that the lying was intended to prevent. In "The Pyre of Denethor," Denethor brings up the lying of Pippin himself. When Gandalf tells Denethor that Denethor's behavior "will make the Enemy's victory certain indeed," Denethor replies: "Hope on then! . . . Do I not know thee, Mithrandir? Thy hope is to rule in my stead, to stand behind every throne, north, south, or west. I have read thy mind and its policies. Do I not know that you commanded this halfling here to keep silence? That you brought him here to be a spy within my very chamber?" Perhaps being honest with Denethor from the beginning would have been a better approach. Certainly, lying didn't work.

Another case of significant lying can be found in "The Council of Elrond." When Bilbo is asked to tell the story of the finding of the Ring, he says, "I will do as you bid. But I will now tell the true story, and if some here have heard me tell it otherwise . . . I ask them to forget and forgive me. I only wished to claim the treasure as my very own in those days, and to be rid of the name of thief that was put on me." Bilbo's admission that he is now telling the "true story" is an admission at the same time that until then he has been lying. The first edition of *The Hobbit* is the lie. The second edition is what actually happened. (For a comparison of the two stories, see Bonniejean Christensen, "Gollum's Character Transformation in *The Hobbit*," in Jared Lobdell's *A Tolkien Compass*.)

Such cases of lying need to be distinguished from cases of being mistaken, in which someone says something that is not true but believes it is true and is (as far as we can tell) acting in good faith. Such a case occurs when Gwaihir the Windlord rescues Gandalf from the top of Orthanc, as told in "The Council of Elrond." When Gandalf asks, "Are the men of Rohan still to be trusted, do you think?" Gwaihir replies: "They pay tribute of horses . . . and send many yearly to Mordor, or so it is said; but they are not yet under the yoke." This claim is disputed in "The Riders of Rohan." When Gimli asks, "Then you do not pay tribute to Sauron?" Eómer responds that "We do not and never have . . . though it comes to my ears that that lie has been told. Some years ago the Lord of the Black Land wished to purchase horses of us at great price, but we refused him, for he puts beasts to evil use. Then he sent plundering Orcs, and they carry off what they can, choosing always the black horses: few of these are now left. For that reason our feud with the Orcs is bitter."

In Gwaihir's remarks it seems at first that he is definitively stating that Rohan cannot be trusted ("They pay tribute of horses"); however, he reduces his claim to hearsay with the added remark, "or so it is said." Although Eómer in turn states that people are lying about Rohan ("though it comes to my ears that that lie has been told"), it is difficult to conclude that Gwaihir is lying. First, as Gwaihir notes, he is passing on what others have said and therefore does not claim to know. Second, there is no reason to believe that Gwaihir is acting from bad motives or intending to deceive. Gwaihir is a servant of Manwë and is described as one of the greatest of all the "Eagles of the North" in "The Field of Cormallen." He rescues Gandalf twice (from Orthanc and from the mountaintop after the battle with the Balrog), attacks Nazgul in the final battle, and participates in the rescue of Frodo and Sam from Mount Doom. Since we have no reason to believe that he is not acting honorably and every reason that he is, it is reasonable to conclude that Gwaihir is not lying, that he is simply mistaken.

In addition to cases of lying and being mistaken, there are many, many cases of characters not knowing. Tolkien introduced characters and events into the *Lord of the Rings* with little or no explanation of their meaning or connection with other events. Tolkien did so on purpose. In a letter to his proofreader in *Letters* (p. 174), Tolkien writes: "As a story, I think it is good that

there should be a lot of things unexplained (especially if an explanation actually exists); and I have perhaps from this point of view erred in trying to explain too much, and given too much past history." For example, Tolkien worked out in great detail what various people and beings were doing in the early stages of Frodo's journey to Rivendell, but did not reveal this information in the book or in the appendices. It was not until Christopher Tolkien elected to publish variant versions of an essay, "The Hunt for the Ring," as a chapter in *Unfinished Tales* that this information became available. This chapter is essentially a lot of things that Tolkien felt should not be explained.

A good example of a person Tolkien elected not to tell us about is a mysterious person in Bree. Strider in "Strider" refers to him as "one of the Southern strangers." In "Knife in the Dark" he is "Bill Ferny's squint-eyed companion" and his "handsome friend." While leaving Bree, Frodo sees him looking out of a window in Bill Ferny's house: glimpsing "a sallow face with sly, slanting eyes." In "The Hunt for the Ring," section 2, it is revealed that the Dunlending was an agent of Saruman with two missions: to buy pipe-weed and other supplies for Saruman and to get information about well-known people who had recently left the Shire. He was captured by the Witch-king at Tharbad and to save his life he turned over maps and lists of people living in the Shire. He provided the information that permitted the Ringwraiths to be able to find Bag End. The Witch-king sent him to Bree to gather more information about "Baggins." Tolkien makes no effort in the book to explain this information and we know it only because his son elected to publish it later.

Another example is the treatment of Arwen in the main text. Although her life and situation is discussed at length in the appendices, she is hardly mentioned in the main story and with little or no discussion of her significance. When she is introduced in "Many Meetings," we learn only that Frodo saw her and that she was the daughter of Elrond, that she is related to elves in Lórien (Galadriel, who has not yet appeared, is her grandmother), and that she has two brothers. Next we learn that at the end of the banquet, she walked down a hall with Elrond. Later, when Bilbo meets Aragorn, Bilbo asks why he did not attend the feast and adds, "the Lady Arwen was there." The relationship of Aragorn and Arwen is embedded in these remarks, but it would be impossible for a reader to pick up Bilbo's meaning, which is "You should have been there because Arwen was there." At the end of the chapter, Frodo sees Aragorn standing next to Arwen. Since he sees them together "to his surprise," he obviously also does not know that they have any special connection. Frodo is mostly interested in the fact that Arwen turns, looks at him, and smiles. In fact, Frodo does not realize the relationship of Arwen and Aragorn until the last page of "The Steward and the King," when he sees Arwen again and exclaims, "At last I understand why we have waited."

Officially, Arwen is mentioned by name only in "Many Meetings" (already discussed), "Farewell to Lórien" (where it is mentioned that Galadriel is Arwen's grandmother), "The Battle of the Pelennor" (where it is noted that she made the flag on Aragorn's ship), the last paragraphs of "The Steward and the King" (when she arrives in Minas Tirith), and "Many Partings" (where she becomes queen of Gondor and Arnor). She is, however, somewhat anonymously present in other parts of the book. For example, at the end of "Lothlórien," just after Frodo feels "the delight of the living tree itself," he finds Aragorn "standing still and silent as a tree. . . . wrapped in some fair memory." Frodo sees that Aragorn "beheld things as they once had been in this same place." To find out what Aragorn is thinking about one must turn to part five of Appendix A, to "Part of the Tale of Aragorn and Arwen." There it is revealed in some detail that "for a season" Aragorn and Arwen "wandered in the glades of Lothlórien" and that on Cerin Amroth Arwen promised to "cleave" to Aragorn and "turn from the Twilight." The vaguely referenced paragraph in "Lothlórien" identifies the exact spot where this event

occurred. The "Tale" also mentions that when Aragorn first met Arwen in Rivendell he had just been singing part of the Lay of Lúthien and he mistakenly thought he was seeing a vision of that famous woman. In view of this connection between Lúthien and Arwen in the mind of Aragorn, it would be hard to imagine that Arwen does not have an unstated presence in "A Knife in the Dark" when Aragorn sings the Lay of Lúthien to the Hobbits and explains the connection of Lúthien to the "Kings of Númenor," his direct ancestors.

Ordinarily, an author of a novel would be inclined to spell out these details in the main text. Tolkien does not do so because the Hobbits did not know these things and they, not a godlike author in this world, are the source of the information provided in the story. It is this method, employed by Tolkien, that makes the Lord of the Rings more an artificial work of nonfiction than a work of fiction. That is, although it is actually a work of fiction, it is written as if it were truly a work of nonfiction. As stated in "The Grey Havens," it is an account "as seen by the Little People; being the memoirs of Bilbo and Frodo of the Shire, supplemented by the accounts of their friends and the learning of the Wise." Things that the Hobbits didn't know are therefore left out. Things that they misunderstood and failed to understand better later remain misunderstood. In "Minas Tirith" Gandalf tells Pippin that he is a person who has "walked all these days with closed ears and mind asleep." This characterization applies to all the Hobbits to varying degrees. They observed the events around them with inadequate knowledge and therefore sometimes misunderstood things or failed to note their significance properly even in retrospect when writing their book.

To see how the possibility of people lying, being mistaken, and not knowing affects an actual debate, let's consider some aspects of the debate over the identity of Tom Bombadil: specifically, (1) the credibility of Galdor and Glorfindel, (2) the basis for the claim that Goldberry is the Riverwoman's daughter, and (3) the possibility that some people may be purposely misleading others or just not telling all they know.

(1) In "The Council of Elrond," Galdor states with regard to Bombadil, "Power to defy our Enemy is not in him, unless such power is in the earth itself." This remark has often been treated as a definitive and authoritative statement; however, those who rely on it must ignore Galdor's introductory remark, "I know little of larwain save the name." I, for one, find it hard to attribute great importance to a remark made by someone who acknowledges to everyone that he doesn't know anything. (Likewise, Christopher Tolkien in *The Peoples of Middle-earth*, pp. 387-88, notes 1 and 3, casts doubt on the the wisdom of Galdor. He is "much less wise than Glorfindel," note 1. In note 3, "Galdor . . . even in the brief glimpses we have in the Council, is seen clearly as an inferior person, and much less wise.")

Glorfindel also states that he "thinks" that Bombadil cannot defy the Enemy alone and that if everything else is conquered, Bombadil too will fall. Glorfindel perhaps deserves great respect as the originator of the prophecy about the Witch-king of Angmar, "Far off yet is his doom, and not by the hand of man will he fall" (Appendix A, section four). But just how prophetic is this remark? The prophecy is vague enough that it could have remained unrefuted without the Nazgul ever being destroyed in historic time. In addition, it could have been fulfilled by any disaster that befell the Ringwraith as long as the event was not caused by "man." Glorfindel's remark would have become false only if the Witch-king had been killed by man. The remark need not be taken as a profound insight since most certainly everyone at the Battle of Fornost, except perhaps Eärnur, would likely have agreed that a human being could not kill that undead creature. Glorfindel did not specifically predict that the Nazgul would be killed by a woman or by a Hobbit. The destruction of the Witch-king by Pippin was simply a fulfillment in the sense that a Hobbit is not technically "man."

Glorfindel's statement about Bombadil is likewise something that just about anyone could

have said or agreed to. He claims that Bombadil could not defeat Sauron alone and that if everyone else was destroyed by Sauron, then Bombadil would be destroyed too. Put in this way, it is a claim about the limitations of Bombadil, but it is a limitation that would apply to every other being as well, except perhaps for Iluvatar. Obviously Sam could not defeat Sauron alone if everyone else was overcome just as Elrond could not, or Galadriel or Gandalf. As a result, it is a claim that is true, but since it applies just as well to all beings who oppose Sauron, it is meaningless as a special insight into what or who Bombadil is.

(2) A special thorn in the side of any theory about Bombadil is the claim that Goldberry, Tom's wife, is the River-woman's daughter. This claim is presented as a great truth; however, it is important that it be evaluated in the context of the story. The claim appears in a poem called "The Adventures of Tom Bombadil." In the preface of the book by the same name, it is said that it and another poem about Bombadil came from Buckland, since they "show more knowledge of that country, and of the Dingle, the wooded valley of the Withywindle, than any Hobbits west of the Marish were likely to possess." The editor goes on to say, "They also show that the Bucklanders knew Bombadil, though, no doubt, they had as little understanding of his powers as the Shire-folk had of Gandalf's. . . ." The poem is "made up of various hobbit-versions of legends concerning Bombadil." Should the views of the Hobbit "scholars" of Buckland be the final word on these matters? Because the poem is based on legends about Bombadil and is written by Hobbits in Buckland who have "little understanding of his powers," the claim that Goldberry is the River-woman's daughter cannot be any more authoritative than the other information in the poem. The claim may also reflect little understanding of her and her powers. Normally, legends are not treated as credible information unless they are supported by other more credible information.

It could, of course, be argued that Goldberry must be the River-woman's daughter because Tom sang that she was at the end of "The Old Forest." As I showed earlier in this paper, good people sometimes lie or mislead, as in the case of Gandalf, Pippin, and Bilbo. It is clear, since the issue keeps coming up, that Tom Bombadil has a secret identity and that he is not willing to reveal it. In response to Frodo's "Who are you, Master?" in "In the House of Tom Bombadil," Bombadil merely replies, "Don't you know my name yet?" This answer is evasive since Tom Bombadil is not his real name, but rather a name probably given to him by the Hobbits of Buckland (as the editor of *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* states in the notes to the preface). When Tom tells Frodo that the name "Tom Bombadil" is "the only answer," he is obviously being evasive or misleading, withholding information, not telling the truth, or simply lying. If Bombadil is not Bombadil's real name, but rather a name originating in Buckland, then it is not unlikely that the name Goldberry originated there as well and that we know no more about her than we do about Bombadil.

(3) Concerning possible misleading remarks or lies about Bombadil by others, Gandalf's statements about him in "The Council of Elrond" seem to be likely prospects. Specifically, Gandalf states that if Tom were given the Ring, "he would soon forget it, or most likely throw it away. Such things have no hold on his mind." However, since Tom was careful to remember to round up and take the Hobbits' ponies to Butterbur so that he could recover the money he spent on the Hobbits to reoutfit them ("A Knife in the Dark"), and he seems to be able to remember spells or songs for things in the Old Forest (for example, the song for Old Man Willow), he appears to be more responsible and have a better memory than Gandalf claims. There may be more complex reasons why he cannot be the guardian of the Ring, which Gandalf would prefer not to reveal in public, as I have suggested in "Who is Tom Bombadil?" and "Choice and Providential Determinism in Middle-Earth."

My purpose in this paper has not been to settle any specific issue, certainly not the identity

of Bombadil or Goldberry, but rather to show that statements by people in *The Lord of the Rings* should not be treated merely as background exposition by Tolkien. Rather they should be regarded as statements by people who may or may not know what they are talking about and who may even be lying (for evil or good reasons). Approaching *The Lord of the Rings* in this manner means treating the book as an (artificial) work of nonfiction. It means treating events in the book as if they actually happened and treating the remarks by people about those events and related matters as claims that may reflect an imperfect understanding or that may even be false statements intended to mislead or deceive. It means treating claims as statements by people in the story, not as surrogate statements by Tolkien himself. To treat all statements from all people in the book as if they are merely instruments to provide background information, all of which is equally true, is to approach Tolkien's work in a simplistic way that inhibits and perhaps even prevents meaningful discussion, for doing so inevitably produces conflicts that cannot be resolved except by going on to evaluate the credibility or truth of conflicting claims in ways that I have suggested here.

Further, in an essay by William Carter, "The Filial Duty of Christopher Tolkien," in Alida Becker's *The Tolkien Scrapbook* (1978), Christopher Tolkien is quoted as follows on his father's approach to explanation: "He was still writing substantial notes the year before he died, but much of his thought in his last 10 years was devoted to explaining things in his own work as though it were something he had discovered rather than something he had created and could alter. He once said that in writing he had a sense of recording what was already there, somewhere, not inventing it, and where there were discrepancies between things he had written, he sought to study more deeply what he had already written in order to reconcile them."

Stephen Toulmin, a philosopher, in his book *Philosophy of Science: An Introduction* (1953), points out that if someone surveys from point A to point B, the only information obtained is how far it is from A to B. However, when one measures from point B to point C, additional information becomes available, for example, the distance from C to A. However, since the distance from A to C was not surveyed directly, questions may arise about what exists along the direct, but yet unsurveyed path. When additional points are surveyed, the information obtained begins to multiply as well as questions about the information so generated. The same situation applies in dealing with issues such as the invisibility of the rings in the *Lord of the Rings*. Point A (the invisibility of Galadriel's ring to Sam), point B (the visibility of all the rings at the Grey Havens), and point C (the visibility of the one ring when on Bombadil's finger) together provide analogous information that calls for deeper study. Tolkien's method of resolving such issues was the same as method that we must use to the degree that he was unwilling to change what he wrote.

It is possible that there might be an answer in some unpublished material that Christopher Tolkien has published as his history of Middle-earth series or has tucked away in some file. However, this material may or may not be additional points on a map, depending on whether the remarks are information that Tolkien accepted but left out or are remarks discarded in further writing.

Further, it should not be supposed that every remark by every person is equally good background that is supposed to go together to form an explanation. It is possible that some material in the *Lord of the Rings* might be disinformation, just like information obtained in the real world we live in. In a work of nonfiction, misinformation is included on a regular basis because the author misunderstands things or omits because he or she doesn't notice them when they happen. For example, although Frodo knows both Aragorn and Arwen, because he does not know their relationship, in "Many Meetings," it is written that he is surprised to see Aragorn

standing next to her. He apparently doesn't understand their relationship until the end of "The Steward and the King" when he exclaims, "At last I understand why we have waited."

Lying is also a possibility: Gandalf does ask Pippin to withhold information about (lie about) Aragorn to Denethor. Someone could also pretend to know to look important. Just as it is not the case that everyone quoted in a work of nonfiction is in a position to know correctly, the same is likely to be the case in a work of fiction written as nonfiction. Indeed, having people say the wrong things is likely to make a book appear more realistic.

Some years ago I spent a year in Vienna, Austria doing historical research on my favorite philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein. Someone else had written a book claiming that his philosophy had been influenced in particular ways. There turned out to be evidence in both directions, leading me to conclude that the more information available, the less likely it was that any particular claim could be supported. Had Wittgenstein been asked when he was alive, it is possible that he might have been uncertain himself. Even when an event is filmed, for example, the death of President Kennedy, the cause of death might remain unclear. People interpret each frame of film in conflicting ways.